

Introduction to Owen Barfield's *The Tower*

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Owen Barfield's extended narrative poem *The Tower* exists as 58 type-written pages in the Owen Barfield archive in the Bodleian library, Oxford, Shelfmark: Dep. c. 1102. Comprised of 1341 lines, the poem is divided into thirteen sections covering the intellectual and spiritual development of the protagonist who experiences childhood revelries, the violence of war, love, heartache, and enlightenment. The poem serves as a poetic expression of the foundations of Barfield's philosophy, and within it one recognizes the thinking that informs his great early works, namely *History in English Words* and *Poetic Diction*. Despite the literary and philosophical significance of the poem, it has been largely unknown and unstudied to this point. Lingered clues to the poem's existence have come down to us through the eventual publications of C. S. Lewis's early diary, *All My Road before Me*, and the Barfield-Lewis correspondence in the third volume of Lewis's *Collected Letters*. The earlier sources indicate that Lewis was initially an encouraging reader and responder to Barfield's poem, though his later critique of the poem is more tempered. After considering the development of the poem based on the textual evidence provided by Lewis, we examine the significance of the poem in light of Barfield's developing philosophy on the evolution of consciousness.

I

Much of what we understand about the development of *The Tower* is due to what Lewis recorded in his journal and through letters. The first reference to Lewis's knowledge of an early partial draft of *The Tower* appears in a diary entry from June of 1922. Lewis reacts favorably, but also compares *The Tower* to Browning's *Sordello*, one of the more obscure poems composed in English. It seems there was a lapse in Barfield's composition of the poem; no mention occurs again until letters from Lewis to Barfield in 1926 and 1927. In the 1927 letter, Lewis refers to "a rather serious break between the two periods of composition" (1508). This and other clues in the Lewis materials help us understand the development and evolution of this remarkable poem.

In his diary entry from Wednesday 21 June 1922, Lewis writes:

After tea he [Harwood] brought out Barfield's 'Tower' and some new pieces of his own, while I gave him the new Canto of 'Dymer' to read. The 'Tower' is full of magnificent material and never a dead phrase: the new part strong and savage—'Big Bannister' is splendid—but very hazy at present. The story is (to me) as hard to follow as *Sordello*. But what genius! The metre *too* eccentric for me, but on that subject Barfield has probably forgotten more than I ever knew. (52-53)

From this excerpt it is apparent that the "Bannister" episode of the poem – Section II of our current version – was already composed by this date. We also realize from the phrase "the new part" that Lewis was probably already familiar with Barfield's poem. It is also significant to see Cecil Harwood as an early reader—this poem is not secret meanderings but a bold venture known to Barfield's close friends.

The next reference to *The Tower* occurs more than four years later in a letter from Lewis to Barfield dated October 1926. The "break between the two periods of composition," referred to by Lewis in 1927, most likely occurred sometime between 1922 and 1926, and a great deal had occurred in Barfield's life between these two dates. In 1923, Barfield married Maud Douie and joined the Anthroposophical Society. In 1925, he published *The Silver Trumpet*, his early Märchen. The first philosophical work, *History in English Words*, followed in 1926.

Lewis's 1926 letter contains his most extensive critique of *The Tower*, and it seems that for the first time Lewis is responding to a complete version of the poem. It is clear from remarks in the opening of this letter that it is meant to replace an original letter that went missing. Lewis jokingly begins: "How tiresome about the letter. I had trusted to acquire fame by it" (1505). He continues by lavishing praise on the poem:

The chief points were: (a.) That this is, so far, a great poem – in the unequivocal sense – the sense which those words ordinarily bear in literary criticism. It challenges comparison with the Prelude, and keeps its end up. I think spiritually it is not as high as the Prelude (it does not cover so large nor so momentous an experience): on the other hand it is more consistently poetical.... I have no doubt at all that you are engaged in writing one of the really great poems of the world. (1505)

What follows in this letter is a critique of what Lewis both admired and found wanting in the 1926 version of *The Tower*. The current version of the poem in the Bodleian archive is a later version, for revisions have occurred, many based on Lewis's critique.

Lewis's comparison of *The Tower* with Wordsworth's *The Prelude* is apt. If his comparison of the early sections of the poem to *Sordello* suggests difficulty of comprehension, his comparison with *The Prelude* emphasizes the overall movement of the poem – the development of a consciousness by tracing its experiences and influences. A significant difference between Wordsworth's poem and Barfield's, however, is the perspective of the narrator. Wordsworth composes *The Prelude* in first person, and Barfield composes *The Tower* in an extremely interior third person. Lewis writes in his 1926 letter: "You have contrived to keep all the time within the labyrinthine fidgety world of the inner mind, and yet not lost the soaring, winged *movement* – the *cantabile*, as of Milton or Marlowe" (1505-06). Like Wordsworth, Barfield follows a chronological development of the protagonist and divides *The Tower* into thirteen sections, the same number as the 13 books of the 1805 *Prelude*.

Despite the praise heaped on *The Tower* in his 1926 letter and the apt comparison with *The Prelude*, Lewis is quite direct about what he does not like in the 1926 version of the poem. He states, "two parts as a whole seem inferior" (1506), and proceeds to argue his criticisms of the original opening section and the British Museum Reading Room section. Based on Lewis's discussion and the current version of the poem, we come to realize that Barfield gave Lewis's critique definite weight and revised accordingly. The most extensive revision seems to be a reworking of the opening section. Lewis writes:

I can't feel you have entirely solved the problem of dealing with emotions at once primitive and reticent without being mawkish. Need the man think of his child (whether born or unborn) primarily as 'my image'? Again it opens with a picture – the sky etc. Pictures (I mean the more completely picturable kind of image) are not really your long suit: and this, with its aureole etc, remains to me literary and uninteresting.... I should advice a complete breaking up and rewriting of this section with the powers you now have. (1506)

It is apparent from the current version of the poem that Barfield reworked the original opening by moving it to Section VIII of the poem and presenting it as "A memory" recorded by the protagonist's expectant mother of an evening in the countryside with her companion. The

opening of “the memory” preserves the “picture” Lewis critiqued and the reference to the “aureole”:

*The luminous twilight melted into gold,
A clear unruffled lake of gold, that glowed
Behind the hill’s low line, and darkened it,
As the serene brow of a saint is darkened
Under the brightness of his aureole (8.12-16)*

“The memory” of that evening also preserves the father’s consciousness of the developing child:

*Did he not know one thing, and, knowing it,
Whisper within himself again, again,
Marvelling softly; – “Even this moment she
Is fashioning my image in her womb –
Even this moment. . .” till he could not think
Of any other thing, nor speak of this? (8.29-34)*

As the original opening is moved to Section VIII, the new opening of the entire poem is quite reminiscent of *The Prelude* and situates the protagonist in childhood, entering a revelry that stretches “back to the baby mists” (1.20):

Along a footway through a dreaming field
A boy went loitering slowly. Since midday
The golden afternoon had hung about him,
Like a great, sunlit dewdrop gathering
To fall from a leaf’s point; till all that weight
Dazzled and lulled his mind; and a faint smell,
Confused, of hawthorn and of little flowers
Drowsing about the hedgerow, clothed his body
And drew a warm veil over all his thought,

With on the veil traced half obliterate
The pattern of some far forgotten day
In childhood, when the smell, unmarked, had been
Caught in his nostrils and deep in his breast
Imprinted for all lifetime secretly. (1.1-14)

It is unclear whether this new opening was included in the 1926 version of the poem and simply moved to a new position of prominence, or if this new opening was more recently composed, perhaps to strengthen resonance with *The Prelude*.

The second section with which Lewis found particular fault is Section XI in our current version, what Lewis refers to as the protagonist's "enlightenment in the reading room of the B.M. [British Museum]" (1506). Lewis writes:

The first paragraph about there being no Eureka cry but 'Sun Turns himself over' is excellent. So is the third about the man who 'moves about within the quiddity of light and sees Seeing itself, and that our eyes are veils Not windows'. But just in between those the thing itself has to come – and it doesn't. The old and not v. profound image of the light in a dark cave is inadequate. You see, the discovery that consciousness is a voyage of exploration, on the purely logical level, needn't lead to any spiritual consequences at all. (1506)

Barfield's solution to this critique seems to have been to delete the second paragraph, as the "quiddity of light" (11.32) quote from above is now a part of the new second paragraph, not paragraph three. It is doubtful, however, that he revised his emphasis on the spiritual significance of this enlightenment, and it is likely that what he is recording in this event resonates with the understandings he had gained on the nature of language and the evolution of consciousness. Barfield describes the protagonist's newly acquired insights, and the following urgent injunction is a postmodern call to comprehend both the inheritance of meaning and its continual change.

He saw for ever – as when forked lightning
Shatters the secret night, the flash is vanished,
But not the bright map in the shepherd's brain

Of rocks and trees and shapes of hills and sheep –
That he whose soul would touch the very past
Must build himself a delicate consciousness
Out of the dreams of old civilisations,
Must see with ancient eyes, not wisely peer
Through glasses of the last half-hundred years;
And that whose soul would truly touch the present,
Must first have touched the past; how Truth's a stream
That hurries on through complicated webs
Of thought, which meanings of words, ever changing,
Keep letting down into it for a moment,
Till the weak webs are torn away and whirled
On with the rushing torrent. (11.44-59)

The spirituality of consciousness is boldly declaimed in imagery sharp and powerful, a palpable flash of revelation from “forked lightning” and the “bright map” of the world revealed in the “shepherd’s brain.”

Lewis’s third and final critique of *The Tower* is contained in a letter to Barfield from the 10 Sept. 1927. We know from comparing Lewis’s 1926 letter to the current version of the poem that Barfield made some substantial revisions to the poem. It seems likely Lewis in 1927 was responding to a version of the poem very similar to the current version in the Bodleian Library and that Barfield made few revisions after that date. Of Lewis’s three extant responses to the poem, the 1927 letter is by far the least complimentary:

I have finished a first re-reading of the *Tower*. The great passages – VI, VII, X – stand absolutely where they did. The later cantos I have enjoyed much more than I did before: but of course this is chiefly due to my increased understanding of and sympathy with the matter.

As to the poem as a whole, I am afraid I feel now a rather serious break between the two periods of composition.... I don’t know how far you are thinking of ever working on it again. If you do, I shd. (reluctantly) chuck II, III and IV right out. V and the

danceable duet wd. have to be saved: but I shd. like the *bristles of mechanic thought* etc.
to come after the love-tragedy. (1508)

Lewis's response is rather surprising when one considers that Section II, the Big Bannister episode, was enthusiastically received five years earlier. This suggestion, to "chuck" sections II, III and IV, seems to be guided by what Lewis saw as a "rather serious break between the two periods of composition" (1508). The critique is rather reductive, and few criteria are provided for his recommendations. One possibility for this change in enthusiasm might be that by this date Barfield and Lewis were entering a more intense period of their ongoing debate characterized as the "Great War."

At this point Barfield seems to have set the project aside, and it is likely that no further serious revisions were made. There is no evidence that Barfield ever sent *The Tower* to a publisher, nor does it seem to have been circulated beyond a few close friends. The publication of more formal projects developing Barfield's ideas about language and consciousness seem to have taken precedence: *History in English Words* had been published in 1926, and a revision of his B. Litt. thesis, *Poetic Diction*, would follow in 1928.

II

A sensitive reading reveals that *The Tower* serves as a poetic expression of Barfield's emerging philosophy on the evolution of consciousness. It captures in poetry what Barfield expresses about the nature of consciousness in his early prose works and beyond, for we find in *The Tower* not only the significance of words but also the significance of the physical representations which surround us, both natural and constructed. The tower is an image which occurs throughout the poem – the "old stone tower" of a little town that the protagonist encounters as a soldier (3.14), the "Square and un-English, squat and solid" tower the injured protagonist spies from the ambulance (4.75), the tower recorded in his mother's Memory which "became / A filmy drapery of stone that hung, / Having no weight, from nothing in the sky" (8.53-55). In the final section of the poem, through simile the tower becomes a representation of the macrocosmos / microcosmos dynamic polarity that informs much of Barfield's philosophy:

For, as the Tower uprose out of its floor
Into the light, and into the still light
Outgrowing from the Sun – scattering forth

The din of its high bells, gold into gold,
So seemed his breath to rise from his round lungs,
As from a lesser Earth, until it lost
Itself in a vast heaven of still thought,
Whereinto brain poured out the forms it drew
From the dark air beneath it – sounding forth
Resonant, yet unheard. (13.52-61)

The image of the tower is a unifying motif in the poem, but there are many other poetic devices that Barfield uses to create meaning and provide a narrative frame. A chronological overview of the sections of the poem provides insight into the poem's development. The first fourteen lines of the revised version of the poem's opening are quoted above. Barfield devotes 150 lines total to developing this opening section of childhood revelries and frames the interior journey within the boy's loitering along a footway on a golden afternoon (1.1-3). There is a pause to the boy's physical wanderings (1.20-2), but the interior wanderings continue "Back to the mists" (29). As the boy reflects on his earliest realizations of awareness, the emphasis is on the five senses: "No self at all, but only a loose bundle / Of senses five, absorbing open-eyed / And open-mouthed, dim tidings of a world:" (1.26-8). Barfield beautifully develops this section of the poem, capturing fleeting narratives through memories of sensations: the mysterious smell of a sickroom (1.57); the sound of "a simple melody/ So old that it was sad" (1.77-8); the sight of "Beautiful images, lingering like rich arras" (1.84). The boy's afternoon revelry will cover the foundational experiences and years of his development. The last four lines of the section complete the narrative frame with the boy arising to continue his walk:

The restlessness was on him now; he rose,
And went, stirring the breathless afternoon
In fumes about him, like a man who dives
And breaks the surface of a warm, rich pool. (1.147-50)

The effect signals the intended narrative structure of discrete tableaux that interconnect by building a life among them.

Section II of the poem, Big Bannister, was enthusiastically praised by Lewis in his 1922 diary entry; however, in his 1927 letter, Lewis recommended Barfield “(reluctantly) chuck” this section along with Sections III and IV. Undoubtedly, Bannister is a unique section in the composition of the poem. It is the only section in the entire poem that actually names a character, and perhaps no other character is so concretely materialized as Big Bannister. This section is also unique in terms of narrative voice. As mentioned above, most of the poem is composed in an extremely interior third person. In the Big Bannister section the narrative voice often steps back from interiority. This is initially seen in the opening lines: “When men are thrown together, cut apart / From women’s faces and fine influence, / Their souls rush off, like ants, on different paths” (2.1-3). The narrative voice continues to develop the argument by a description of what “some” do in this situation:

Some grow more active, some more obstinate,
Some scarcely can keep back the mawkish tears,
And some pop out bright heads from cynic tubs
And nod to the four quarters with a wink.
Some – with a gesture – woo dear beastliness (2.4-8).

This opening serves as a fitting prelude to the character of Big Bannister:

Big Bannister, the soft-faced Irishman,
Who wrenched and wrenched, and felt himself a man
By talking *sotto voce* with big eyes
About his women and their secret clothes,
Has slid into the room (2.24-8).

What ensues is an unexpected confrontation between the protagonist and Bannister, for “Tonight the boy / Chances to be too tired to play up” (2.40-1). The narrative voice has set the scene; the interiority of the protagonist has been delayed.

The consciousness of the protagonist is revealed through the senses in the first section of the poem, but in the Big Bannister section there is a shift to consciousness constructed through

metaphysics / philosophy. The term “truth” occurs three times in this section. The first is in reference to those “who woo beastliness,” (8) and “shout that they alone / Are seeing the world very clearly, swimming / Naked the waters of cold Truth” (10-12). The second reference to truth is in the context of the unexpected argument. The boy, “too tired to play up” (41), “[a]nswers very gravely with the truth” (46). This confrontation leads to an epiphany, for “He now in eyes / Of every man saw more than he could tell / Even to himself” (63-65), and he perceives “Heart stumbling after heart, the while men spoke / Out of their knowledge and their pain the truth” (69-70). The protagonist comes to meanings and consciousness constructed through interactions with others. By the end of this section, he transitions to manhood:

He was a working, playing, grumbling man,
A sleeper through the night, a lover of laughter,
Sweet comfortable laughter that transforms
Demons to bogeys and long grief to folly. (93-96)

This closing section foreshadows that the “comfortable” existence will not continue: “And so for many months he travelled on, / And so he might have travelled to the grave” (97-98).

Section III is one of the briefest in the poem, composed of thirty-four lines. Despite its brevity, these lines significantly advance the narrative and thematic meaning of the poem. Capturing the pause of a group of soldiers marching through a “little town” in the moonlight (3.1), this section contains the first representation of a tower in the poem, “Fairy beneath the moon, an old stone tower / Framed in the archway;” (3.14-5). Barfield subtly identifies the protagonist as one of this group by connecting Section I of the poem with the interior thoughts of the soldier during this pause:

But there between those chimings of the bells,
Somewhere in the quietness of that street,
Where it flowed most adream, the stream of Thought
Bubbled, and beauty suddenly built her bridge,
Her rainbow archway cantilevered upon
Gossamer bastions. . . A day in fields,

Clear with whole sunlit reverie, and tonight
Sprang together behind a soldier's face. (3.26-33)

The “stream of thought” flows until “beauty” triggers consciousness, building the “rainbow archway” of forgetive figuration with memory at the foundation.

Section IV advances the narrative arc of the poem: the soldier has been injured and is traveling some distance in an ambulance. Before focusing on the interior experiences of the protagonist, the narrative approaches from an exterior perspective:

From his machine
An airman spied that road – on it a van
Ran like a small ball rolling down a groove,
Hurrying westward. (4.5-8)

From that point, the narrative focus switches to the protagonist:

It was dusk inside,
And there was smell of petrol and burnt oil
In the nostrils of a dozing soldier
Exempt from pain and terror – not from woe.
The shattered limb had ceased to ache – not yet
The shattered spirit. (4.8-13)

The interiority focuses on memories related to bodily pain, both witnessed and experienced by the protagonist. The narrative's return to immediacy captures the moment in which the protagonist spies a tower from his ambulance window, “Square and un-English, squat and solid, and yet / Beautiful with its northern symmetry,” (4.75-6). This sighting is enough to rouse the soldier to sharper thoughts of both gratitude and despair, elucidated by the interior narrative voice.

Section V opens with a narrative tag situating the protagonist in post-war recovery: “Summer and health returned: remembered war / Was not yet deep enough sunk in his being / To canker every dream” (5.1-3). In his 1927 letter, Lewis refers to section V as the first section he would retain after the opening section (“I shd. (reluctantly) chuck II, III and IV right out”). Section V continues to develop the idea of a dual nature in the protagonist, concluding with an image of dual towers: “one slender tower / Whose grace had moved so many loving hearts” (5.128-9) and “the old tower / Looked all awry and stockish” (5.144-5). The dualism of the protagonist results from the development of a higher consciousness (the “slender tower”) that exists somewhat in tandem with the more mundane consciousness (the “old tower”). In this highly interior third person narrative voice we see the emerging duality of consciousness familiar from Barfield’s philosophical writings:

Ay, for now this man
Began to be not one sole soul but two
...
At night, if by the end he had succeeded
In taming down his mind to be receptive,
Wide-eyed with bodily fatigue, he grew
Aware as of a faintly singing cloud
Enveloping his head: and, wearily
Closing his volume, would feel in his blood
The pressure of unwritten poetry
Knocking: “I can all things!” No imagery
Formed in his mind, no thoughts; and yet it seemed
His essence and the essence of the world
Flowed, and that if he could maintain the mood
Long enough time, the brain must of itself
Construct new metaphors, and move the world
To tears and wonder with its terrible art. (5.45-6; 53-66)

Comprehending the interpenetrated polarity of self and world opens the path to the forgetive art of metaphor. Yet, upon waking the protagonist dismisses those “reveries” and “dreams” (5.69) and insists upon a more positivist outlook: “he who knew / That fire burns or seven and two are nine – / This was the real ‘I’” (5.72-4).

Yet the power of the polarity grows apace, for Section VI presents the “new metaphor” of the sunrise paralleling the protagonist’s interior feelings of discovering love.

Slowly the glimmering Eastern sky inserts
The watcher in his visible universe
With right or left, North, South, until more light
Discovers cloud and rock and blade of grass
Distinct, and gives, like love, to everything
Colour and self. (6.5-10)

As the rising sun allows us to discern the world around us, so too does love. The next paragraph provides a narrative tag, “She sits – she sits beside him – hush! – speak not! – / Think not! – this is the sunrise of a life” (6.28-9), which situates the protagonist as experiencing “a sunrise” of love. Yet, in closing this section Barfield presents the antithesis of this experience – one can fall out of love as well as fall in – personal passion can die:

and he is on the threshold,
Threshold of Heaven on earth – but falling out,
Not climbing in. From now seek earth on earth,
Heaven in Heaven – wisdom which men learn
Only by pain and death, the cruel death
Of personal passion, which, like some low creature
Whose hideous vitality kicks in spasms
After the back is broken, shall long years
After thou deem’st it crushed and starved to death,
Raise up its beauteous head and bite the soul
With awful desolations, bitter thoughts

Of wasted life and of no happiness. (6.48-58)

There is a sort of “wisdom” that is learned from the experience but also regret, for the infection of positivism pulls one into bitter pragmatics and relegates divinity and beauty beyond a threshold deemed uncrossable by the empirical focus of the day.

Section VII follows, but distantly, the protagonist in the aftermath, “What use to follow him through that blind walk / Of pain, incessant pain” (7.4-5). The narrative voice presents the image of “a dark tunnel’s mouth” (7.2) but later questions if a more appropriate metaphor would be “a cave / Exitless, damp, where he has left the light / Of day for ever” (7.15-7). Employing the same structure as the preceding section, Barfield opens the second paragraph with a narrative tag, “Behold him, then, on a hot day in June / Wheeling a road through meadows high with flowers / Absorbed in his great misery” (7.24-6). This day seems to echo the opening of the poem when the protagonist, as a boy, “through a dreaming field...went loitering slowly” (1.1-2), for nature once again seems to provide comfort and a “sudden sweet solution of all strain” (7.27). The narrative voice then shifts to a dream in which the protagonist experiences the “springing Tower” becoming “A filmy drapery of stone that hung, / Having no weight, from nothing in the sky” (7.49-50). At this point in the poem, Barfield bridges the image of the Tower to the understandings about language that the protagonist will achieve in the reading room of the British Library (discussed above), for within the dream of the Tower, “the rich golden silence...conceived / And grew big-bellied with terrific meaning / And the whole dream resounded as with words” (7.53-6). The protagonist cannot yet hear these words, which causes anxiety, and this section ends with the crippling couplet: “Often day smashed the link which night had forged / Betwixt the sick heart and the dungeoned brain” (7.65-6).

As mentioned above, based on the 1926 letter from Lewis, Section VIII seems to have been the original opening of the poem. Barfield composed an eleven line introduction to the mother’s memory before setting the text of the memory apart with quotation marks before every line; we have instead used italics to set off this part. This section captures the interiority of both parents, yet focuses more on the mother’s experiences both in perceiving the tower and

becoming aware of the conscious being developing in her womb. Interestingly, Barfield borrows lines from Section VII to describe the mother's vision of the tower:

*Out of the green turf of a hill, beyond
The quiet valley, there uprose a tower –
Four slender walls, which, rising from the ground
In straight austerity, far, far above
Burst into pinnacles innumerable,
That seemed to float on air; the mellow light
Softened the stone and entered into it,
And slowly spread a change over the tower,
Making its corners faint against the blue,
Till it began to dream, **till it became**
A filmy drapery of stone that hung,
Having no weight, from nothing in the sky. (8.44-55; bold added)*

The purpose of this repetition may be to strengthen the conscious link between the protagonist and his mother. Soon after the mother's vision of the Tower she is "startled" (8.75) by a "sweet chime" (8.62) which results in wonder and awareness of another consciousness:

*A wonder that died not, but slowly grew,
Opening its noiseless petals – mingled all
With the strange dawning of a tenderness
Beyond all wonder, which enclasped her heart
With curious tiny fingers. Now she felt,
For the first time, that they were not alone,
And love came, like a great sob, suddenly,
Whispering "Mother!" – but she could not speak. . . (8.81-8)*

The protagonist is so touched by this account that it "[seems] to become a memory of his own" (8.11).

Section IX, the shortest section at only twenty-seven lines, traces the protagonist's development from awe to darkness. For days the protagonist basks in the joy of discovering his mother's account: "loveliest memories / Hovered around him, and a sense of awe – / Of dim connections not yet understood / Betwixt all human beings" (9.3-6). Yet, even this gives way to an ultra-positivism (i.e., "darkness") that creeps back in to dominate his consciousness: "And all the mystery were dissolved to matter / In the blind workings of his mother's womb" (9.12-3). In such a frame of mind he recasts the Tower as a "romantic vision" which "had buttressed / His peace of mind with mystic-selfish hopes" (9.17-8). Thus, he descends into a positivist mindset:

The fairy gold, its magic dream-light dear,
Shrivelled into a litter of dead leaves.
Yet, like a prisoner shovelling dead leaves,
For want of barren tasks, in idleness,
He went on piling intellectual knowledge
On intellectual knowledge, fitting fact
To theory, adding dead thought to dead thought. (9.21-7)

Section X, one of the longest sections of the poem, is also one of the darkest. Barfield employs metaphor and simile brilliantly in this section to convey the protagonist's contracting consciousness. He begins with the image of a house situated in a valley so narrow that sunlight is perceivable for only a few hours each day. This image gives way to a simile comparing spectral companions to "sweet imaginations":

Even as the Haunted Sailor's ghastly mates,
Those sweet imaginations of soul-life
Without himself in Nature – one by one,
Unmasked by reason, they stood forth revealed
As ghostly emanations from himself,
Then dropped dead. (10.38-43)

The resonance with the Old English poem known as “The Wanderer” is palpable, and the desired effect is similar, to describe an appalling isolation and the confusion of lonely figuration.

Another similar tableau follows – that of a delirious mountain traveler who believes he has found refuge from a storm only to have his comfortable dwelling fade and find himself “sitting upon a damp stone” (10.61). Darkness grows and “every star / By which until that moment he had steered / His moral course, was blotted” (10.132-4). But within this void, he becomes aware of “an impersonal Force; it was alive, / Solid” (10.139-40). He sleeps and awakes to “a curious calmness in the air,” (10.150). Joy does not yet return, but the darkness has been lifted.

Section XI was discussed above in relation to Lewis’s negative response to the early paragraphs of this section in his 1926 letter. As mentioned above, Section XI records the understandings Barfield had gained on the nature of language and the evolution of consciousness and places these understandings in a narrative scene similar to the research he was conducting for his philosophical works *Poetic Diction* and *History in English Words*:

One day, in intimate study of the past
When his imagination was all steeped, and dreaming
Its way along those mazy paths of thought
Which open from contemplating the growth
Into their present seeming-simple meaning
Of smallest, commonest words, a blind thing stirred
Deep in the core of inexpressive mind. (11.1-7)

The narrative frame places the protagonist in the Reading Room of the British Library – “Under a grey dome / Inscribed with echoes of the past, the names / Of poets dead” (11.39-41) – to present poetically the beautifully realized expressions of the evolution of consciousness quoted above. Leaving the Reading Room, the protagonist faces the onslaught – “The voluble angry chattering of ten thousand / Small, fussy starlings” (11.90-1) – along with the “thousand faces” (11.93) of humanity with “nowhere-looking eyes” (11.95). The onslaught leaves him “Beholding the world only with his eyes, / Crushed by its weight and passion” (11.105-6) until the next week when his assumed return to the Reading Room would usher in “once more

imagination – / Like some huge half-fledged bird...” (11.109-10). Eventually he becomes stronger and even when “The books are closed,” (11.115) the mind goes on “of its own weight” (11.116). Section XI concludes with the strongest poetical representation of the evolution of consciousness thus far in the poem:

He sees the sharp horizon
Of man’s sense-knowledge suddenly flung out
All ways to limitless distance – and he feels
In his own self the future self of Man
Stirring, awaking, grasping at consciousness
Of Life, which since creation has been flowing
Through and through the body unawares,
Asleep – and asleep – till at a sign
The sweet, the long long stored Promethean hour –
Oh, wondering adolescence of the world! –
Brings in self-knowledge with a rush, and calls it
To blossom from blind Being into Truth. (11.126-37)

Section XII is essentially a pause in the narrative frame focusing on the interior philosophical musings of the protagonist. As his consciousness begins to expand, he gains an appreciation for those who had worked along these lines before and “the sad spirits who abandoned faith” (12.46). He also solidifies the emerging understanding that positivism is a hindrance to truth, for though it categorizes and codifies useful knowledge, it cannot represent the truth embodied in life and consciousness:

For this neat abacus, which put up for truth,
Was but the husks of dead truths strung together
By a mechanic joiner: knowledge is not,
Until it is the thing it knoweth; knowledge
Is Life incarnating in consciousness. (12.67-71)

This section concludes with a link to Section V in which the narrator, after the war but before love, “would feel in his blood / The pressure of unwritten poetry” (5.58-9). This line is repeated to begin the last part of Section XII.

The pressure of unwritten poetry
Which had so furiously knocked at his blood,
Sitting alone once by the fireside, now
Dies into tranquil tremors of the spirit
And ripples into pure joy; for this man,
Even this man, has spoken face to face
With the eternal Muse – and ever more,
Save in the puny hours, it must be
Matter of accident if himself or other
Be chosen to indite. He has found peace. (12.72-81)

The conclusion of Section XII – the protagonist at peace – sets the stage for the culmination of the entire poem, for Section XIII begins in linked repetition, “He has found peace” (13.1), serving as the kernel of all before and all after – not a circle closing, but more like the neck of an hourglass. Interestingly, the protagonist first considers the idea of “accident” in relationship to the philosophical concept of necessity: “for he has seen / How the long wisdom of the living spirit / *Uses* its accident – the vine’s green tendril / Accepts the loose brick and the rusty nail” (13.4-7). Aristotle’s ontology of “accident” is reframed as a having a role in the “essential” rather than spurious to it, for the empirical catalog of being is reframed as the narrative of consciousness becoming. Along these musings, Barfield records the protagonist’s voice, pronouncing an anthem of sorts:

“Henceforth I take
All that is granted thus and thus, with thanks,
With reverence, yet not less as mine own right
For use and growth and knowledge – even I,
This whorl of nebulous thinking, whose moist arms

Nodded in circles blindly, till they touched
The Tower, and sucked and gripped and climbed – ”

Marvel! (13.14-20)

Prior to this reference above, “the Tower” has not been referred to since Section X, line 114. Five more references will occur in Section XIII, for this is the arch metaphor linking the protagonist’s new consciousness to the steps of consciousness that he has built throughout his life. The Tower becomes the metaphor by which he is able to see: “The strong dream of the Tower / Is but a stone into the pool of Life, / Amplifying its ripples” (13.41-3), and also the crux of the macrocosm/microcosm metaphor discussed above: “For, as the Tower uprose out of its floor / Into the light... / So seemed his breath to rise from his round lungs” (13.52-3, 56).

This tension of polarity and threshold is finally explored in the relationship among the Tower and “earth” and “sky,” for as humanity is “one with earth and sky, being between” (13.63), so is the Tower “Now earth, now sky – by turns” (13.76):

There is a mystery of this being between
Hard to be solved by man, who is himself
That Being. Thus, the light on the grey Tower,
Which melted earth and sky to a round pearl
Of peace and summer stillness and calm joy,
Was rare upon it: at all other times
It shot bewilderingly, now bright, now dull,
Now starting solid from the dull dry glare,
Part of the earth, under the arch of the sky,
Now mingling in the mist, its fainting corners
Streaming out into rain, as though the stones
Were an unreal streak of the soft air:
Now earth, now sky – by turns – how rarely both! (13.64-76)

C. S. Lewis’s youthful ambition for this “truly great” poem is understandable, and Owen Barfield’s efforts with it formidable and traceable. The poetry is consistently good, at times

remarkably so, and the philosophy of poetics pronounced and revealed by this work is easily recognizable as Barfield at his best, the kernel and scope of his life-long program revealed with ease, passion, and poetic genius. This forgotten work is a true gem—a unique and pleasurable version of Barfield’s great mind easily familiar to the scholar of his work and a lovely exploration of being for any who enjoy the forgetive power of good poetry.

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