

Compelled to Create: Barfield, Collective Consciousness, and Orpheus

Laura Holden

Suggested Citation:

Holden, Laura. "Compelled to Create: Barfield, Collective Consciousness, and Orpheus." Paper presented at the Ambrose Research Conference, Calgary, AB, March 29, 2017.

Please consult your style guide when citing this resource.

Available at: <https://ambrose.whdl.org/>

Posted with permission of rights holder.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

Laura Holden

Philosophy of Consciousness in Barfield's Orpheus

C.S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, and Charles Williams: all names we recognize as literary greats today. While these men have won their group, the Inklings, fame there is another who we may thank for the philosophy that finds its way into the work of the group. Philosopher, poet, and author Owen Barfield may be referred to as the “first and last inkling” (OwenBarfield.org). In his work, featuring the intermingling of literary excellence and philosophical thought, Barfield prompts his readers to explore how consciousness changes and progresses. He provokes a questioning of how humanity interacts, and has, in the past, interacted with nature. Through his drama, *Orpheus*, Barfield suggests readers abandon what fragmented, post-Descartian, notions they have about natural philosophy and open their minds to a picture of humanity that is united with the collective consciousness of the world: the consciousness from which meaning and language itself originated.

Barfield's *Orpheus* is a re-telling of the ancient Greek myth in Barfield applies his theory of the evolution of consciousness to characters of classical mythology. Many of you may be familiar with the Orpheus that descended into the underworld to bring back his beloved wife, Eurydice. After pleading with the lord of the underworld, Orpheus is granted his request and allowed to lead his wife back to the world above provided he does not look back at for the duration of their ascent. Orpheus' failure to resist the temptation to cast a glimpse behind him ends in Eurydice's eternal banishment to the underworld.

While Barfield does recount this famous episode in his play, I would like to direct our focus primarily toward the opening scene of Barfield's play: the moment the doomed lovers first meet. Barfield's depiction of Orpheus' encounter with the hyper-natural world of the nymphs and subsequent singing of Eurydice into a conscious existence is the particularization of

Barfield's general theory of consciousness. Before touching on the nuances of how this scene embodies Barfield's theory, a brief explanation of the theory itself is necessary.

In his lecture *Owen Barfield and the Origin of Language*, Barfield deconstructs theories on the origin of language that make a case for language coming before meaning (in grunts, or through the imitations of animals). This method would have been dependent on a speaker attaching meaning to newly formed sounds. One theorist, Max Müller, suggests that man, after creating language, began the process of attaching immaterial meaning to material objects, thereby entering a period Müller deems the 'Metaphorical period' (Barfield "Barfield on the Origin of Language"). According to Müller, metaphor was an invention of man that improved the tool of language. Barfield, instead, contends that "meaning entered into man rather than coming out of him" ("Barfield on the origin of Language"). Man did not attach meaning to words but rather meaning attached itself to man. Barfield asserts that nature spoke through man, inspiring him to develop language to express this meaning. Barfield shows us how this would look through his stage direction in *Orpheus*. Here Barfield presents the key to interpreting consciousness: "*[Orpheus] stands looking on for a time and then begins to play, taking up the thread of the music. Gradually with his lyre he leads the music at the same time influencing it, so that it becomes less formless and more measured*" (Act 1. Scene 1). Barfield's instruction to "*[Stand] looking on for a time and then begin to play*" demonstrates meaning preceding language. Orpheus, unlike the theories of Müller would suggest, must draw in the meaning nature exudes before he can create a sound of his own. He drinks in meaning mingled with inspiration from his surroundings and it moves him to express this in the form of music. Barfield has his titular character re-enact the process in which language was formed. Orpheus intakes meaning, *then* plays his lyre.

John Ulreich in his afterword to *Orpheus* states, “When we experience in ourselves the polar transformation of unconscious inspiration into conscious imagination, we begin to grasp the historical evolution of consciousness as a growth of potential into actual meaning”(122). Ulreich speaks of an *unconscious* inspiration turning into conscious imagination enabling readers to understand the concept of the evolution of consciousness. Consciousness, in this instance, should not be thought of as present/ absent binary. In the case of *Orpheus*, and the case of the history of humanity itself Barfield would argue, consciousness may be thought of as a scale of progression. There is no point on this continuum where consciousness is absent, meaning that it did not spontaneously begin in a metaphorical period or otherwise. It simply always was. In its earliest stages consciousness is linked with original participation in Barfield’s words, and inspiration as Ulreich put it.

Barfield’s philosophy of participation is also showcased in *Orpheus*. Barfield defines participation as the way in which individual minds take part in the universal mind. Animals, according to Barfield, participate in a way that is closer to original participation than that of humans (Lavey and Tennyson). Animals are unaware of their participation and possess a collective soul. This is the reason ducks, for example, all perform the same actions. One of them does not say to all the others, ‘let’s act in this particular way’. While the animals have a more base participation, they still participate in the universal mind more than humans of the present day (Lavey and Tennyson). Barfield’s portrayal of the Nereids in his play, the daughters of Nereus including Eurydice, depicts the same collective soul as Barfield says animals possess. The Nereids also have a group consciousness and are unaware of their participation. At one time, when humans were closer to original participation, they were able to perceive mythical beings in trees and other elements of their environment. Humans have made a progressive movement

towards individualism in today's world and have cut themselves off from nature (Lavey and Tennyson). Barfield, believing that meaning speaks to man, advocates that the world we live in today still exudes this meaning, and "if we listen properly, we too will hear it's meaning" (Lavey and Tennyson). Barfield believed Rudolf Steiner's theory of original consciousness, that "there was in fact such a consciousness, and he [man] builds on that foundation" (qtd. in "Barfield and the origin of Language"). Barfield pushes the thought that consciousness does not remain trapped inside a body, or brain, but rather exists not only within us, but the world itself. Participation is the process by which individuals interact with this universal mind. If humans begin to positively evolve along the spectrum of consciousness, past their self-segregation from nature, they may, in the end arrive at a deeper level of participation than ever before; this is what Barfield calls final participation. In this state of final participation, imagination can be used to once again unite humanity and nature, bringing them back into a united participation with the universal consciousness. Orpheus shows Barfield's philosophy that men of ancient times, before they entered into their current stage of individualism, were more adept at participation. Orpheus, an ancient Greek, foreshadows modern man's weakness with his proclamation of knowing less is to know more. The Greeks may not have known all we do today, but they were at a deeper level of participation than humanity is at today. When men knew less and saw less, they were more closely united with nature.

Barfield says:

it is the nature of language to grow less figurative, less and less couched in terms of imagery, as it grows older". ("Barfield and the Origin of Language")

In *Orpheus*, Barfield shows his title character speaking in first person, as he would be expected to as a self-aware character. During the first scene he says "I am no hero." (*Orpheus* Act 1.

Scene 1. Line 92) and “Might you help me?” (*Orpheus* Act 1. Scene 1. Line 125). However, as Orpheus and Eurydice begin to interact in the second scene, he begins to speak of himself in the third person. As he kisses Eurydice’s hand he says “Lips of Orpheus!” (*Orpheus* Act 1. Scene 2. Line 39) and then later on in reference to himself says “He abides and knows and loves it” (*Orpheus* Act 1. Scene 2. Line 74). Barfield speaks of language as growing less figurative, and less dependent upon imagery. Both Nereus and his daughters, the Nereids, as god-like beings, are portrayed as older, more ancient creatures. They have been around for a long time, witnessing many of the events that took place in Greece such as Heracles’ quest. They, according to mythology, came before the creation of man, and have a closer connection to original participation. They are more primitive than the younger Orpheus. Their language is archaic, full of figurative expressions and reliant upon imagery. Nereus describes Heracles’ head as “a hard round knob/ Sat on his shoulders, like shore on sea” (*Orpheus* Act 1. Scene 1. Lines 43-44). Nereus communicates through image rich metaphors. It is also through this figurative language that his daughters communicate with him. The Nereids describe the body they find as “A strange starfish!...Pale and pink as a pearly shell/ And soft as a sponge!” (*Orpheus* Act 1. Scene 1. Lines 24-28). Nereus and his daughters’ metaphor rich form of communications is different from Orpheus’ newer language. “What a whirr of words! You weary me” says Nereus in response to Orpheus’ eloquent diction (*Orpheus* Act 1. Scene 1. Line 113). Nereus repeats himself, driving home the importance of his inability to perfectly comprehend Orpheus. “What whirring words” Nereus says at line 121, “Jabber and jargon and jibberish! What land-language! To listen and laugh!” (*Orpheus* Act 1. Scene 1. Lines 23-24). Nereus and his daughters are near the beginning of the evolution of consciousness spectrum, closer to original participation. Eurydice, affected by the poetry gains knowledge and enters into an understanding of Orpheus’ way of speaking.

Although her consciousness has evolved from the group consciousness of the Nereids, she is still not at the same developmental stage as Orpheus. She is, as she states, bewildered still. Barfield says “man evolves from original participation, to the age of the intellectual soul, to the age of the consciousness soul” (Barfield “Anthroposophy”). Barfield places the characters in *Orpheus* along this spectrum. The Nereids and Nereus are closest to original participation; Eurydice, having advanced in consciousness, nears the intellectual soul. Barfield explains that as a soul nears final participation, the end of this continuum of consciousness, it becomes the imaginative soul (“Anthroposophy”). Orpheus is closest to the imaginative soul. However he has not yet reached this stage in evolution, because Barfield believes that man has not yet attained this final level of participation.

In Barfield’s play, Orpheus, having taken in meaning “*Tak[es] up the thread of the music*” (Act 1. Scene 1). The pre-existing melody allows the audience to observe that Orpheus is not creating music *ex-nihilo*. Orpheus joins in to the melody, confirming that he can tune into what nature is communicating. Nature is Orpheus’ inspiration. In Orpheus’ music the audience can witness the transformation Ulreich refers to. The meaning nature proclaims, Orpheus takes and, “*Gradually with his lyre he leads the music at the same time influencing it*” (Act 1. Scene 1). This changing, or evolution of the music parallels the evolution of consciousness model that Barfield proposes. Orpheus moves the message from the primordial hymn of nature to something more structured; he develops it.

Orpheus’ music offers the audience not only a metaphor for the changing of consciousness, but also simultaneously, a metaphor for the process by which the artist creates. Barfield presents this metaphor through Orpheus “*influencing [the music], so that it becomes less formless and more measured*”(Orpheus Act 1. Scene 1). Barfield advocates for a re-examination

of nature philosophy to accompany “the abandonment of cast-iron presuppositions that resulted from Descartes’ antiseptic amputation of matter (the observed) from the mind (the observer)” (Barfield “Nature and Philosophy”). In *Orpheus*, Barfield shows the character’ inspiration by his muses, the Nereids.

One of the Nereids, Eurydice, came into consciousness because of Orpheus’ observance of her. She is the observed. Orpheus, the observer, was able to develop her consciousness into self-awareness through his observation, which he turned into poetry and used to awaken her. The two leave the scene together. Their relationship, instead of fragmenting, turns into one of love and marriage. This is the opposite of separation of subject and artist. This unity has none of the “amputation” of the observer from the observed. While Orpheus and Eurydice consummate their marriage off stage, Orpheus asks “Yea! Yea! Where now is Orpheus?” (*Orpheus* Act 1. Scene 2. Line 256) and Eurydice says “Where Eurydice?” (*Orpheus* Act 1. Scene 2. Line 257). Their unity is so total that they both express an absence of self. They are completely one being, unable to express the individuality they once embodied. By uniting author with nature through Orpheus with Eurydice, Barfield reintroduces the unity of mind and matter to his audience.

In *Barfield and the Origin of Language*, Barfield says

“the appreciation of lyric poetry brings about, in however small a degree, a change of consciousness, a change in the direction of a slight increase of knowledge, of wisdom. The pleasure we feel in it is.... less important than the change. It lasts while we feel the change is going on. After that the pleasure doesn’t last, but the change does, or it may do so”. (“Barfield and the origin of language”)

Eurydice is the embodiment of such a change in consciousness. With his music and poetic diction, Orpheus first pronounces “Eur-yd-ice” (*Orpheus* Act 1. Scene 1. Line 140). It is at this precise moment when Eurydice’s consciousness evolves into self-awareness and she becomes an individual. Orpheus provides her with her name, and so her knowledge and wisdom increases.

Orpheus ends his music and verse, leaving the scene. No longer dancing and enjoying his music, Eurydice is left permanently changed even after the song ends.

Nereus,, Eurydice's father, has seen this happen before, he begs his daughter not to listen saying, "When the name is come, the Nereid goes" (*Orpheus* Act 1. Scene 2. Line 146).

However, his warning comes too late. Eurydice has already heard Orpheus' pronouncement and cannot stop the change in consciousness it brings about. His words and music have taken her from inspired group consciousness, closer to original participation, into the consciousness of a self-aware soul. As Barfield says in his essay, the change lasts even after the art ends.

By overlaying his philosophy of consciousness and the concept of participation with the classical myth of Orpheus, Barfield reunites early man with nature in the minds of his readers. He offers an alternative to the fragmented mentality brought about by Descartes separation of mind and matter. Barfield does not use persuasive argument, or pointed claims to convert readers to his theory. Instead, believing that poetry has the ability to bring about a change in consciousness, Barfield uses the poetic diction of his play to change reader's consciousness. It is his subtle, unobtrusive story telling layered with philosophy in the form of poetic language that creates a shift in the mind of his readers that lasts well beyond the duration of his play.

Works Cited

Barfield, Owen. "Anthroposophy". *Owenbarfield.org*. Owen Barfield Literary Estates: 1997.

Web. 29 November 2015.

Barfield, Owen. "Barfield on the Origin of Language". *Owenbarfield.org*. Owen Barfield

Literary Estates: 1997. Web. 27 November 2015.

Barfield, Owen. "Nature and Philosophy". *Owenbarfield.org*. Owen Barfield Literary Estates:

1997. Web. 27 November 2015.

Barfield, Owen. *Orpheus A Poetic Drama*. LindenFarne Press: 1983. Print.

Lavey, David and Tennyson, G.B. "Owen Barfield: Man and Meaning". Documentary. 1

December 2015.

Ulreich, John. "Afterword". *Orpheus A Poetic Drama*. Lindenfarne Press: 1983. Print.