S GILES-IN-READING

SOUTHAMPTON STREET

URBAN ABBEY PUB STUDY

A SACRED DIVE INTO: OWEN BARFIELD'S WHAT COLERIDGE THOUGHT,

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THE INTRODUCTION

CENTRAL ARGUMENT: Barfield advocates for a shift in Coleridgean studies, moving away from biographical and comparative approaches to a direct engagement with the internal coherence of Coleridge's philosophical system. He argues that Coleridge's thought deserves to be evaluated on its own merits, prioritizing the question of its validity and relevance over tracing its influences or psychological origins.

KEY THEMES:

Beyond Biography and Comparisons: Barfield critiques the prevailing trend in Coleridgean scholarship, which he labels the "biographical/comparative approach." He argues that this approach, while offering valuable insights, risks obscuring the essence of Coleridge's thought by focusing on external factors like his life story or his relationship to other philosophers. Instead, he calls for a study that "will consider him on his own terms and not as a representative of something else" (quoting J. A. Appleyard).

The Unity of Coleridge's Thought: Despite the fragmented nature of Coleridge's writing across letters, notebooks, and marginalia, Barfield asserts that there is a fundamental unity and coherence to his philosophical system. He believes Coleridge's later views are often implicit in his earlier work, and that his thought developed in a consistent, "organic" manner.

Coleridge as a "Spring" not a "Tank": Addressing the accusations of plagiarism leveled against Coleridge, Barfield rejects the notion of him as a mere borrower of ideas. He uses Coleridge's own analogy of "tanks" and "springs" to argue that Coleridge was a spring, creatively absorbing and transforming the ideas he encountered into something new and uniquely his own.

Coleridge's Relevance for Today: Barfield sees Coleridge's lasting significance in his radical critique of the dominant "metaphysic of quantities" and the "epoch of the understanding and the senses." He suggests that Coleridge's insights into the importance of qualities, the limitations of purely empirical knowledge, and the dynamic interplay of opposing forces ("lost Dynameis") are particularly relevant in our current age.

The Importance of Reverence: While acknowledging that some aspects of Coleridge's style, like his excessive use of reverence, might seem out of touch with modern sensibilities, Barfield emphasizes the importance of recognizing the deeper value of reverence as an "organ of perception." He argues that reverence allows us to access a range of qualities otherwise invisible to us, which is crucial for understanding Coleridge's project of supplementing the prevailing emphasis on quantifiable aspects of reality.

KEY QUOTES:

"What is wanting in the sizable bibliography of literature on Coleridge is a full-scale study of the development of his philosophy which will consider him on his own terms and not as a representative of something else." (J. A. Appleyard)

"What are my metaphysics?—merely the referring the mind to its own consciousness for truths indispensable to its own happiness." (Coleridge)

"Originality consists in the power of digesting and assimilating thoughts, so that they become part of our life and substance." (James Russell Lowell)

"Rarely was he much concerned with the precise and actual meaning an idea had for another writer; almost always it was its interaction with his own thinking that mattered most to him." (Appleyard)

SUMMARY: Barfield's introduction offers a compelling argument for approaching Coleridge's thought with fresh eyes, moving beyond biographical details and comparative frameworks to engage directly with the internal logic and enduring relevance of his ideas. He urges readers to grapple with the substance of Coleridge's philosophy, to see if it holds up under scrutiny and whether its insights can illuminate our understanding of ourselves and the world around us.