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Metaphor, Meaning, and Mind: Knowledge and Imagination in Owen Barfield

The intellectual contributions of Owen Barfield are often overshadowed by the mammoth reputations of other prominent members of the Inklings, namely J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis. Scholarship primarily concerned with the work and thought of the Inklings during the 1930s and 40s in Oxford does indeed account for the enormous impact of Barfield, but his status is less assured beyond the circles of intellectual biography and literary criticism. Although Barfield’s critique of enlightenment rationalism may be obvious among his intellectual biographers and enthusiasts of the Inklings’ theological preoccupations and the aesthetics of their fantasy literature, this chapter attempts to introduce Barfield to scholars and readers concerned with the principal conversation of this volume and situate his wide-ranging body of thought within a larger context. Barfield’s intellectual eclecticism bespeaks his concern to approach the social world from diverse angles, and his thought – from his advocacy for anthroposophy to his poetry – points to his aspiration to promote and elevate human consciousness and knowledge in a fashion that contradicted rationalism, among other problems that he saw as characterizing the modern condition, such as alienation. This chapter argues that Barfield’s thought was a profound and unique contribution among the diversity of reactions to enlightenment rationalism.