

**Owen Barfield, *Eager Spring*,  
Review by Brendan N. Wolfe  
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*Eager Spring*. By Owen Barfield. Barfield Press, 2008. 160 pp.  
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*Eager Spring* is a novella by Owen Barfield, written in the late 1980's, but published in 2008 by the Barfield Press. Its overriding theme is ecology and environmentalism, and it depicts a young woman's growing awareness of threats to the earth.

The story begins with the main character, Virginia (or Vi) and her future husband, Leonard, walking on the downs near the redbrick university where they are studying English and archaeology, respectively. They pass the site of a dried-up spring, and discuss how deforestation has depleted the ground water and eliminated the spring. They discover a cottage in some woods, and make the acquaintance of its owner, who turns out to be a roving tree-planter named Harry Coppard, comparable to John Chapman (Johnny Appleseed). The character of Coppard introduces one of the central themes of the story, in that he is the scion of family long involved in the iron industry, who has rejected his wealth and industrial background.

After they have both taken doctorates, Vi marries Leonard, and he takes a job teaching at another university. They grow increasingly estranged as Leonard persists in taking a pedestrian view of the past: As an archaeologist, he denies that anything can be known about the mental life of prehistoric man, preferring to speak exclusively of their 'material culture', and never to view their works as 'art' (cf Chesterton's observation in *The Everlasting Man* that the only thing we know about cave men is that they were artists). Vi becomes friends with another academic at Leonard's university, one John Herapath, who introduces her to Rudolf Steiner and Anthroposophy.<sup>1</sup> Marriage difficulties continue, although they remain beneath the surface. Leonard's work takes them back to their university town. Vi is impressed that Coppard's reforestation efforts have reanimated the spring, but worries about the 'rape of the Earth' nonetheless, and joins a group of activists. In the course of exposing the illegal export of banned chemicals, she is exposed to the hazardous product. The story leaves her balanced between life and death, and ends with a fairy story, or *conte* nominally of her composition, given in full, about three sisters whose peaceful life is threatened by iron mining.

On one level, *Eager Spring's* main character stands for the Earth as a whole, as even her names indicate (Virginia = virginal, but still more so Vi = life). While it is

frequently mentioned that she is just a cell in the great world organism, she is clearly a symbolic one. Her ambivalent prognosis is not intended as a disappointingly incomplete conclusion, but as a call to action. The device of placing an allegorical story (Vi's *conte*) inside the main text alerts the reader to the intended mythic status of *Eager Spring*.

Irrespective of its mythopoeic pretensions, *Eager Spring* is far too long a book for the story it contains. Barfield relishes every stage in the development of his principal's thoughts, and spends pages and pages getting her to just the right state of opinion before any action can proceed. While readers are told very often that she is deeply affected by some new piece of information, and are given the outlines of the new datum, the didactic tone keeps them at a distance: If the idea of prehistoric man's intellectual life cannot be made interesting for us, how are we to believe it interested Vi?

While it is refreshing to revisit the environmental concerns of an earlier age such as clean water or deforestation, Barfield's mule-like hybrid 'biocide' (although praised by the introducer) grates. What really disappoints, however, is that the author's focus upon the world as an evolving being does not lead him to consider phenomena like pollution in any kind of new light. Mining, industry, modern farming, all represent the 'rape of the earth', and are uncomplicatedly evil (indeed Satanic, in Vi's *conte*). This is risible. As human populations become more affluent, certain impositions are made upon their environment. These impositions (including pollution, etc) do not simply increase forever in tandem with growing affluence; rather, there comes a point in economic terms after which increasing wealth betokens decreasing impositions.

Most Western societies have reached this point, which is why the environment is in better shape in wealthy countries today than it was 45 years ago. This seems to be a natural evolution: It is to be expected that very wealthy societies will be prepared to pay for ecological goods. The work of activists (as 'cells in the organism') is instrumental in effecting the change in consciousness required to value 'nature' as a good in itself. Indeed, this evolution relates strongly to Barfield's understanding of social progress. All the more pity therefore that it is ignored in favour of sensationalism.

Meanwhile, "Vi's" *conte* is very bad indeed, reading more like the work of a 13-year old than that of an English Ph.D. Its dull narration does not give any atmosphere to the story, and the reckless anachronism means it fails the most basic test of sub-creation: Believability.

Eager Spring may be said to contain two stories, which fit very ill together: The lavishly detailed account of Vi's thought processes, her difficulties with Leonard, and her induction into Steiner, and the environmental adventure. The latter could have made a good short story of a few thousand words. The former might be interesting as an example of Barfield's ideas, but story-telling is thoroughly subordinated to philosophy, and it would not be read for pleasure (which is not necessarily a criticism, true as it is of many of Plato's dialogues, at least in translation). Barfield has provided a neat illustration of what Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien disliked about allegory. *Eager Spring* should be appreciated by its likely audience of students of Barfield, but would bore the general reader.

Brendan N. Wolfe

### Notes

1. Interestingly, however, Steinerism is presented as a progression in her intellectual journey, but hardly a final destination. It is admitted to be sometimes confusing, and Vi is advised to get out of it what she can, rather than try to accept it whole cloth.