

**Owen Barfield, *Night Operation*,
Review by Brendan N. Wolfe
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Night Operation. by Owen Barfield. Barfield Press, 2008. 80 pp.
ISBN 0955958210.

Night Operation, though it was written in 1975, was published for the first time in 2008 by the Barfield Press. It is Owen Barfield's only science-fiction story, and is a satire, allegory of the cave, depiction of his theories of meaning in action, and mystical vision. Set in the 22nd century, the story centres on Jon, Peet, and Jak, boyhood friends who query the educational and personal norms of their subterranean society.

Barfield presents a world in which, for the sake of security from terrorism, the population of an unnamed country has decamped to its former sewers, with waste disposal now handled by instant disintegration. Government is a benign version of Orwell's IngSoc, with priorities comparable to those of the Handicapper General of Vonnegut's *Harrison Bergeron*, fostering a discourse such as that warned of in Lewis' *Abolition of Man*.

Although the boys' education is useless, Jon receives a special permit (one of many freedoms theoretically open to all members of society) to visit the Library, where the world of the past is gradually opened to them. Jon's endeavours to understand the language of the past are related with care, illustrating Barfield's conception of the evolution of consciousness and the unity of meaning. He wrestles with terms such as *winsome*, *honour*, *temperance*, *chasten*, *humane* and *dirty*, all of which are supposedly bound to a worldview lost in a society that glorifies human excretion (sexual, faecal, and vomitory). They decide to visit the Aboveworld, and there, after taking in with wonder the sky and open space, as well as flowers and living things, receive a vision of grace as it infuses the world.

Night Operation is not a pleasure to read. The setting is deliberately discomfiting, and the focus on excretion quite off-putting. The style is sometimes too clinical and essayistic, and the satire too broad for so short a story: While the promotional material emphasizes the extreme restrictive measures taken by the society to protect itself, and 'portrayal of the repressive, claustrophobic effects of anxiety on human communities', in fact Barfield's main target appears to be progressive education policies. The sewer dwellers are much closer to *Brave New World* than to *1984*. Finally, if the three main characters are never wholly convincing, their relationship feels entirely contrived.

Barfield's theories are also front and centre on almost every page of the work. Read as a creative exposition of the same, *Night Operation* is at its best. The allegory is carefully constructed, and picking out the author's claims and concerns is worthwhile and not unentertaining. Barfield liked to remark that he wrote the same thing over and over again, and it is striking to find what his students will know well from his discursive works expressed in narrative format. Indeed, *Night Operation* might have been better published online, to be disseminated widely and to stimulate interest in the theoretical background of its preoccupations. Nevertheless, the Barfield Estate is to be commended for bringing this work to public notice.

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