

OWEN BARFIELD: THE HISTORY OF LANGUAGE  
AND THE EVOLUTION OF CONSCIOUSNESS

*We can learn from the sensitive student of language that language, in its life and occurrence, must not be thought of as merely changing, but rather as something that has a teleology operating within it.*  
*Hans-Georg Gadamer (PH 13)*

In 1922 the London Mercury published an article examining the changes in meaning and usage of the word “ruin” in English poetry. Written by a 24-year-old critic and poet named Owen Barfield, the piece concludes by quoting the first verse of the Gospel of St. John. It was the beginning of Barfield’s reflections on language which resulted in two books before he began a career as a lawyer. The first of these, History in English Words, is a fascinating exploration of the way in which the history of specific words can reveal changes in the way human beings experienced the world. It is filled with what in other contexts might be wonderful trivia, but flowing through it is a grand vision of the evolution of consciousness:

It has only begun to dawn on us that in our own language alone, not to speak of its many companions, the past history of humanity is spread out in an imperishable map, just as the history of the mineral earth lies embedded in the layers of its outer crust. But there is this difference between the record of the rocks and the secrets which are hidden in language: whereas the former can only give us a knowledge of outward, dead things – such as forgotten seas and the bodily shapes of prehistoric animals and primitive man – language has preserved for us the inner, living history of man’s soul. It reveals the evolution of consciousness.

While I shall not attempt to do full justice to the scope and complexity of his thought, an attempt to incorporate Owen Barfield into a discussion of philosophical hermeneutics appeals to me for several reasons. First of all he represents to me a thread of English language philosophy which is much richer than the tradition of linguistic analysis and symbolic logic normally associated with English philosophy in the first half of the twentieth century. His reflections on the nature of language are rooted in a love of poetry, literature and drama rather than mathematics. Secondly enough of the themes in his thought seem to me to parallel themes in Dilthey and even Heidegger or Gadamer to justify holding him up as a comparison which can shed light on the exact meaning of philosophical hermeneutics. There is also the intriguing fact that Barfield begins with a very familiar literary frame of reference but ends up pointing to a form of thought so esoteric that he often takes great care not to mention it explicitly for fear of putting his reader off. And finally I discovered Barfield via references to him in the writings of Norman O. Brown, and Barfield strikes me as a manageable pathway leading up to the edge of the cliff from which Brown became airborne in his hang glider constructed of psychoanalytic theory and mysticism. Brown's convictions about the nature or function of language resulted in an aphoristic style and the abandonment of any attempt to construct a coherent conceptual scheme. Barfield resorted to fiction and drama as well as poetry to communicate his ideas, but he also continued to formulate a conceptual framework which was intended to disentangle the thinking of his readers and point towards a vision that could not ultimately be embalmed in a conceptual framework.

The main point of History in English Words is essentially a formulation of the central problem of hermeneutics. Barfield sees that the only way literature from the past

can be understood is if the meaning of the words is grasped not by means of our current interpretation of our own world but via an appropriation of the way in which the world was experienced at the time of the work in question. This requires not only scholarship in the form of etymology, but what he describes as a form of sympathetic imagination. Two nice examples should suffice to indicate the way in which he approaches this issue. The first is his comment on the derivation of the word *electricity*:

But apart from the way in which it is used, there is a little mine of history buried in the word *electric* itself. If we look it up in a dictionary we find that it is derived from a Greek word 'elektron', which meant 'amber'.

And in this etymology alone anyone who was completely ignorant of our civilization could perceive three facts – that at one time English scholars were acquainted with the language spoken by the ancient Greeks, that the Greeks did not know of electricity (for if they had there would have been nothing to prevent our borrowing their word for it), and that the idea of electricity has been connected in men's minds with amber. Lastly, if we were completely ignorant of the quality of amber itself, the fact that 'elektron' is connected with 'elektor', which means 'gleaming' or 'the beaming sun' might give us a faint hint of its nature. (17)

This is a straightforward description of the way in which language evolves to incorporate new ideas about the world. The payoff comes however when he compares the implications of this to the implications of a word used to describe what we think of as a psychological state.

There was a time when no such word as *panic* existed, just as there was a time when no such word as *electric* existed, and in each case, as in the other, before the word first sprang into life in somebody's imagination, humanity's whole awareness of the phenomenon which we describe as 'panic' must have been a different thing. The word marks a discovery in the inner world of consciousness, just as *electric* marks a discovery in the outer world of physical phenomena. Now it was said that the connection of the latter word, in its Greek form, with 'amber' would be informative if we had no other means of determining the electrical properties of that substance. Words like *panic* are important, because we really have no other means of determining how the ancients, who lived before the days of literature and written records, thought and felt about matters. Its derivation enables us to realize that the early Greeks could become conscious of this phenomenon, and thus name it, because they felt the presence of an invisible being who swayed the emotions of flocks and herds. And it also reveals how this kind of outlook changed slowly into the abstract idea which the modern individual strives to express when *he* uses the word *panic*. At last, as that idea grows more abstract still, the expression itself may change; yet, just as the power to think of the 'quality' of an article was shown to be the gift of Plato, so it would be impossible for us to think, feel, or say such things as 'crowd-psychology' or 'herd-instinct' if the Greeks had not thought, felt, said 'Pan' – as

impossible as it would be to have the leaf of a plant without first having a seed tucked into the warm earth. (86f)

While at first this insight into the history hidden in words may seem like amusing or intriguing trivia, it gradually becomes apparent that there is something vital at stake in being able to sense the extent to which our language carries within it the very different experiences of past cultures. At the outset Barfield uses an analogy to Sleeping Beauty to describe the effect of becoming aware of the historical depth hidden in words:

In the common words we use every day the souls of past races, the thoughts and feelings of individual men stand around us, not dead, but frozen into their attitudes like the courtiers in the garden of the Sleeping Beauty. The more common a word is and the simpler its meaning, the bolder very likely is the original thought which it contains and the more intense the intellectual or poetic effort that went to its making. (18)

The ability to apprehend this original thought is “the kiss which brings the sleeping courtiers to life.” (19) It turns out this is much more than a decorative figure of speech for Barfield. Being sensitive to language makes the world alive.

He works his way gradually towards the full realization of this insight by embedding his etymological commentary in an outline of what might be called “intellectual history.” He begins with Greek mythology and uses changes in words to illustrate the evolution of the philosophy and religion of the middle ages from the Greek worldview. As he progresses through the scientific revolution to contemporary culture there is a gathering sense that something is being lost as the mastery over our environment is being gained. The book is mainly fascinated by the perception of the

evolution of human consciousness as revealed by a changing vocabulary, but his description of the difficulties of entering imaginatively into the medieval worldview points towards the path he shall take in his later work and is a nice description of the classical problem of hermeneutics. There is first of all the difference in the sense of time and history:

In order to enter sympathetically into the outlook of an educated medieval gentleman, we have to perform the difficult feat of undressing, as it were, our own outlook by divesting it of all those seemingly innate ideas of progress and evolution, of a movement of some sort going on everywhere around us, which make our cosmos what it is. This is more difficult even than it sounds, because so many of those thoughts and feelings have become subconscious. We have imbibed them with our vocabulary and cannot without much labour and research disentangle the part that is due to them from the rest of our consciousness. (167f)

The difficulty of shedding our modern preconceptions about history or time, however, pales in comparison to the difficulty of shedding our preconceptions about inner and outer reality:

There is another difference between the past and the present which it is hard for us to realize; and perhaps this is the hardest of all. For with the seventeenth century we reach the point at which we must at last try to pick up and inspect that discarded garment of the human soul, intimate and close-fitting as it was, into which this book has been trying from the fifth chapter onwards to induce the reader to reinsert his modern limbs. The

consciousness of ‘myself’ and the distinction between ‘my-self’ and all other selves, the antithesis between ‘myself’, the observer, and the external world, the observed, is such an obvious and early fact of experience to every one of us, such a fundamental starting point of our life as conscious beings, that it really requires a sort of training of the imagination to be able to conceive of any different kind of consciousness. Yet we can see from the history of our words that this form of experience, so far from being eternal, is quite a recent achievement of the human spirit. (169)

Starting with the perception of word (and concepts) as “frozen” and even using a geological metaphor of sedimentation similar to one used by Heidegger, Barfield describes a discipline required to retrieve a state of prior to a division between subject and object, observer and observed. Meanings must be seen as the history of meanings, and there is something much more basic than just the meanings of words which is changing with time:

[I]t is not merely ideas and theories and feelings which have changed, but the very method of forming ideas and of combining them, the very channels, apparently eternal, by which one thought or feeling is connected with another. (168f)

The emergence of a consciousness of history is seen as tied with the emergence of modern self-consciousness:

Though these two development – the birth of an historical sense and the birth of our modern self-consciousness – may seem at first sight to have

little connection with one another, yet it is not difficult, on further consideration, to perceive that they are both connected with that other and larger process which has already been pointed to as the story told by the history of the Aryan languages as a whole. If we wished to find a name for it, we should have to coin some such ugly word as ‘internalization’. It is the shifting for the centre of gravity of consciousness from the cosmos around him into the personal human being himself. The results are twofold: on the one hand the peculiar freedom of mankind, the *spontaneous* impulses which control human behaviour and destiny, are felt to arise more and more from *within* the individual...; on the other the spiritual life and activity felt to be immanent in the world outside – in star and plant, in herb and animal, in the juices and ‘humours’ of the body, and in the outward ritual of the Church – these grow feebler. The conception of ‘laws’ governing this world arises and grows steadily more impersonal; words like *consistency, pressure, tension, ...* are found to describe matter ‘objectively’ and disinterestedly, and at the same time the earth ceases to be the centre round which the cosmos revolves. All this time the European ‘ego’ appears to be engaged, unawares, in disentangling itself from its environment – becoming less and less of the actor, more and more of both the author and the spectator. (171)

It seems clear to me that within a conceptual framework for the “evolution of consciousness” Barfield is wrestling with the same insights which found expression in Heidegger as “temporality” and “historicity.” One must avoid, of course, skipping across

the surface and assuming that Barfield's ideas are only part of a simplistic theory in which man is maturing through an inevitable evolutionary process. It is best with History In English Words to stay within the framework of the book and not jump ahead to conclusions.

There is one final citation which may be helpful. In a commentary on the use of the phrase "nervous machinery" by Thomas Huxley, Barfield describes how it can often be more difficult to get into a relatively recent outlook than it is to access an ancient one:

Differences of outlook on such matters as biology and physiology between ourselves and the Middle Ages we readily perceive, though we may not properly understand them; here we stand a long way off, and can often see quite plainly how the old words have altered their meanings. But from the way in which our great grandfathers used such words as *energy*, *midriff*, *motor*, *muscle*, *nerve*, *respiration*, *work* – to take examples only from the passages quoted at the beginning of this chapter – we sometimes find it hard, even when we have traced the history of their meanings up to that date, to feel what different associations they must have called up to the generations which died before Huxley was born. At this time, fifty years after his death, it is our own imagination, working introspectively on such a phrase as 'nervous machinery', and grasping, as it can do, how the meanings of the two words have been running into one another, which can bring this difference before us. When it has done so, we are again reminded of the simple yet striking truth that all knowledge which has been conveyed by means of speech to reason has traveled in metaphors

taken from man's own activities and from the solid things which he handles. The present is no different from the past. Only the metaphors get buried deeper and deeper beneath one another; they interact more subtly, and do not always leave any *outward* trace on the language. (188f)

Barfield clearly understands the interpretive process not as gaining access to the intentions of the writer but as gaining access to the meaning of the words at that point in their evolution and to the way in which a new layer meaning may be added through (perhaps unconscious) metaphorical use. In order to understand a work from the past, it is necessary to work forward from the origins of the words to the point at which they are used or modified in the work rather than projecting a contemporary understanding back onto the words.

It is perhaps not as coincidental as it may seem that a sophisticated student of English poetry would venture into territory associated with German philosophy. Coleridge, who was the subject of a later book by Barfield, had been a student of German philosophy, and Barfield commented on an affinity which he felt with "the German language and the way in which the German language can express philosophical ideas and thought more easily and accurately sometimes than English." (Evolution 3) While Barfield described himself as a gentleman of leisure during the six or seven years he spent reading and writing after Oxford, his idea of leisure activities may help to indicate how he came to write the books he did:

I also did quite a lot of reading and studying and at that time I renewed such acquaintance as I had from school with the Greek and Latin languages, in which I'd got very rusty. I also learned Italian in order to

read Dante and, during that period, I read the late Platonic Dialogues, which are not so much about ethics but more about the nature of perception, as well as Aristotle's psychology, De Anima – with great excitement. (Evolution 11)

More importantly it was during this period he discovered Rudolf Steiner. Steiner (1861 – 1925) was a philosopher who began his career by editing the scientific works of Goethe and collaborating on a complete edition of Schopenhauer. He studied with Franz Brentano and was greatly influenced by Dilthey. He was the founder of the Anthroposophy movement, most widely known through its theories of education and the Waldorf schools based on them. He appears to be regarded by much of the academic community as a occultist on the fringes of philosophy because of the mythological form in which he eventually expressed his ideas, but he has found his occasional champions; and there can be little doubt that he was a remarkable man. From early childhood he had what he described as experiences of the spiritual world and his life work seems to have been devoted to exploring the nature of that world via drama, architecture, science, medicine and even farming as well as philosophy.

Barfield grew up in an intellectual environment which was skeptical and suspicious of “enthusiasm.” When in his twenties he developed a love of lyric poetry to the point where he began writing poetry himself, part of him needed to establish the validity of his feelings. He sensed that the experiences he found in poetry were altering the way in which he experienced everyday reality, especially the natural world; and he began to analyze the way in which language works in poetry in order to understand his own experiences. Around the time he wrote History In English Words, he discovered

Steiner's theories of thought and perception and felt they crystallized exactly what he had been groping for. Poetic Diction which was published in 1928 was his attempt to put this understanding in his own words. He credits his debt to Steiner in the preface to the book; but all the explicit references to Steiner are contained in the appendices, and the book represents down-to-earth English thinking in its best (and thoroughly readable) form. I cannot resist relinquishing the podium to him for another sustained sample of his prose, this from the conclusion of his exploration of the inadequacy of two competing notions of the nature of myth.

On the other hand, the more widely accepted 'naturalistic' theory of myths is very little more satisfactory. For it is obliged to lean just as heavily on the same wonderful metaphorical period. The only difference is this, that for an extinct race of mighty poets it substitutes an extinct race of mighty philosophers. In either case, we must admit that the posthumous obscurity of these intellectual giants is ill-deserved, considering that the world owes to them (to take only one example) practically the entire contents of Lempière's Classical Dictionary. The remoter ancestors of Homer, we are given to understand, observing that it was darker in winter than in summer, immediately decided that there must be some 'cause' for this 'phenomenon', and had no difficulty in tossing off the 'theory' of, say, Demeter and Persephone, to account for it. A good name for this kind of banality – the fruit, as it is, of *projecting post-logical thoughts back into a pre-logical age* – would perhaps be 'Logomorphism.' Whatever we call it, there is no denying that it is at present extraordinarily widespread, being

indeed taken for granted in all the most reputable circles. Imagination, history, bare common sense – these, it seems, are as nothing beside the paramount necessity that the great Mumbo Jumbo, the patent, double-million magnifying Inductive Method, should be allowed to continue contemplating its own ideal reflection – a golden age in which every man was his own Newton, in a world dropping with apples. Only when poesy, who is herself alive, looks backward, does she see at a glance how much younger is the Tree of Knowledge than the Tree of Life. (90)

Poetic Diction, which Barfield later described as “a theory of poetry as a form of knowledge,” (Evolution 6) sets out to examine the way in which poetry reveals something about the intrinsic nature of language. It is not a survey of all the rhetorical devices employed in poetry. nor does it attempt to analyze the role of meter and rhyme. It focuses on metaphor and starts with the effect that a truly poetic metaphor has on the reader. To describe this he enlists the idea of the passage from one plane of consciousness to another.

[A]n introspective analysis of my experience obliges me to say that appreciation of poetry involves a ‘felt change of consciousness’. The phrase must be taken with some exactness. Appreciation takes place at the actual moment of the change. It is not simply that the poet enables me to see with his eyes, and so to apprehend a larger and fuller world. He may indeed do this, as we shall see later; but the actual moment of the pleasure of appreciation depends upon something rarer and more transitory. It depends on the change itself. ... [T]he poetic mood, which, like the

dreams to which it has so often been compared, is kindled by the passage from one plane of consciousness to another. It lives during that moment of transition and then dies, and if it is to be repeated, some means must be found of renewing the transition itself. (52)

It is the movement which is the apprehension of meaning and not the recognition of a codified relationship of a word to an overall linguistic system. Based on this insight into the nature of poetic diction, he develops a theory of language and the role of discursive thought. New meaning is introduced into language by means of poetic diction, but it is immediately transformed into an element of discursive thought.

The Meaning of life is continually being dried up, as it were, and left for dead in the human mind by the operation of a purely discursive intellectual activity, of which language – builded, as it is, on the impact of sense perceptions – is the necessary tool. This discursive activity is inseparable from human *self*-consciousness, out of which it would kill, alike the given Meanings of which language, at its early stages, still retains an echo, and the meanings which individual poets have inserted into it later by their creative activity in metaphor. ‘Language’, wrote Emerson, in a flash of insight which covers practically all that has been written in these pages, ‘is fossil poetry.’

*Living* poetry, on the other hand – the present stir of aesthetic imagination – lights up only when the normal continuum of this process is interrupted in such a manner that a kind of gap is created, and an earlier

impinges directly upon a later – a more living upon a more conscious.

(179)

As much as self-consciousness seems to appear here as a disease of the mind, Barfield is never advocating a complete return to primitive consciousness or an abandonment of discursive thought. This is perhaps one of the areas in which Steiner offered him a solution. Barfield's theory of language has implicit in it a theory of the evolution of consciousness from a pre-logical, un-self-conscious direct experience of meaning through the development of reason and self-consciousness towards an ultimate goal in which full self-consciousness is able to coexist with a direct participation in meaning. This evolutionary development is not seen as inevitable, and in fact the extent to which reason and logic have replaced poetry implies a vulnerability in the process.

Language is the storehouse of imagination; it cannot continue to be itself without performing its function. But its function is, to mediate transition from the unindividualized, dreaming spirit that carried the infancy of the world to the individualized human spirit, which has the future in its charge. If there fore they succeed in expunging from language all the substance of its past, in which it is naturally so rich, and finally converting it into the species of algebra that is best adapted to the uses of indoctrination and empirical science, a long and important step forward will have been taken in the selfless cause of the liquidation of the human spirit. (23)

He later formulated the evolution of consciousness in terms of a distinction between "original participation" and "final participation." It is sometimes unclear in his

writings whether these two poles are purely historical or whether they are polarities inherent in all human consciousness. One thread in Barfield's thought, which I assume is derived from Steiner, sees history in terms of a critical moment when the development of individualization reached the point at which it could be said that the Word became incarnate. Since my goal here is simply to allow Barfield's thinking to shed additional light on the issues involved in philosophical hermeneutics, I am content to leave suspended the question whether the Kingdom is always at hand or only something that future generations may enjoy. The idea that "Mind existed, as Life and Meaning, before it became conscious of itself, as knowledge," (179) can be pulled out of context so that "existing before" connotes an ontological priority rather than a literally historical one.

The ability to enter into primitive consciousness in some way is, however, not just a possibility for modern man, but a vital necessity. It is as though the more consciousness evolves, the more important it is that the effort be made to recover original meaning. It is only by doing so that we retain contact with reality. Our age is "divorced from reality by universal abstraction of thought." (202) The possibility of being "divorced from reality" implies the possibility of drastic consequences. Barfield saw confusion reigning in the modern age. One symptom was the mistaken acceptance of the scientific method as a form of knowledge.

That the two or three experimental sciences, and the two or three hundred specialized lines of inquiry which ape their methods, should have developed the rational out of all proportion to the poetic is indeed an historical fact – and a fact of great importance to a consideration of the last four hundred years of European history. But to imagine that this tells us

anything about the *nature* of knowledge; to speak of method as though it were a way of knowing instead of a way of testing, this is – instead of looking dispassionately *at* the historical fact – to wear it like a pair of blinkers. (139)

Another symptom is an attitude toward art as essentially escapist. What Barfield says of the popularity of “the fanciful poetry of ‘escape’” (202) goes well beyond a critique of escapist entertainment as a distraction from more important moral or social issues.

‘Escape’, in this sense, is clearly from an unpleasant, which is conceived as real, to a pleasant, which is conceived as unreal. It is thus analogous to taking opium, or getting drunk. And it is the tragedy of art in our time that most of those who – whether they desire it or not – are regarded as the living representatives of the poetic, are under the spell of a Kantian conception of knowledge, or, worse still, a popular conception of ‘Science’. Consequently, even those who give much of their time to reading, yes, and writing about, the greatest poetry, frequently reveal their sense of its ‘unreality’ as compared with the rest of the life about them.

Where will it end? When the real is taken as unreal, and the unreal as real, the road is open to the madhouse. (202)

If the idea that mankind can be losing touch with reality while busily developing the ability to control natural processes at the sub-molecular level seems problematic, I suspect it is because of the very confusion Barfield is attempting to reveal. If the scientific method is not a way of knowing, what exactly is the knowledge that is found in

poetry? It happens in the moment of appreciation and is the apprehension of meaning. More specifically it is the apprehension of *new* meaning. In poetry it occurs primarily with the use of metaphor.

Words whose meanings are relatively fixed and established, words which can be defined – words, that is, which are used with precisely the same connotation by different speakers – are *results*, they are *things become*. The arrangement and rearrangement of such univocal terms in a series of propositions is the function of *logic*, whose object is elucidation and the elimination of error. The poetic has nothing to do with this. It can only manifest itself as *fresh meaning*; it operates essentially *within* the individual term, which it creates and recreates by the magic of new combinations. (131)

When poetry induces an awareness of new meaning or brings into relief an aspect of reality that was theretofore unknown, the reader undergoes something which is analogous to the original creation of meaning in primitive language. Barfield is careful to make a distinction between metaphor in which a poet consciously uses existing words in a way that forces them to take on a new meaning and what he calls “figuration,” which is the creation of original meaning in words. He also makes it clear that the words on which scientific discourse is based have figurative or metaphorical origins just like all other words. Very often scientific terms now taken for granted were in fact conscious metaphors when they were coined.

The main purpose of distinguishing between figurative and metaphorical is to avoid the common error of assuming a metaphorical origin of language. A metaphor

makes use of existing words in a way that Ricoeur goes to great lengths to describe. As a process for creating meaning, it cannot do justice to the original creation of meaning in a primitive language. Barfield's perspective on the growth of language through the creation of new meaning with metaphor is opposed to Ricoeur's in a fundamental way. While Ricoeur applauds the incorporation of a new meaning into the lexicon as it becomes a concept, Barfield sees the process as an inevitable loss of access to meaning resulting in relics, fossils or, as he calls them in Saving The Appearances, idols. Ricoeur is not completely insensitive to this loss, and there seems to be some ambiguity in his attitude; but for the most part he sees the tendency towards the creation of univocal meaning and conceptual consistency as a demand of Reason.

Any attempt to view the origin of language in terms of metaphor ultimately arrives at root words which can not be interpreted as metaphors formed from other words and the concrete meaning of which seems completely untranslatable. I cannot do justice here to Barfield's critique of various competing theories of the origin of language, but his commentary on one aspect of Max Müller's theory will perhaps suffice as an indication of it.

According to Max Müller, it will be remembered, 'spiritus' – which is of course the Latin equivalent of πνευμα, acquired its apparently double meaning, because, at a certain early age, when it still meant simply *breath* or *wind*, it was deliberately employed *as a metaphor* to express 'the principle of life within man or animal'. All that can be replied to this is, that such an hypothesis is contrary to every indication presented by the study of the history of meaning; which assures us definitely that such a

purely material content as ‘wind’, on the one hand, and on the other, such a purely abstract content as ‘the principle of life within man or animal’ are both *late* arrivals in human consciousness. Their abstractness and their simplicity are alike evidence of long ages of intellectual evolution. So far from the psychic meaning of ‘spiritus’ having arisen because someone had the abstract idea, ‘principle of life...’ and wanted a word for it, the abstract idea ‘principle of life’ is itself a *product* of the old concrete *meaning* ‘spiritus’, which contained within it itself the germs of both later significations. We must, therefore, imagine a time when ‘spiritus’ or πνευμα, or older words from which these had descended, meant neither *breath*, nor *wind*, nor *spirit*, nor yet all three of these things, but when they simply had *their own old peculiar meaning*, which has since, in the course of the evolution of consciousness, crystallized into the three meanings specified – and no doubt into others also, for which separate words had already been found by Greek and Roman times. (81)

One other comment on the untranslatable root words in a primitive language strikes me a particularly apt:

But if these words are really quite untranslatable, if the gulf is truly unbridgeable, it will be said – what is the use of talking about them? The answer to this is that the meaning of such words – like all strange meaning – while not expressible in definitions and the like (the prosaic), *is* indirectly expressible in metaphor and simile (the poetic). That is to say, it is suggestible; for meaning itself can never be *conveyed* from one person

to another; words are not bottles; every individual must intuit meaning for himself, and the function of the poetic is to mediate such intuition by suitable suggestion. (PD 133)

My mind jumps immediately to Wittgenstein's ladder being discarded and Huang Po's efforts to evoke the process of the transmission of mind. Regardless of what kind of psychology or philosophical anthropology is implicit in terms like "intuit", "mediate" and "suggestion;" I am confident that Barfield is speaking of the same process that Gadamer describes as the "fusion of horizons" and that Barfield knows whereof he speaks. That words are not bottles and that meaning can never be conveyed are insights that push one right into the heart of the matter.

"Strangeness" is one of Barfield's words for a sense of the possibility of hermeneutical interpretation. He focuses on it as one aspect of the beauty in poetic diction and says that it "arises from contact with a different kind of *consciousness* from our own, different, yet not so remote that we cannot partly share it." (177) He distinguishes it from wonder which can be aroused by it. Wonder he describes as "our reaction to things which we are conscious of not quite understanding, or at any rate understanding less than we had thought." (177) Truly poetic strangeness (as opposed to "merely aesthetic strangeness") gives rise to "aesthetic imagination" when we do understand.

This kind depends, not so much upon the difference between two kinds of consciousness or outlook, as on the act of becoming conscious itself. It is the momentary apprehension of the poetic by the rational, into which the former is for ever transmuting itself – which it is itself for ever in the

process of becoming. This is what I would call pure poetry. This is the very moonlight of our experience, true and ever-recurring begetter of strangeness; it is the pure idea of strangeness, to which all the others are but imperfect approximations, tainted with personal accidents. It is this which gives to great poetry its 'inevitability' ... (178)

Starting from his love of poetry and with his amazement at the way in which his newly acquired sensitivity to the history of words brought to life the dialogues of Plato (Evolution 11), Barfield seems to have been forged his own way into a radically different conception of language, perception, meaning and experience than that held by most of his countrymen. He saw the need to break through habits of thought based on a subjective/objective dualism in order to rediscover the participation in the world which lies a the basis of all thought.

This is why, in order to form a conception of the consciousness of primitive man, we have really –as I suggested – as it were, to '*unthink*;', not merely our now half-instinctive logical processes, but even the seemingly fundamental distinction between self and world. And with this, the distinction between thinking and perceiving begins to vanish too. For perception, unlike the pure concept, is inconceivable without a distinct perceiving subject on which the percepts, the soul-and sense-data, can impinge. Consequently for Locke's picture of Adam at work on the synthetic manufacture of language we have to substitute – what? A kind of thinking which is at the same time perceiving – a picture-thinking, a figurative, or imaginative consciousness, which we can only grasp today

by true analogy with the imagery of our poets, and to some extent, with our own dreams. (206f)

Thirty years later around the time he retired from his career as a barrister, Barfield explicated these ideas more systematically in Saving the Appearances: A Study in Idolatry. By this time he was much more involved with Anthroposophy, and at one point after commenting on contributions Steiner made to scientific thinking he gives a brief appreciation of the scope and importance of Steiner's work:

The mind of Rudolf Steiner was of course not only applied to the scientific sphere, and it was perhaps not even the most important part of his work. He is, for instance, far more illuminating and I would say, reliable on the subject of language and its origin than Fabre d'Olivet and the others I mentioned in Chapter XVIII. To say that he advocated, and practised, 'the systematic use of imagination' is to place so much emphasis on the mere beginning of what he taught and did, that it is rather like saying that Dante wrote a poem about a greyhound. Steiner showed that imagination, and the final participation it leads to, involve, unlike hypothetical thinking, the whole man – thought, feeling, will, and character – and his own revelations were clearly drawn from those further stages of participation – Inspiration and Intuition – to which the systematic use of imagination may lead. Although the object with which this book was originally conceived was none other than to try and remove one of the principal obstacles to contemporary appreciation of precisely this man's teaching – the study and use of which I believe to be crucial for the future of mankind – I shall

here say no more of it. This is a study in idolatry, not a study of Rudolf Steiner. (141)

Barfield defines idolatry as “the valuing of images or representations in the wrong way and for the wrong reasons; and an *idol*, as an image so valued. More particularly, idolatry is the effective tendency to abstract the sense-content from the whole representation and seek that for its own sake, transmuting the admired image into a desired object.” (111) What “images” or “representations” are is the main point of the book. Barfield strives to make accessible to the layman a sophisticated philosophical conception of the nature of consciousness, and he begins with a common sense distinction between consciousness and “objective reality.” In a second preface to the book written 30 years after its original publication, Barfield continues to address a common misunderstanding of his intent.

The Introduction to the first edition expressly states that the object of the book is to evoke in the reader ‘a *sustained acceptance*’, as distinct from mere theoretical admission, ‘of the relation assumed by physical science to subsist between human consciousness on the one hand and, on the other, the familiar world of which that consciousness is aware’. Nevertheless, and in spite of more than one disclaimer later on in the text, some readers have treated the work as claiming to propound a complete metaphysical theory of the nature of reality. Not so. There is much speculation in our time about that, some of it in the realm of advanced physics and some with more or less well-informed reference to that realm. My object being to convince as wide a spectrum of readers as possible, I tried to preserve

neutrality towards all such speculations by referring to objective reality (that is to say, reality insofar as it is independent of our awareness of it), whenever such references became necessary, sometimes as ‘the particles’ and sometimes as ‘the unrepresented’. What is asserted is that, *whatever* may be said or thought about a microscopic or sub-microscopic reality, it must be admitted, and indeed is admitted by all thinking people, that the macroscopic world is not independent of that awareness but on the contrary is correlative to it. It is then shown that our awareness of the macroscopic world, that is to say of nature, has changed in the course of time, and it is argued from the premises that this entails nature itself having changed in the course of time in a mode not covered by the doctrines of biological evolution.

Succinctly, then, the subject of the book is not the nature of reality; it is the evolution of consciousness. The use of the term ‘particles’ was not intended to connote their crude material existence (which some scientists doubt or deny), and it was with a view to forestalling any such assumption that I also employed the term ‘unrepresented’. This brings me from the misunderstanding to the difficulty. The need was to express in language the view that our immediate awareness of nature is a system of ‘representations’ of something of which we are *not* immediately aware, but to which the representations are correlative – and to do so without characterising or identifying the something, and therefore without predicating anything of it beyond its place in the system. To refer to it as

‘the represented’ would be misleading because that might mean simply the representation itself. On the other hand to refer to it as ‘the unrepresented’ might admittedly be confusing, since it is dealt with throughout as though its whole function is precisely to *be* represented. It is thus apparently a contradiction in terms. I see the difficulty, but I have seen no way around it. I can only plead that, if it is a contradiction in terms, it is one that is inherent in the nature of symbolic representation – of which wiser heads than mind have maintained that it reveals by concealing. (6f)

Consciousness at its root is the process of figuration which Barfield encountered in his explorations of poetic diction and the history of language. Barfield begins with an exploration of the common sense way in which we distinguish hallucinations from perceptions of things that are “really there.” Like the consensus supporting a scientific model, the everyday sense of reality involves a shared component. Reality is a “collective representation”, a term he adopts from Durkheim, and representation is the result of figuration, a term which he adopts specifically because of its lack of familiarity. There is clearly a parallel here with Gadamer’s exploitation of the sense of “an understanding” as a mutual agreement about something in his attempt to get at the nature of understanding and the role of interpretation. By expressing himself in ordinary English, Barfield may limit his ability to make subtle distinctions; but he gains more immediate access to the common-sensical part of his reader’s mind. His point is that the mind contributes something to the perception of a thing in a way that we tend to forget about once we start dealing with things routinely. Whether his positing of “particles” or

“the unrepresented” creates more issues than it resolves may be debatable, but it certainly serves as a sliding board into a sense of what he means by figuration and “participation.”

On the assumption that the world whose existence is independent of our sensation and perception consists of ‘particles’, two operations are necessary (and whether they are successive or simultaneous is of no consequence), in order to produce the familiar world we know. First, the sense-organs must be related to the particles in such a way as to give rise to sensations; and secondly, those mere sensations must be combined and constructed by the percipient mind into the recognizable and nameable objects we call ‘things’. It is this work of construction which will here be called *figuration*.

Now whether or no figuration is a mental activity, that is, a kind of thinking, it is clearly not, or it is not *characteristically*, a thinking *about*. The second thing, therefore, that we can do with the representations is to think about them. Here, as before, we remain unconscious of the intimate relation which they in fact have, as representations, with our own organisms and minds. Or rather, more unconscious than before. For now our very attitude is, to treat them as evidently given; and to speculate about or to investigate their relations *with each other*. One could perhaps name this process ‘theorizing’ or ‘theoretical thinking’, since it is exactly what is done in most places where science I pursued, whether it be botany, medicine, metallurgy, zoology or any other. But I do not think the term is wide enough. The kind of thing I mean covers other studies as well – a

good deal of history, for instance. Nor need it be systematic. There are very few children who do not do a little of it. Moreover, if a common word is chosen, there is some danger of confusion arising from its occasional use with a less precise intention. Therefore...I propose to call this particular kind of thinking *alpha-thinking*. (24f)

He labels the next level of reflection, which is thinking about the nature of collective representations as such and might be labeled philosophy or psychology by some, *beta-thinking*. These terms may be of limited use outside his own schematic, but the result is a clear stratification of consciousness into three levels: figuration, alpha-thinking and beta-thinking. The obvious value of this stratification is the delineation of what is meant by figuration. It is perhaps not totally unrelated to the notion of gestalt in some theories of perception and of the distinction between figure and ground. Perhaps analyzing the figuration involved in the perception of a “thing” could lead into that (as yet for me unexplored) philosophical territory concerned with “identity and difference.” For Barfield the task is not to analyze figuration further but to see its implications for the way in which human experience of nature or our sense of the world has changed as primitive consciousness evolved into modern consciousness.

In primitive consciousness before the development of alpha-thinking, figuration produced collective representations which were ritual activity rather than words or ideas.

This stage is not only pre-logical, but also pre-mythical. It is anterior to collective representations themselves, as I have been using the term.

Thus, the first development Durkheim traces is from symbiosis or active participation (where the individual feels he *is* the totem) to collective

representations of the totemic type (where the individual feels that his ancestors were the totem, that he will be when he dies, etc.). From this symbolic apprehension he then arrives at the duality, with which we are more familiar, of ideas on the one hand and numinous religion on the other. (32)

As consciousness evolves collective representations are expressed in language and art as myth, and grasping the nature of “original participation” is critical to grasping the true nature of mythical thinking. For Barfield the goal is not scientific anthropology but insight into the nature of thought which can be gained using the ideas from anthropology. One pointer towards participation that Barfield cites is the experience of panic or sexual arousal, both being states which are experienced as something possessing us in such a way that a distinction between self and other dissolves. We are it in some small way. The acknowledgment that we act out of instinct at times is also an acknowledgment of a form of participation. In the original participation of primitive consciousness there is no distinction between the self and what is behind the representations formed by figuration. There is thought in the sense that there are representations of things in the world, but there is no sense of a separation of these things from the thought of them. It seems to me that here Barfield is taking the insights of anthropology and pushing them in the direction of Heidegger’s concept of being-in-the-world as the form of being underlying all understanding and language.

The boundary between figuration and alpha-thinking is not clear cut. Once alpha-thinking begins dealing with relationships between representations, more complex figurations developed by alpha thinking function in the same way as basic figurations.

Barfield uses an analogy with the perceptions of an experienced bird watcher as compared to the those of the average person. I may hear a bird singing outside my window and figure out that it is a thrush. The bird watcher simply hears a thrush. As consciousness evolves the layers of representation build up making it more and more difficult to retrieve the experience of original participation. It is in fact inevitable that alpha-thinking destroys participation.

For alpha-thinking, as I have defined it, is a thinking *about* collective representations. But when we think ‘about’ anything, we must necessarily be aware of ourselves (that is, of the self which is doing the thinking) as sharply and clearly detached from the thing thought about. It follows that alpha-thinking involves *pro tanto* absence of participation. It is in fact the very nature and aim of pure alpha-thinking to exclude participation.

When, therefore, it is directed, as it has to be to start with, on phenomena determined by original participation, then, at first simply by being alpha-thinking, and at a later stage deliberately, it seeks to destroy that participation. The more so because (as we shall also see), participation renders the phenomena less predictable and less calculable. (43)

Like Gadamer Barfield sees the experience of art as a gateway to a form of understanding which involves the whole person and provides access to thought in the past.

Now, participation, as an actual *experience*, is only to be won for our islanded consciousness of to-day by special exertion. It is a matter, not of theorizing, but of ‘imagination’ in the genial or creative sense of the word,

and therefore our first glimpse of it is commonly an aesthetic experience of some sort, derived from poetry or painting. And yet this experience, so foreign to our habit, is one which we positively must acquire and apply before we can hope to understand the thought of any philosopher earlier than the scientific revolution. (89)

I shall not attempt here to follow all the pathways of Barfield's thought. For my purposes it is sufficient to see that he has developed a conception of thought which leads him to perceive a danger of "idolatry" in modern times and a path to liberation from idolatry which requires an historical perspective. He also uses the metaphor of awakening from a dream to describe the modern era.

Now a process of awakening can be retrospectively surveyed by the sleeper only after his awakening is complete; for only then is he free enough of his dreams to look back on and interpret them. Thus, the possibility to look back over the history of the world and achieve a full, waking picture of his own gradual emergence from original participation, really only arose for man with the culmination of idolatry in the nineteenth century. He has not yet learned to make use of it. (Saving 183)