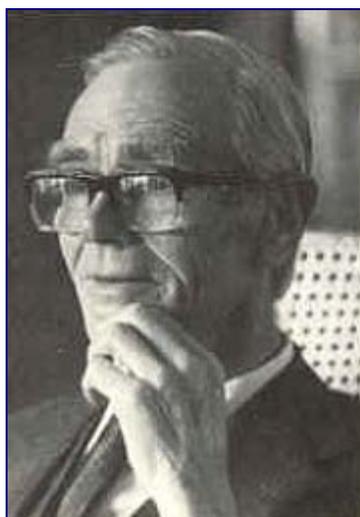


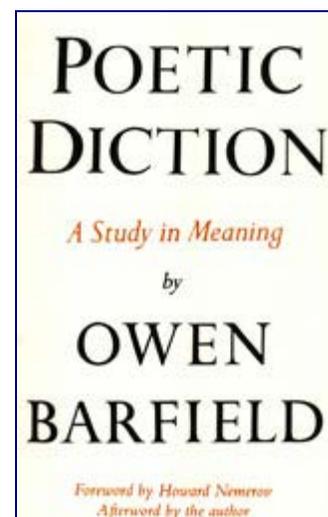
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A READER'S JOURNAL

Poetic Diction
A Study in Meaning
by
Owen Barfield

ARJ2 Chapter: On Writing
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A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©2019



Owen Barfield provides the reader a way to differentiate prose and poetry. He writes in the Afterword, "If the book does anything, it erects a

structure of thought on the basis of a felt difference between what it calls "the Prosaic" and "the Poetic." I first read this book in 1992 and wrote, as was my practice in my early days of writing reviews, a short half-summary [review](#) of the book. What led me to examine my copy of *Poetic Diction* again was a book which fell into my hands from my bookshelf entitled, *Splintered Light, Logos and Language in Tolkien's World* by Verlyn Flieger published in 1983.

She wrote in her book:

[page 39, *Splintered Light*] Barfield suggests that myth, language, and man's perception of his world are inseparable. Words are expressed myth, the embodiment of mythic concepts and a mythic world view. The word myth, in this context, must be taken to mean that which describes man's perception of his relationship to the natural and supernatural world. Barfield's theory postulates that language, in its beginnings, made no distinction between the literal and the metaphoric meaning of a word, as it does today. Indeed, the very concept of metaphor, of one thing described in terms of another, was non-existent. All diction was literal, directly giving voice to man's perception of phenomena and his intuitive mythic participation in them. The modern distinction between the literal and the metaphoric use of a word suggests a separation of the abstract from the concrete which did not exist in earlier times. Man in his beginnings had a vision of the cosmos as a whole, and of himself as a part of it, a vision which he has long since left behind. We now perceive the cosmos as particularized, fragmented, and wholly separate from ourselves. Our consciousness and the language with which we express it have changed and splintered. In that earlier, primal world-view, every word would have had its own unified meaning, embodying what we now can understand only as a multiplicity of concepts, concepts for which we (no longer able to participate in the original world and world view) must use many different words.

And summed up the situation here:

[page 41, *Splintered Light*] This is the theory which Tolkien told Lewis had "modified his whole outlook." Nor is it difficult to see why. To accept such a theory — and Tolkien clearly did — would be to accept a whole new way of looking at words, to see them not

just as parts of a language but as fragments of the Logos and integral elements in man's way of relating to his surroundings. Tolkien commented to Lewis that Barfield's concept "stopped him in time" from saying things about language which he must have then seen as wrong or misleading.

Clearly Tolkien found something important in Barfield's *Poetic Diction*, and Flieger showed me where to begin looking, "The genesis of *Poetic Diction* was an article Barfield had written in 1922 on the history and changing of meaning of the word *ruin*." I searched through *Poetic Diction* until I found his *ruin* essay on pages 116 through 126 (obviously from the 1922 article) in which he decoded, excavated, and showed the progress of this four-letter word from 1375 A. D. until the present day. Barfield gives us an example of philology(1) at its best, in his pinpoint focus on a very short word:

[page 126] In this chapter, I have taken only one English word, and one no richer in itself than a thousand others. Yet it serves well enough to show how the man of today, overburdened with self-consciousness, lonely, insulated from Reality by his shadowy, abstract thoughts, and ever on the verge of the awful maelstrom of his own fantastic dreams, has among his other compensations these lovely ancestral words, embalming the souls of many poets dead and gone and the souls of many common men. If he is a poet, he may rise for a moment on Shakespeare's shoulders — if he is a lover, then, certainly, there are no more philters, but he has his four magical black squiggles, wherein the past is bottled, like an Arabian Genie, in the dark. Let him only find the secret, and there, lying on the page, their printed silence will be green with moss; it will crumble slowly even while it whispers with the thunder of primeval avalanches.

No lover of words, whether a reader or writer of prose or poetry, can help but being shaken to the core by these thoughts of Barfield. He brings every word on a page to life. He becomes like Prince Charming who kisses the Sleeping Beauty of every word on the forehead, awakens them from their *sleeping charm*, and releases them into life again. Since reading *Poetic Diction* in 1992, I wrote several times about words as Sleeping Beauties, including this [poem \(2\)](#).

In his Preface to the Second Edition, Barfield writes: ". . . this book grew out of two empirical observations, first, that poetry reacts on the meanings of the words it employs, and, secondly, that there appear to be two sorts of poetry." He doesn't specify the two sorts of poetry, but claims to present a theory of poetic diction, a theory of poetry, and a theory of knowledge, and thus the sub-title of the book is "A Study of Meaning." (Page 14)

It has occurred to me that a true philosopher would question many of the so-called truths of modern twenty-first century science, and yet so few do. Barfield claims that science is no longer considered to be a newcomer whose work is based on philosophy, but that the two have changed place. Today any philosopher seems to support science rather than question it. "If he is a philosopher, he regards it as his business, not to question the scientific assumptions of the day, but rather to justify the ways of science to man." (Page 18) It is as if the child, Science, has become the father of the man, Philosopher. As such, any one who questions the ghosts of logic in such closely-held *scientific-truths* as greenhouse gases and global warming will be ridiculed by self-labeled *true scientists*, who are in fact only empiricists pushing buttons and trying things out.

Barfield gives us a useful metaphor: think of the Universe as a large automobile in which everyone lived and no one knew anything about it. Two groups developed: the first group was concerned with the invisible structure of the car, the second with pushing levers to see what happens. Soon the pushing-levers second group decided that the first group was merely manipulating meanings and that it was only by pushing levers that one could attain knowledge. They began pushing on smaller and smaller levers and the car began going faster and faster, heading for a crash! Knowledge of this sort, in other words, is like a ship which crashes upon entering the harbor it has been seeking. Poetry on the other hand is aiming for an expanding of consciousness. (Page 26)

He has led us to his understanding of where poetry exists. It is not just sound waves in the air or ink-marks on paper. He says that poetry "exists primarily in the world of consciousness." (Page 41)

[page 41] Language itself, we feel, only springs into being as it is uttered by men, or heard by men, or thought by men. Whatever poetry may be, then, it is something more than the signs or sounds by which it is conveyed.

In my reading I often stumble upon passages of prose which can be unmasked as poetry; I call these "Found Poems" and whenever it's appropriate, I extract these to present them as poems so that they might be better appreciated for their poetic essence. For example, in Ralph Waldo Emerson's Journal there appeared, completely formatted as prose, a lyrical passage that begged to be sung aloud about the early steam railroad engines which sounded like tea kettles whistling. (See RWE [Journal](#) near the end.) Barfield describes such found poems:

[page 49] . . . a given group of words may be a vehicle of poetry to one individual, or to a group of individuals, and not to another. It may, for instance, be unpoetic to the consciousness which originates it, but poetic to the consciousness which receives or contemplates it.

The poet can be the *agent provocateur*, moving a ghostly coil through the reader's magnetic force field and creating an electric current of poetic mood. When the poet creates a transition through the planes of consciousness, a poetic mood flows in the reader or listener.

[page 52] So it is with poetic mood, which, like the dreams to which it has 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.

Life requires change, a movement through physical states as well as states of consciousness. The smallest thing, such as the morning dew, can be understood as essential for life on Earth.

[page 53] Everlasting day can no more freshen the earth with dew than everlasting night, but the change from night to day and day back again to night.

There must be something dewing at some point on the Earth at every moment. Here is my poem inspired by Barfield quote above:

*In the arms of everlasting day
Dew dries up and goes away,

But couched in the cool blackness of
the night
Dew returns in wet delight.

Unless there be an ebb and flow,
Night-time come and daylight go,

No dew would e'er intrude
Upon the midnight quietude.

The spinning globe creates the dew
And in its wake
It spins a web of life anew.

Thus may we forsake*



our pride, vanity, and hubris, too

*Remembering our
origin is humble as the dew.*

~^~

The humblest thing in our surroundings can prove to be essential to our life; it may never be understood until it goes away. The simplest impressions we received early in life may last a lifetime, becoming more revered each decade and never questioned.

[page 54] Youth in these matters governs maturity, and while men may develop their early impressions more systematically and find confirmations of them in various quarters, they will seldom look at the world afresh or use new categories in deciphering it.

Here again is the sense of the expression "the child is the father of man" revealed. We climb into our box of impressions as a child and spend our lives confirming their accuracy, often never considering the possibility of thinking outside or climbing outside the box. We are able to see best what we have already seen.

[page 65] The most conspicuous point of contact between meaning and poetry is *metaphor*. For one of the first things that a student of etymology — even quite an amateur student — discovers for himself is that every modern language, with its thousands of abstract terms and its nuances of meaning and association, is *apparently* nothing, from beginning to end, but an unconscionable tissue of dead, or petrified metaphors.

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "Language is fossil poetry" which can mean that whenever we speak or write we are creating "sermons in stone" with our words. With this thought in mind, I wrote a poem "Sermons in Stone" which can be read [here](#). Emerson also wrote, "Every word was once a live metaphor." Over time the liveliness of the metaphor fades away and is lost except to the most ardent philologist.

C. S. Lewis wrote in his [Studies in Words](#), "Words progress from descriptive to evaluative." He showed us evolution or rather devolution of some words. He helped me suss out a meaning which had always

puzzled me: "Why was my godfather's last name *Bonvillain*?" To the casual observer the name seems to be an oxymoron meaning a good (*bon*) bad guy (*villain*)! Aha! A villain originally meant a man of the village, so a good man of the village would be a *bonvillain* and be fully descriptive. Over time, when things went missing around the village surrounding the Lord's manor, someone invariably blamed a man of the village, saying it was one of them villains. Thus, villain devolved into bad person when it went from a descriptive word into an evaluative word. C. S. Lewis turned me into a philologist with his fine book, making it possible for me to see in words novel meanings which I had been previously unaware of.

Barfield talks of "primitive languages in which there are words for 'gum tree', 'wattle-tree', etc., but none for 'tree'; and R. R. Marett, in his little book, *Anthropology*, remarks that in some crude tongues, although you can express twenty different kinds of cutting, you cannot say 'cut'." I have encountered in many places talk of Eskimos having 21 words for different kinds of snow, but no one mentioned whether they have perhaps no word for "snow". The leap of consciousness required to generalize "tree", e.g., from the individual names for various trees had not yet reached the people in their language. To have the word "snow" and twenty-one adjectives for the specific type of snow is an advantage of modern peoples, not a defect.

Were earlier civilizations full of poets as Max Müller suggested, living in a wonderful "metaphorical period"? Or did these peoples appear to us as poetic because they perceived without generalizing, e.g., by coming up with the word "snow" for all 21 kinds of the icy substance that filled their daily lives? Barfield rejects these two possibilities and suggests a third possibility in which these "apparently metaphorical values were latent in meaning from the beginning."

The Tower of Babel suggested the chaos that could result if people let go of the words attached to their referent objects and were unable to communicate with each other. I wrote a short verse called "Poem in Waiting" in the back of my copy of *Poetic Diction*, imagining an Ark instead of a Tower:

A Poem in Waiting

*Two by two and
Side by side
They gathered at the Semantic Ark.*

*Where two by two
Each Object and its Reference
Were loaded aboard
Hand in Hand
Showing its name.*

*There was the 4-legged, long-nosed snout
Holding onto to 'anteater' walking by
as Noah announced,*

*"When you get abroad,
you must hold onto
your name for dear life.*

*"If you get separated,
there will be complete chaos."*

~^~

Barfield says:

[page 86, 87] It is these 'footsteps of nature' whose noise we hear alike in primitive language and the finest metaphors of poets. Men do no *invent* those mysterious relations between separate external objects, and between objects and feelings or ideas, which it is the function of poetry to reveal. . . . The language of primitive men reports them as direct perceptual experience. The speaker has observed a unity, and is not therefore himself conscious of *relation*. But we, in the development of consciousness, have lost the power to see this one as one. Our sophistication, like Odin's, has cost us an eye; and now it is the language of poets, in so far as they create true metaphors, which must *restore* this unity conceptually, after it has been lost from perception.

Words are palimpsests of primitive man. The philologist can examine these layers of meaning which were once seen directly and with imaginative archaeology, they can be brought to the light of day once more.

Barfield disdains the modern propensity to "projecting post-logical thoughts back into a pre-logical age", calling it "Logomorphism". This is a process I have noted for several decades which I call "retrodiction", talking about something which pre-dates us using our current way of speaking. Note the wonderful metaphors Barfield calls upon in this passage.

[page 90] 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.

During my long career in computers, I came to understand the difference between *process* and *content*. Executable code in software creates a *process* in the computer hardware(3), and the data is *content* which is operated upon by the executable code in the CPU. Over the years I came to see that the very words we used had process and content attributes. Verbs are *process* words and nouns are *content* words.(4) My essay [Art is the Process of Destruction](#) contains my earliest exposition of this "process and content" dichotomy. Now I discover from Barfield that Homer's epics speak in *process* form and Virgil's epic, appearing later, takes on a *content* form.

[page 98] And we find this contrast — a contrast, as it were between movement and rest — working itself out in broader curves in the descriptions of the shields (Iliad, xviii and Aeneid, viii, 607-731), where Homer instinctively translates the description of motionless objects into action, while Virgil finds it natural to employ the static mode of 'here is...', 'there is...'. Importantly, as Barfield adds in a footnote: "Moreover, Homer shows us Hephaestus actually fashioning the shield, whereas Virgil speaks as a spectator examining the finished product."

Thus, even in the simple description of a shield, Homer lets us follow the *process* of making the shield, while Virgil describes the shield as *content*, a finished object.

These considerations leads Barfield to distinguish two types of poetry, the fluid and the architectural types.

[page 98] To characterize further the difference between what I have ventured to describe as the *fluid* type of poetry and the later, *architectural* type: in the later, elisions tend to become less frequent, whilst (in verse) the number of syllables in a single foot or time-interval grows less easily variable.

Clearly he points out, "The fluid type of verse is made for reciting or singing aloud (ala Homer), and probably gains more than it loses by this method of delivery." The poetry which the verbal story-teller

Homer delivered was not poetry to him but the only way Homer had of sharing his stories. If someone had interrupted Homer to point this out, "Homer, you are speaking poetry", Homer would likely have denied it by words spoken in the same verse as his story.

[page 103] Owing to familiar associations, this use of the word 'poetic' may still be misleading, unless we are willing to consider it a little further. In II, 3, it was pointed out as matter of immediate experience that what is poetry to the reader or hearer need not have been poetry to its maker. This may now be put more strongly: inasmuch as man is *living* the poetry of which he is the maker, and as long as he is so doing, it *cannot* be poetry to him. In order to *appreciate* it, he himself must also exist, consciously, outside it; for otherwise the 'felt change of consciousness' cannot come about. Now nothing but the rational, or logistic, principle can endow him with this subjective — *self-consciousness*. Hence it was justly inferred (IV, 3) that the functioning of the rational principle is indispensable, if *appreciation* is to take place. The absolute rational principle is that which makes conscious of poetry but cannot create it; the absolute poetic principle is that which creates poetry but cannot make conscious of it.

What Barfield is indicating is that the *more* absolute poetic principle (the *more* process), the *less* absolute rational principle (the *less* content), in other words, the *more* poetic principle, the *less* appreciation of the poetry. As Barfield said of the critic (Page 108) 'to write well of love a man must be in love, but to correct his writing he must be out of it again'. He adds, "Yet if the intellectual and active powers are, in Emerson's phrase, 'exclusive', the interval of time which must elapse between their alternations need not be fixed." In my own writing, I allow about three days to elapse after I have written an important piece of work before I am able to correct it. My copy-editor can fix minor typos and point out inconsistencies in my text, and I can repair these immediately, but I need three days or more before I can execute a process I call "playing with sentences". This is the time required for me to read my work as if I were reading someone else's words and allows me to spot areas of lack of understanding. They show up to me this way. I'm reading a sentence or paragraph and it doesn't seem to make sense. It did when I wrote the text in the heat of creativity, but after cooling off, I am as lost any other reader would be reading it. That is when I have to return to my mind what I intended to say and to re-write it until it says exactly that. This cooling-off period is what Barfield calls "the time-interval between the mood of poetic creation proper and the mood of appreciation" (Page 109), or as I would call it, the time interval between the *process* of creating a poem and the enjoyment of the *content* which resulted from it.

Barfield reminds us what the poet Shelley wrote in *A Defense of Poetry*:

[page 105] 'In the infancy of the world, neither poets themselves nor their auditor are fully aware of the excellence of poetry: for it acts in a divine and unapprehended manner, beyond and above consciousness; and it is reserved for future generations to contemplate and measure the mighty cause and effect in all the strength and splendor of their union.'

In the chapter "The Making of Meaning" Barfield's words and ideas on pages, 132 and 133 inspired me to pen this verse:

Ode to the Morning Star

*O, give me the pure heat of poetic expression
where juxtaposition
lays ruin to logic and grammar.*

*Logic? What need have I of logic?
Grammar itself melts in the force of unthinking.*

As a baker of words

*my mind forms new terms
like gingerbread in the oven.*

*What need has the morning sky of a new star? you ask.
Does not the morning sky enjoy a new star?*

*Let me Wing to the morning star,
Singing: A new Word is born!*

~^~

Barfield writes about words with strange meanings:

[page 133, italics added] 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.

A bottle cannot contain radio waves, nor can words be bottles of meaning. Words are like the carrier waves of radio signals broadcasting meaning upon the world. The tuning of the hearer idiosyncratically separates the meaning from its carrier waves.

Barfield on page 134, 135 discusses a book entitled *The Meaning of Meaning* which begins by positing that 'it is impossible thus to handle a scientific manner in metaphorical terms'. Paradoxically the authors never acknowledge the relationship of meaning to metaphor.

[page 134, 135] The authors of *The Meaning of Meaning* have never practiced the gentle art of *unthinking*, though it is one for which the subtlety and agility of their intellects must, as a matter of fact, make them peculiarly fitted. As a result, they are absolutely rigid under the spell of those verbal ghosts of the physical sciences, which today make up practically the whole meaning-system of so many European minds. This may seem a strong expression; yet surely nothing but a kind of enchantment could have prevented two intelligent people who had succeeded in writing a treatise some four hundred pages long on the 'meaning of meaning', from realizing that linguistic symbols have a *figurative* origin; a rule from which high-sounding 'scientific' terms like *cause, reference, organism, stimulus, etc.*, are not miraculously exempt! That those who profess to eschew figurative expressions are really confining themselves to one very old kind of figure, might well escape the ordinary psychological or historical writer; it usually does; that it should escape the specialist in Meaning is somehow horribly tragic. And indeed the book is a ghastly tissue of empty abstractions.

Want examples of the "verbal ghosts of the physical sciences" which besiege politicians on all sides today as they plea for money for their causes, claiming to be supported by *hard scientific* facts? These *verbal ghosts* are easy enough to find: global warming, coastal erosion, sea level rise, etc. One notes how these new causes have replaced such earlier scourges such as acid rain which has been completely discredited, having been found to be the natural effect of the environment and not caused by human intervention. One would think that a true scientist would be skeptical of the claims of those who use 'scientific terms like cause, reference, organism, stimulus, etc.' which are indeed metaphorical terms completely introjected as fact by oblivious scientists. Barfield thinks so.

[page 135] Now a great deal — perhaps most — of the technical vocabulary of philosophy and science can be shown to be not merely figurative, but actually

metaphorical.

Barfield has a lot more to say about the issue of what constitutes *real* science. And what he says may constitute an "inconvenient truth" and uncomfortable revelation for many verbose barkers of the verbal ghosts of science today.

[page 138, 139] It has already been emphasized that the rational principle must be strongly developed in the great poet. Is it necessary to add to this that the scientist, if he has 'discovered' anything, must also have discovered it by the right interaction of the rational and poetic principles? Really, there is no distinction between Poetry and Science, as kinds of knowing, at all. There is only a distinction between bad poetry and bad science. 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.

William Blake claimed that without the poetic ability, "the philosophic and experimental would soon be at the ratio of all things, and stand still, unable to do other than repeat the same dull round." Yes, much like the melancholic rants that verbose barkers of today's super-rational science intone from public platforms today.

[page 144] In Platonic terms we should say that the rational principle can increase *understanding*, and it can increase *true opinion*, but it can never increase *knowledge*. And herein is revealed the levity of chanting with too indiscriminate praises the triumphal 'progress' of our language from Europe to Cathay.

How could anyone remember all the words of Homer's epics before they were written down? Barfield points out in footnote on page 146, that, "before the invention of writing, metrical form was deliberately adopted as an aid to memory."

[page 146] Nature herself is perpetually rhythmic. Just as the myths still live on a ghostly life as fables after they have died as real meaning, so the old rhythmic human consciousness of Nature (it should rather be called a *participation* than a consciousness) lives on as the tradition of metrical form.

*Participation mystique is a rhythmic feat
that pitters and patters in metrical feet.*

That is how I would express the metrical tradition of Homer.

[page 147] We can only understand the origin of meter by going back to the ages when men were conscious, not merely in their heads, but in the beating of their hearts and the pulsing of their blood — when thinking was not merely *of* Nature, but was Nature herself.

It is only at a later stage that prose (= not-verse) comes naturally into being out of the growth of that rational principle which, with its sense-bound, abstract thoughts, divorces man's consciousness from the life of Nature.

Barfield writes of the separation of prose from verse as he might speak, as his Solicitor-self, of a bill of divorce.

[page 149] Thus, if we chose to confine our prophetic gaze to language and its 'progress',

we should certainly behold Poetry giving poor Verse a bill of divorce and flying at some distant date into the arms of prose.

Next he tackles the difference between the minor poet and the great poet, not in terms of their *content* produced, but rather in terms of the *process* that each uses. First, he describes the minor poet — and poets should beware: he may pin the tail on your donkey self.

[page 159] For a certain kind of pupil — as though more concerned to please his master than to digest his lesson — insists, as it were, on learning the lesson off by heart. This is the minor poet. The minor poet is appreciator rather than creator. He imitates, because he must have his idiom established, acknowledged, labeled in his own consciousness as 'poetic' before he can feel that he is writing poetry. He is always trying to give himself the sensations which he has received from reading the works of greater poets. And since his energies go more into contemplating than creating, it is even possible that he extracts more aesthetic pleasure from his own work than the great poet does.

Here he describes not only the minor poet, but the minor artist in all genres — the shopping mall artworks contain many examples of their work. The true artists all fields strive to break the mold of the extant artists; to *express* to others something by their work, rather than to *impress* others by their work. For this reason, their early works are considered ugly, not pleasing, to the eye(5). Replace the word poet with artist and what Barfield says still holds.

[page 159] A poetic meaning is already in the words and mannerisms which the minor poet is instinctively drawn to use and imitate. Whether it is there as a legacy from the ancient poetic meaning in all language, or whether it is there because it has been put there by some original poet in the past, the fact remains that it is there. It is to do some of my work for me, thinks he (though not, of course, in so many words); let me fit my own emotional experience as neatly as I can into the established poetic molds, and the result will give me something, will comfort me, intoxicate me.

Often I have found a new form of poetry, such as when I discovered the triolet(6), and my temptation to write a poem using the triolet form was unstoppable. My use of the sonnet form is one I fall back on to express a sentiment on a special occasion to my wife. None of my uses of these forms qualifies me as anything other than a minor poet with a creative bent. Barfield explains what a great poet is.

[page 160]The great poet, on the contrary, is himself the giver. He is giving out all the time — wisdom to other men, meaning to language. This he does by externalizing as fully as is possible in words his own first-hand experience beyond them. There is, indeed, a certain simplicity and sobriety about the activity of men who expend more energy upon creation than upon appreciation. If they are poets, they do not require to wear their hair long or to neglect their accounts in order to remind themselves of the fact.

Archaism as defined by Barfield is of two types, the literary and the colloquial. The literary archaism brings back to life academic words long fallen out of use. The colloquial form utilizes words in spoken form, not in literary use, from an earlier time.

[page 166] These great movements of archaism, which are at the same time returns to Nature, are only inaugurated, as we should expect, by the greater poets. They are led by poets with something to say, in other words, with something to give. It is these who break away from the old 'poetic diction' in its futile sense, and it is not their fault that what they create eventually becomes a new one. At first, indeed, so far from being the fashion, their language is likely to find it difficult to get a hearing at all.

True poetry, like true art, is a process of the destruction of the sameness of expectations built up over time, a sameness which when broken up often seems ugly or repugnant, at first. For this reason true art in all

fields gives critics great trouble, leading them to ignore the great contemporary geniuses of their own time.

[page 166, 167] For the critic, like the minor poet (they are often one even in corporeal substance) needs to have his poetry in an idiom already duly established as poetry, before he can appreciate it as such. And usually nothing but time can bring this about; as the new style percolates through the more lively and original spirits till at last it receives the franchise of the pedants and the literary snobs. Thus, it so often comes about that the fame of great poets is posthumous only. They have, as Shelley said, to create the taste by which they are appreciated: and by the time they have done so, the choice of words, the new meaning and manner of speech which they have brought in *must*, by the nature of things, be itself growing heavier and heavier, hanging like a millstone of authority round the neck of free expression.

The new genius is like a prophet being born of a virgin which the priests declare to be an abomination.

[page 167] We have but to substitute dogma for literature, and we find the same endless antagonism between prophet and priest. How shall the hard rind not hate and detest the unembodied life that is cracking it from within? How shall the mother not feel pain?

Barfield explains how a minor critic will likely devolve into a collector over time.

[page 169] As time passes and the dammed springs of poetic impulse which first impelled him to criticism dry up, his criticism becomes no more than a hunting for subtle sensations and high flavors, and then a nice classification of these according to similar sensations and flavors enjoyed in the past. He invents proper epithets like *Dantesque*, *Dickensian*, *Shavian*, to save himself the trouble of interpretation; and these become less and less significant as they are drawn from more and more minor artists; till at last his work tells us nothing about its subject-matter and too much about its author.(7)

What is love, Barfield asks and answers.

[page 175] Love is the begetter of intimate knowledge; for what we love it is not tedious but delightful, to observe minutely. In a footnote he adds, "Hatred, as in the case of satire, or any powerful feeling may lead to a similar result. It is really indifference, alone, which accepts generalization as sufficient."

Barfield closes out his chapter on Strangeness this way:

[page 177] At the risk of tedious repetition, I would insist once more that this aesthetic value of strangeness overlaps, but does not coincide with, the ancient and proverbial truism that familiarity breeds contempt. It is not correlative with wonder; for wonder is our reaction to things which we are conscious of not quite understanding, or at any rate of understanding less than we had thought. The element of strangeness in beauty has the contrary effect. It arises from contact with a different kind of consciousness from our own(8), different, yet not so remote that we cannot partly share it, as indeed, in such a connection, the mere word 'contact' implies. Strangeness, in fact, arouses wonder when we do not understand; aesthetic imagination when we do.

Two of the people Barfield seems to most admire, and I would agree with him on that opinion, are Ralph Waldo Emerson and Rudolf Steiner. Emerson I discovered at eighteen when I entered college and found the bookstore there had books never found in my local rural libraries, such as a collection of Emerson's essays. Steiner I found in part due to Barfield himself and the high opinion he expressed of Steiner's writing on the evolution of consciousness and other subjects.

[page 179] '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.**

The second paragraph above struck me as familiar and, as I pondered why, it occurred to me that Barfield was describing my Violet-n-Joey cartoons which have graced the top of my [DIGESTWORLD](#) Issues almost from the beginning. Here's a sample of one of them: Joey says: "Try not to have an opinion." Violet replies: "I don't think that's possible." Joey requests Violet to not have an opinion and Violet interrupts him with a conscious refutation, in other words, Joey's earlier living request is confronted by a later more conscious statement.

Emerson's insights shared in his Essays poured an endless supply of insight into my still teenage brain which never left me.

Next Barfield refers the reader of *Poetic Diction* to the voluminous writings of Rudolf Steiner. As for myself as a reader of over 237 books of Rudolf Steiner, I can attest to an endless flood of insights I have acquired from Herr Steiner.

[page 207] And here the reader is once more referred to the voluminous writings of Rudolf Steiner, who brought to bear upon precisely this ancient consciousness an amazing wealth of intuition, inspiration, and imagination, illuminating it out of an inexhaustible fertility in metaphor with a brilliant flood of poetic light.

What better way of completing my review than a quote from Barfield's concluding paragraph, elaborating on what constitutes great poetry, in which he gives us a living creation to hold memorably in our hand.

[page 181] Great poetry is the progressive incarnation of life in consciousness. Hence the absolute value of aesthetic pleasure as a criterion; for before we can feel it, we must have become aware in some degree of the actual progress — not merely of its results. Over the perpetual evolution of human consciousness, which is stamping itself upon the transformation of language, the spirit of poetry hovers, forever unable to alight. It is only when we are lifted above that transformation, so that we behold it as present movement, that our startled souls feel the little pat and the throbbing, feathery warmth, which tell us that she has perched. It is only when we have risen from beholding the creature into beholding creation that our mortality catches for a moment the music of the turning spheres.

So rare: an academic book that leaves me breathless, saying under my breath, WOW!

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Footnote 1.

"Philology is commonly defined as the study of literary texts as well as oral and written records, the establishment of their authenticity and their original form, and the determination of their meaning." Credit: Google. I would define it simply as "the love of words".

[Return to text directly before Footnote 1.](#)

Footnote 2.

The following sentence on page 115 was a likely source of my writing about words being "sleeping beauties": "Like sleeping beauties, they lie prone and rigid in the walls of Castle Logic, waiting only for the kiss of Metaphor to awaken them to fresh life."

[Return to text directly before Footnote 2.](#)

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**Footnote 3.**

The Central Processing Unit (CPU) is the hardware which converts the code into action inside the computer.

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Footnote 4.

It is possible, to *noun* a verb and to *verb* a noun. For example, this process can *happen* to happen.

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**Footnote 5.**

See my Essay, [Art is the Process of Destruction](#) linked here: <http://www.doyletics.com/artpofd.shtml>.

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Footnote 6.

See a trio of triplets [here](#), including one I wrote myself, "The Laughing Monk".

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**Footnote 7.**

Barfield here reminds me of why my reviews are rarely criticisms of the books I read, but instead expository comments on my understanding of each author's meaning.

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Footnote 8.

Robert Heinlein's classic science fiction novel *Strange in a Strange Land* evokes this quality of strangeness in its hero Robert Valentine Smith.

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