

Before the New Criticism Barfield's *Poetic Diction* in Context¹

Before the New Criticism, Owen Barfield published *Poetic Diction* (1928), a revision of his B. Litt. Thesis at Oxford. Much has happened since in the field of literary theory: new criticism, mythic and Marxist criticism, existentialism, phenomenology, structuralism, semiotics, deconstructionism and no doubt many more. This welter of intellectual activity points both to great cultural energy and to a philosophical and spiritual abyss. Through it all *Poetic Diction* has remained in print, and, although Barfield has written no other book on literary theory, his several books on related topics and his numerous essays have kept his name public and his thoughts influential.

More than Barfield's subsequent career, however, has kept his youthful, slender volume of literary theory current. His early brilliance has retained its luster because it includes and still illuminates many of the issues that constitute our present enterprise and crisis. Those issues and that crisis may be summarized in a single word – romanticism. Nearly each “generation” of critics has attacked its predecessor since the late enlightenment and Kant, violent evidence of cultural unity. The attacks seem increasingly virulent while the “generations” are ever shorter, testimony to the rhythm of crisis. Indeed, a generation seems now to be about four or five years, just enough to matriculate a set of literature graduates with a glossary of obscure technical vocabulary. The sad brevity of the generations has lately produced careers in which the critics attack not only their elder colleagues but also their younger selves. What currently appear are not merely turmoil and discord but almost clinical self-hatred and intellectual paralysis, a process chronicled by Frank Lentriccia in *After the New Criticism*.

Such crisis represents a psychological debt our culture has for too long owed itself. The aestheticism of the *fin de siècle* and then the new criticism attempted to put literature and especially poetry into isolated categories. Modern critics after 1945 have bravely tried to face the fact that literature is merely a special case of all discourse, all language, and therefore of nearly all that we call meaning. Romanticism implies more than a series of cataclysmic political and social revolutions; it marks the crucial departure point from Western Europe's well-mapped version of classical Aristotelian ontology into an uncharted sea without the bearings of cause and effect, an unmoved Mover, particulate atoms of matter and a simple union between words and the things or ideas they signify. Romanticism did not produce modern science but it did make *imaginable*: eons of prehistory, electromagnetism, nuclear decay, interchangeable space/time and matter/energy, statistical quanta, string physics and who knows what next? At the same time, romanticism made a universe where all meaning seems unmoored and arbitrary. The initial reaction among literary scholars was to form “scientific”

studies of language and meaning which shortly became departments of philology, linguistics, semantics, and cognitive science safely removed from "art." That is the debt of accumulated cultural and psychological interest now being repaid, but the process is far from complete.

Owen Barfield's career, beginning with *Poetic Diction*, has spanned just this period of crisis. A look at Barfield's ideas in this early book shows how he anticipated the crisis by understanding and facing up to the implications of romanticism for literary theory when it was fashionable to hide from them. Because his ideas were so far ahead of their time, *Poetic Diction* remains an important work and can yet contribute not merely ideas but an elevated perspective which may be of help in finding a point of rest in the present crisis.

Barfield's thesis in *Poetic Diction* and throughout his career is that consciousness has evolved in fundamental ways during the course of history. We are all used to the notion that humanity evolved physically. Remarkably little has been done, however, in standard scientific research to plot the evolution of the human mind. Despite the nearly countless artifacts and documents and the clear patterns of "progress" they depict, the unspoken assumption among nearly all scholars and scientists even now is that physical and mental evolution are in all ways synonymous and that prehistoric man was just as we are except that he lacked a modern education.² Any person today though who tried to run his life exclusively not merely on a belief in but with the perception of demons, spirits, totems and deities would soon be declared insane. If we accept at face value *Gilgamesh*, the *Iliad* and *Beowulf* as literal transcriptions of experience and not as barbarous mixtures of the strangely fanciful and the strikingly factual, literature and history appear far differently. This in effect is what Barfield – taking hints from Goethe and Emerson, and ideas from Coleridge and Max Müller – has done with wondrous results.

The title of a collection of essays which Barfield published later in his career – *Romanticism Comes of Age* – concisely describes what happens in *Poetic Diction*. From without he examines metaphor and from within the "felt change of consciousness" that is the experience of poetry in the twentieth century. As one looks back in time, both metaphor and "change of consciousness" evaporate into literal language and into a mode of consciousness that perpetually includes poetry and requires no change. At this stage of its mental evolution the human race lives within the perception of poetry and naturally utters it simply by describing everyday experience. The process of evolution causes more and more crystallized meanings to become necessary; this crystallization makes possible the conceptual experience of metaphor but cuts off the possibility of directly experiencing "reality." "Reality, once self-evident, and therefore not conceptually experienced, but which can *now* only be reached by effort of the individual mind – this is what is contained in a true poetic metaphor" (88).³ Every modern abstraction can be traced back to the literal depiction of "primitive" experience which contains the components of what we *now* think of as material and spiritual. Modern languages

are fossil beds of such ancient unity, and abstract prose requires these inexhaustible fossils for its meaning. Poetry revivifies the metaphors and causes the felt change of consciousness to arise. For these reasons ancient language makes no distinction between poetry and abstract or literal discourse.

This is the barest sketch of Barfield's theory. Even without elaboration, however, it should be clear that the theory contains within it the essential seeds which have grown into our most recent contention. Barfield supplies a semantic theory and a philosophy of literary history; we shall see that these imply a full ontology and a kind of structuralism. Barfield seems to say that our present trauma and crisis are little more than adolescence and that all of our frenetic literary-isms are a single romanticism struggling to come of age.

Poetic Diction anticipates modern critical theory because Owen Barfield saw quite early that the central issues of a mature romanticism were not self-absorbed melancholy, abstracted ideals of beauty, some revived folklore, the triumph of a political program, or notions of genetic purity, but rather the nature of language itself and its evolution. His theory still offers us a great deal because he includes evolution and insists that any viable theory must deal with language both as it is and as it has been. The current proliferation of theories tends to focus either on detailed analysis or the experience of reading or upon placing a work within an historical context. Barfield's theory does not begin to function until these two dimensions combine, and does not function successfully until the usual concept of "history" is relieved of the secondary qualities of politics, economics and social dynamics, and the fact prevails that "all real history is the history of thought," a phrase borrowed from R. G. Collingwood by Barfield, who feels that Collingwood too frequently ignores what his thesis implies (Barfield, *Speaker's Meaning*, 17-25).

Poetic Diction is, in larger part than now seems necessary, an answer to positivism. Barfield does not seem to be aware in his work of de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*, but we can be fairly sure he would not have approved of it and that positivists would have. De Saussure's linguistics played a large role in the formation of structuralism and was therefore also present at the beginning of modern critical theory.⁴ Two famous points of de Saussure's theory are especially relevant and help make clear why modern theorists are still attempting to arrive where Barfield began.

First, de Saussure divorces language from meaning, declaring that the meanings which attach to words are entirely arbitrary. That is, the link between a physical word and "its" concept remains unexamined and is on principle unknowable:

The bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary. Since I mean by sign the whole that results from the associating of the signifier with the signified, I can simply say: *the linguistic sign is arbitrary*.

The idea of "sister" is not linked by any inner relationship to the succession of sounds s-ö-r which serves as its signifier in French; that it could be represented equally by just any other sequence is proved by differences among languages and by the very existence of different languages: the signified "ox" has as its signifier b-ö-f on one side of the border and o-k-s [Ochs] on the other. (*Course* 67-68)

We here witness a crucial moment in the formation of the twentieth century. Physical language is simply declared to be separate from the only reason for its existence – meaning. This blow made possible a "science" of linguistics and, one should note, the philosophical basis for the pseudo-mathematical formal logics which were developing at that time, which still actively continue to develop, and which are now being encoded into machine "languages" for the electronic mechanization of "thought."⁵ All of this consensual energy races along one of the central nerves of contemporary Western culture and of course "proves" the wisdom of de Saussure's decision just exactly as Descartes' earlier decision to separate subject from object was proved by the formation of empirical science itself.

Barfield would have had none of this, and it is important to realize why. To him de Saussure's severing of meaning from word would be simply the ultimate in a long process begun with Descartes or even before of crystallizing objective "pure intellect" out of an earlier condition of "original unity" (86-88). Although Barfield's feelings as well as his reason are clearly engaged, the point for him is not a moral one at all. Nor would the important point be exactly *what* de Saussure says but that he *can* say it at all.

In a previous era, word and concept are inseparable and any severing of "them" literally unthinkable. But Barfield would not have been slow to point to the unexamined assumptions in de Saussure's position, which were shared by positivists and the first structuralists. De Saussure by *fiat* declares all of language to consist of two parts: word and concept. These he says are arbitrarily attachable to and detachable from one another. There is, for example, a concept "cat" with lexical entries for all modern European languages. Examples of this sort serve well enough where cats are domestic pets in an homogenous culture. As one goes back a few centuries, however, the words may not change at all but the concept presumably shifts so that the pet becomes a semi-wild animal tolerated in the barn to catch rodents. In some non-European cultures, even in modern times, the concept must include the possibility of food for dinner. If one considers ancient Egypt, "cat" becomes hedged with divinity. No one who has studied a foreign language with any care can be unaware of the difficulty of translating (words? concepts?) from one language to another. It is simply not obviously true that words or concepts are easily separable, and it is not acceptable to pretend that we can separate them when it seems that we cannot. Nor can we allow a patched up explanatory phrase, which hooks divinity and cat together, at worst with brute force and at best poetically, to stand in place of a single concept "cat" which evokes "both" ideas.

De Saussure's static realm of universal concepts easily attachable to sound or writing is obviously something which we cannot *assume* to exist and something he would probably not have defended very strongly. He seems to have wished merely to cut "philosophy" loose from language and so to free physical words for empirical science. The result, however, was to alter the traditional (and no doubt somewhat naive) assumption of unified language and replace it with a notion of language consisting of two parts – one purely physical and the other "mental" but either rigidly algebraic or altogether out of bounds.

Barfield would regard all of this as symptomatic of an immature romanticism, one that makes distinctions which finally obscure rather than enlighten and rigidify rather than liberate. What de Saussure ignores – the elusive substratum of meaning which "precedes" logic and formal concepts – is for Barfield the very essence of the problem of language. And the problem is the reverse of finding which words go with which conceptual blocks. Rather it is to watch, or better through poetry to participate, as conceptual relations form and grow from "flashing iridescent shapes like flames – ever-flickering vestiges of the slowly evolving consciousness beneath them" (75). Barfield does not try to specify the conceptual structures of language, but the image here expresses an evanescence which can discover meanings and their relations. Such discovery is not arbitrary and not prescriptive. Any concepts which emerge are gifts from evolution and not a matter of the human race creating meaning from nothing or drawing epistemological boundaries of its own conscious choosing.

Barfield might agree with de Saussure and the positivists that there are solid conceptual blocks which have more or less crystallized from the "iridescence." He would probably find that a triangle, for example, is explicable in purely intellectual and, as it happens, mathematical terms. Such concepts may indeed exist, but Barfield would never agree either that these fully crystallized concepts are all there is to the reality of ideas or that they have "always" been there. Triangles and everything else that we may feel is fully comprehensible have emerged from the "flames" through a co-operation between the evolution of human consciousness and "reality." But it would be presumptuous to make a sharp distinction between this evolution and reality. The two are necessarily identical phenomena. We must earn and justify any distinction we would make between "word," "meaning," "idea," "concept," "reality," and "truth." And it is just the act of making such distinctions which causes concepts to form and consciousness therefore to evolve, and which both creates the rational consciousness with which we are used to engaging the world and also obscures the "iridescence" underlying or overarching our world.

The second aspect of de Saussure's thought which pertains especially to Barfield is the famous distinction between "synchronic" and "diachronic" analysis of language. Synchronic pertains to the languages as it is without regard to change

over time. Diachronic analysis compares one “evolutionary phase” of language to another (81). Synchronic analysis is the stuff of linguistics as it has developed since the time of de Saussure. Diachronic analysis has not found as much favor in spite of the fact that its predecessor was triumphant as “philology” during the nineteenth century. One reason for this may be the emphasis with which de Saussure makes his distinction; indeed he insists upon “two sciences of language” (81). Analytic linguistics in the twentieth century has developed synchronically with special focus on the structures of contemporary languages and the “phenomenology” of language usage. This development of structuralist linguistics stems directly from de Saussure’s work and certainly represents an advancement over the techniques of the previous century. But these very advances come close to precluding a genuinely diachronic linguistics, for reasons which de Saussure could not have foreseen and which have implications as great for literature as for linguistics.

The development of linguistics since de Saussure has largely been an exploration of synchronic questions with emphasis on discovering a “deep structure” (i.e., highly general) set of “production rules;” these rules allow a speaker to generate utterances which a listener can interpret as syntactically complete – a sentence. At this level of formalization neither specific languages nor human interlocutors are theoretically necessary (Sowa 391-97). This level may indeed be what de Saussure had in mind when he called for a new science of “semiotics” (16-17, 67-70), but he could not have known how different this sort of structural emphasis would be from the descriptive grammars of individual languages which he was familiar with and which we all use when we study languages which are not native to us. This difference erects a formidable barrier before the diachronic study of language because a generative grammar requires a society of at least two users of language, and is part of the collective social mind of the community of speakers. In other words, de Saussure’s attempt to reserve language for empirical science has actually driven linguistics into the arms of phenomenological psychology where a speaker’s “intuitions” about grammar constitute the “physical” evidence of syntax.

There is serious question, therefore, whether an accurate transcription of past generative grammars is even theoretically possible; it is certainly insuperably difficult, since the communities have by definition disappeared. Moreover, de Saussure almost seems to discourage diachronic study. Although he uses the phrase “evolutionary phase” to describe any given past state of a language, his real attitude is more apparent when he speaks of evolution as being in fact “a blind force against the organization of a system of signs” (*Course* 89). Saussurean linguistics actually sees “evolution” as a kind of entropy which works against the arbitrary but elegant system of signs of any given moment. The word *evolution* does not truly apply here. De Saussure’s imagery is of decay, which something like an interpersonal genius of language presumably manages somehow to keep patched up. Out of the reckoning altogether are extralinguistic

phenomena which might have an effect on language, such as concepts (“signifieds”). A truly arbitrary system of signs such as a computer “language” could have no need or use for diachronic analysis, and Saussurean linguistics in this century could reasonably plead its neglect of diachronic analysis on similar grounds: “blind force” is the diachronic equivalent of the arbitrary nature of meaning and equally unknowable. De Saussure’s immaturely romantic faith in a blind and arbitrary universe has become the stage setting for much of our contemporary linguistic and literary “science.”

Barfield may not have known of de Saussure when he wrote *Poetic Diction*, but he did know of immature romanticism. Central to his theory is that meaning itself evolves in ways we can trace empirically and experientially. Barfield’s principle of a “felt change of consciousness” is exactly cognate to the modern linguists’ assertion of a phenomenologically generated grammar. A sentence recognized as such is itself indeed a felt change of consciousness and neither more nor less.⁶ But there is a great difference between Barfield and the linguist. The latter refers to the experience of language in general, Barfield to the experience of poetry. The two would agree that there is a great difference, the linguist as likely as not insisting that poetry has nothing intrinsically to do with linguistic structures or the fundamental nature of meaning. Barfield – and here one must be hypothetical since he nowhere compares linguistic syntax with poetry – might argue as follows: The experience of language generally and poetry in particular are somewhat similar but occur at different levels. The normal use of conversational language provides felt change of consciousness, measured against the statistically remote instances of humans who are incapable of, or reared without, language at all. The experience of poetry provides very similar benefits, except at a higher level and to a correspondingly smaller group. In particular, the enjoyment of true metaphor is precisely the measurement of the evolutionary past of human consciousness. This experience indeed *is* the grammatical structure of language. These distinct but very similar experiences are our evidence for the synchronic and diachronic structures of language respectively. This summary is purely hypothetical but not without foundation. *Speaker’s Meaning*, pp. 13-39, gives a detailed comparison of “expression” and “communication” in language. This discussion *mutatis mutandis*, might well apply to the spoken “prose” which constitutes the linguist’s usual view of language as well as it does to the more formal non-poetic written language.

Barfield has been called “Heidegger disguised as an English solicitor,” but Barfield himself admits that he and Heidegger cannot “get on” and is even inclined to feel “there is less than meets the eye” in the German philosopher’s writings (from private correspondence, March 1987). The irony that “the English Heidegger” finds his German counterpart to be as impenetrable as he is incorrect is not difficult to explain; Heidegger, from Barfield’s perspective, is another case of immature romanticism, however unlike de Saussure’s romanticism Heidegger’s

may be. More surprising perhaps, are the eerie parallels and contrasts in Barfield's and Heidegger's careers. The two are close enough in age to have been brothers (Heidegger born 1889, Barfield 1898). Their seminal early work appeared within a year (*Sein und Zeit* 1927, *Poetic Diction* 1928). Each writer devoted a long career to books and essays which elaborate upon, but never deviate from, this early settled philosophical position. Theirs are very different biographies, however. Heidegger spent a long quiet life producing acclaimed academic writings which influenced first, professional philosophers, and more recently, literary critics. Barfield started his professional life in literature but was obliged to pursue a legal career, during which he also published fiction, poetry, drama, critical essays and books of philosophical speculation. Barfield moved generally from literature to philosophy; Heidegger proceeded from technical academic philosophy toward more and more speculative considerations of history, language, art and poetry.

What is truly remarkable in all of this is their overall intellectual similarity, in spite of wholly different attitudes and styles. Heidegger sees himself, in his ontological speculations, to be beyond traditional metaphysics and philosophical tradition and adopts a mantic style reminiscent of a humorless Nietzsche. Barfield, on a completely different but almost exactly parallel path, calmly, surgically and wittily adopts a traditional dialectical style which has been common since Plato; it never occurs to Barfield that he or anyone else might be "beyond philosophy," or that if there were such a position it would be best served by despairing of history, words and humanity. In essence this is what Heidegger does. Faith in reason and the integrity of language – "maturity" – is what separates Heidegger and Barfield.

Barfield and Heidegger are by no means alone during the first half of the twentieth century in finding language supremely important to philosophy. But they are unusual in their belief that the expressive power of language provides a truth hidden from mere analysis. As we have seen, the articulation of just such a thesis is where Barfield begins his remarkable career; in a sense it is where Heidegger ends his. The collection of essays published in English as *Poetry, Language, Thought* includes papers written between 1935 and 1954 and so contains work from Heidegger's full maturity, when he develops his views on language and poetry.

In order to understand Heidegger's remarks on these topics, it is helpful to review the image central to all his philosophy. He is above all an ontologist, who spent his career probing the fundamental principles of existence. For him, being manifests itself in a "clearing," an opening in a chaotic forest where there is, suddenly and inexplicably, clarity – a place where "beings" are recognizable. Concepts and ideas are such beings. Language names beings: "...language alone brings what is, as something that is, into the Open for the first time. Where there is no language...there is no openness of what is, and consequently no openness

either of that which is not and of the empty" (*Poetry* 73). This aspect of language precedes and underlies its use as a tool of mundane communication. Language names the beings, projects them into the clearing, and causes "a renunciation of all the dim confusion in which what is veils and withdraws itself" (*Poetry* 74). The paragraph which follows this quotation, with a slight change of technical vocabulary and a large change in style, could almost stand as a synopsis of *Poetic Diction*:

Projective saying is poetry: the saying of world and earth, the saying of the arena of their conflict and thus of the place of all nearness and the remoteness of the gods. Poetry is the saying of the unconcealedness of what is. Actual language at any give moment is the happening of this saying, in which a people's world historically arises for it and the earth is preserved as that which remains closed. Projective saying is saying which in preparing the sayable, simultaneously brings the unsayable as such into a world. In such saying, the concepts of an historical people's nature, i.e., of its belonging to world history, are formed for that folk, before it. (*Poetry* 74)⁷

At the conclusion of this essay Heidegger articulates a theory of history and art uncannily like Barfield's. Heidegger finds that art – and for him as well as for Barfield poetry is the wellspring of art – "lets truth originate" and simultaneously not only has an external history but "is history" (*Poetry* 77). Art "founds" history:

This foundation happened in the West for the first time in Greece. What was in the future to be called Being was set into work, setting the standard. The realm of beings thus opened up was then transformed into a being in the sense of God's creation. This happened in the Middle Ages. This kind of being was again transformed at the beginning and in the course of the modern age. Beings became objects that could be controlled and seen through by calculation. At each time a new and essential world arose. At each time the openness of what is had to be established in beings themselves, by the fixing in place of truth in figure. At each time there happened unconcealedness of what is. Unconcealedness sets itself into work, a setting which is accomplished by art. (*Poetry* 76-77)

What Heidegger here calls history, Barfield terms "evolution of consciousness." Barfield's more ornate phrase is justified if, as the two writers would seem to agree, every major cultural change implies the emergence of "a new and essential world," and a community of human minds aware of previously unknown or "absent" concepts. It is not surprising to find that Heidegger almost seems to quote Barfield on the topic of "normal" language, everyday usage of language which presumably indexes our state of consciousness: "Poetry proper is never merely a higher mode (*melos*) of everyday language. It is rather the reverse: everyday language is a forgotten and therefore used-up poet, from which there hardly resounds a call any longer" (*Poetry* 208).⁸

There has been no attempt here to find all of the very many remarkable similarities between Heidegger's and Barfield's philosophies of art, poetry and language, nor any to present a categorical analysis of them. Even if we did not know that Barfield does not "get on" with Heidegger, it would hardly be

surprising that there are differences between the two. The greatest of these differences is at the lowest level of their thought. Although the two agree on a number of particulars, they radically disagree on first principles. It is just where Heidegger thinks of himself as wandering in a mist "beyond philosophy" that Barfield pitches base camp and plots his route to what he considers to be a clearly visible summit. The differences between Heidegger and Barfield are not always easy to find or to explain, in spite of what would undoubtedly have been violent disagreements between them had either writer commented on the other's work. Both authors describe the rather subsidiary concept of "strangeness" in almost exactly the same way. This is entirely coincidental and therefore not without its own haunting dimension of strangeness. An examination of each author's rhetoric leads past the coincidence toward what it is that forms a seemingly unbridgeable gap between them.

Heidegger, in a late essay,⁹ comments on a work by his favorite poet Hölderlin and at the same time generalizes about poetic images: "The poetic saying of images gathers the brightness and sound of the heavenly appearances into one with the darkness and silence of what is alien. By such sight the god surprises us. In this strangeness he proclaims his unfaltering nearness" (*Poetry*, 226). Barfield, characteristically, goes into more detail. He distinguishes one sort of strangeness which is "merely...eccentricity of expression." Truly poetic strangeness, however, is one "of meaning" (*Poetic Diction* 21, italics in original). This latter strangeness is "pure poetry" not because it juxtaposes "two kinds of consciousness," but rather because it is "the act of becoming conscious itself. It is the momentary apprehension of the poetic by the rational, into which the former is forever transmuting itself – which it is itself forever in process of becoming" (*Poetic Diction*, 178). Heidegger presents us with a cosmic strangeness which forcefully yokes the "heavenly" with the "alien." We read at the end of this essay that "kindness" forms humanity and is the product of just these divine visitations of poetry: "As long as this arrival of kindness endures, so long does man succeed in measuring himself not unhappily against the godhead" (*Poetry*, 229). The poetic consciousness is romantically vast and heroic, but, at the same time, seems romantically fragile and lonely, surrounded by a divine but alien universe. This impression is no doubt enhanced in this essay because Heidegger is interpreting the romantic Hölderlin, but there can be no doubt that Heidegger expresses his own thoughts here. Throughout his work Heidegger writes of "beings" who or which appear to man. The governing image is one of intervention; all of mankind's traffic with reality seems to be the product of divine immanence, a numinosity charged with wonder and terror, a sudden clearing in the alien chaos where glorious and frightening beings perform the dance we call reality, knowledge and culture. Only "kindness" can make this spectacle seem human. But humanity must await the "arrival" of kindness and hope for it to endure.

Barfield's perspective is not cosmic in *Poetic Diction* and he sees neither divinity nor alienation in poetry, merely "the rational" and "the poetic." In place of

“godhead” we find “the act of becoming conscious.” Nevertheless, for Barfield the true experience of poetry is a very rare event, rarer perhaps than visitations from Heidegger's rather willful divinities, and certainly more revelatory. Barfield does not require kindness to supply humanity to the drama. Poetry for Barfield is by definition human and in essence dramatic. Drama arises as a result of the friction between the way the entire race used to (or we individuals as children do) perceive reality and the way we modern adults now are constrained to do so, through a useful and accurate, but rigid, conceptual grid.

For Heidegger all cognition is a hard-won contest. Chaos constantly threatens. “Dif-ference” (the schism which creates a “thing” apart from the flow of “world”, between “thinging” and “worlding.” Heidegger's neologistic gerunds stress the fragility of all cognition, perhaps of perception itself, if there is a meaningful distinction between percept and concept at this level. Barfield also is articulately aware of the fragility of thought and of the struggle to attain “presencing,” but for Barfield the process is largely historical or evolutionary. The poet's metaphor allows us to experience this evolutionary process and to discover the fluid “reality” behind our own rigid modern concepts. But the concepts are there for us and form our effortless, commonsense world without any heroic endeavors on our part except those involved in acquiring culture, that is, in evolving our personal consciousness. But the panorama of history is where the evolution happens and where it reveals itself clearly and coherently during successive epochs in the history of poetry.

In *Poetic Diction* the flow of evolution traces through specific words in poetic context. Barfield, for example, examines Greek, Latin, and English poetic uses of the word “ruin” and its ancient equivalents. He finds that the Greek “ruin” is a verb which means “to flow.” It is very nearly the same for Latin in which, however, it also means “to fall.” The Latin substantive *ruina* came to mean a thing which had fallen but also retains its active sense through both the classical and medieval periods. By the sixteenth century in England the ancient word which simultaneously conveys “rush,” “fall” and “collapse” has separated sufficiently that ruin can mean both the activity of collapse and pieces of fallen masonry. Spenser writes both of “The old ruines of a broken towre” and of the defeat of Marinell as “The late ruin of proud Marinell.” At about this time, “ruin” became a transitive verb in English, and so in a way also became the opposite to its ancient intransitive cognates which mean “flow.” A focus on movement has become fascination with the completed process; formless rushing has taken on the possibility for quite static solidity. It is at just this period of history when all of the potential of ruin is active that Shakespeare gathers the word's power into a single line at the climax to *King John* where young Arthur has thrown himself from the castle walls and Salisbury describes himself “Kneeling before the ruin of sweet life...” Arthur's headlong fall and the pitiable fragments of his young body both find expression here. In the context of the play, beyond the physical description, are the rush and utter finality of drama, history and indeed all “sweet life.” Barfield traces the word ruin through the seventeenth and eighteenth

centuries. Milton self-consciously and with deliberate archaism has Hell hear and see "Heaven ruining from Heaven..." Much of the rest of the following century and a half are capable only of allegory and picturesque but sentimental heaps. Wordsworth self-consciously invokes Milton who had himself self-consciously invoked the history of the word. Here is a Wordsworthian waterfall: "Ruining from the cliffs the deafening load/Tumbles."¹⁰

This paraphrase of Barfield's discussion of "ruin" seemed necessary to explain how he studies "evolution of consciousness." The method itself is not quite either lexicography or traditional literary criticism, yet is capable of transcending both of them without abstraction. Evolution is dependent on, perhaps defined by, changes in the meaning of words. The example of the single word "ruin" by itself proves nothing, perhaps, but it serves beautifully to illustrate the formation of modern European humanity. The fact that the Latin *ruo* began to acquire meanings of "fall" and then "collapse" does not mean that new meanings are added to it but rather that emerging aspects of a single meaning find need for expression and strain the word. In the case of "ruin" the changes from "falling" to "pile of [usually ancient] masonry" is straightforward enough. Shakespeare was the right person at the right time to capture the exact metaphorical moment and the full range of meaning with utter clarity and without a hint of self-consciousness. Milton, in his use of the word, is fully aware of its history and, therefore, of the poetry implicit in it. He avoids the rapidly forming concretion of "ruin" and achieves a secondary kind of poetry which insists on its "strangeness" and points not so much to new as to very old meanings. For the most part the neo-classical period either allegorizes ruin or depicts scenic and nostalgic objects. Neither of these uses is poetic in Barfield's formal sense, although they express what was soon to become the modern era with its crystallized objects and concepts. Romanticism's use of "ruin" is similar to Milton's and very conscious of being poetry. Indeed, the evolution of this word since the Renaissance points directly to the general flow of evolution: Increasingly, processes solidify into concepts and effects into objects, while human consciousness becomes ever more self-aware and needs more and more to strive intellectually for that which previously seemed almost to happen of itself – poetry.¹¹

Barfield's method is not rigorously "scientific" and is not meant to be. It relies explicitly on intuition which transcends but is cognate to the intuition we all use when we comprehend ordinary language. It is just that intuition which responds to poetry and calls for an imaginative "unthinking" of what seems explicit but which may well differ in subtle but significant ways from modern prosaic thought. As Barfield says,

One of the most striking examples of this truth is the interpretation of Greek philosophy by modern Europeans. Such an one can read Plato and Aristotle through from end to end, he can even write books expounding their philosophy, and all without understanding a single sentence. Unless he has enough imagination, and enough power of detachment from the established meanings of the fundamental terms – unless, in fact, he has the power not only of thinking,

but of *unthinking* – he will simply re-interpret everything they say in terms of subsequent thought. (*Poetic Diction* 132-133)

Heidegger has similar – but distinctly different – advice regarding Greek philosophy. To both authors it is obvious that “translation” in the straightforward sense has no meaning for an ancient text, and both agree that “thinking” and “poetry” are involved in the correct process of interpretation. Heidegger seems almost to equate thinking and poetry:

Thinking of Being is the original way of poetizing. Language comes first to language, i.e. into its essence, in thinking. Thinking says what the Truth of Being dictates; it is the original dictare. Thinking is primordial poetry, prior to all poesy.... All poetizing...is in its ground a thinking. (*Early Greek Thinking* 19)¹²

For Heidegger, thinking is primordial and logically precedes even poetry; Barfield is of close to the opposite opinion: Thought emerges gradually and creates history and poetry. Rather than seeing Heidegger's and Barfield's difference as a disagreement of “facts,” however, it is helpful to consider it as one of different perspectives. Heidegger views thought, poetry and history from “outside,” as entities which impinge on individual humans. Barfield's perspective is inward; for him, history and poetry only happen (“presence”?) as by-products of an individual's participation in the evolution of consciousness.

To Barfield history is the emergence and solidification of concepts in language and mind with a corresponding recession of spiritual “reality” from consciousness but not an absolute diminution of it; overall, mind and language both gain in the process, especially considering that spiritual reality is perpetually available through poetry. Heidegger adopts the point of view of “Being” rather than mind or language. “Being” is close to the equivalent of Barfield's “spiritual reality.” “Being” allows individual beings to come into the brightness and in the process obscures itself “As it reveals itself in beings, Being withdraws” (*Early Greek Thinking*, 26). This setting loose of beings implies both destiny and wandering (error), the two primary characteristics of Heidegger's sense of history:

Error is the space in which history unfolds. In error what happens in history bypasses what is like Being. Therefore, whatever unfolds historically is necessarily misinterpreted. During the course of this misinterpretation destiny awaits what will become of its seed. It brings those whom it concerns to the possibilities of the fateful and fatal. Man's destiny gropes toward its fate. Man's inability to see himself corresponds to the self-concealing of the lighting of Being. (*Early Greek Thinking*, 26)

History, then, is not the narrative of man's acquisition of consciousness but rather of the errant destiny of Being, i.e., to be fragmented into individual beings – not at all a happy fate. As Heidegger says,

Philosophy...arises solely from thinking and in thinking. But thinking is the thinking of Being. Thinking does not originate: it is, when Being presences. But the collapse of thinking into the sciences and into faith is the baneful destiny of Being. (*Early Greek Thinking*, 40)

History is the misuse of beings and the obscuring of Being; humanity arrogates power through beings and yet is powerless. According to Heidegger,

This same defiant man is utterly at a loss simply to say what *is*; to say *what* this *is* – that a thing *is*. The totality of beings is the single object of a singular will to conquer. The simplicity of Being is confounded in a singular oblivion....What mortal can fathom the abyss of this confusion? He may try to shut his eyes before the abyss. He may entertain one delusion after another. The abyss does not vanish. (*Early Greek Thinking*, 57)

What for Barfield is evolution of consciousness is for Heidegger a devolution of Being. Although Heidegger has no affinity with positivism or materialism, his picture of Being's destiny and history has much in common with de Saussure's "blind force." We can now summarize with a hypothetical review of Barfield's point of view:

There is much to agree with in Heidegger's writings but also several things which cannot pass unchallenged. These things indeed cause his entire system to go amiss. The most obvious weakness is that Heidegger's vision of history lacks focus and consistent perspective. In order for *history* – as opposed to a mere series of events – to exist at all, there must be an ordering principle. Heidegger does not offer such a principle but rather "error," a mysterious "baneful destiny," and humanity's "will to conquer." This latter phrase has been imported from Nietzsche; it betrays the romantic immaturity which permeates Heidegger's theory of history. Surely history does not show us a *self-conscious* human will to conquer through language. Language becomes self-conscious only as the romantic age develops, a phenomenon we can witness empirically in many ways including, as we have seen, through the history of a single word such as "ruin." In order for history to be in "error," Heidegger seems to have felt obliged to place "thinking" outside of human culture with Being itself. Humanity participates in thinking through language and poetry, according to Heidegger. Were this truly the case, the history of language and poetry should reveal wandering and error. Instead they seem to show the reverse – the emergence of increasingly coherent thought, which reveals and helps to solidify a universe of concepts ("beings") which are simultaneously "real" and "mental." These concepts, considered in and of themselves, do indeed obscure from human thought that which Heidegger terms Being, and the obscurity increases as history progresses and the concepts proliferate and congeal. It is fundamentally incorrect, however, to believe with Heidegger that this obscuring is absolute or even a necessary consequence of the human condition. When Heidegger calls thinking "primordial poetry" he has exactly reversed things, for poetry is primordial thinking. And that is precisely the reason that poetry provides so much more than trivial enjoyment. In the enjoyment of poetry is not the proof for, but the enlivening of, the evolution of

consciousness, of which the current discussion is not intended to be a theory at all but the description of modern humanity's capacity for a self-conscious and fully "mature" experience of its spiritual past.¹³

Jacques Derrida, a full generation younger than Barfield and Heidegger, is probably the most influential literary critic to come out of the French "structuralist" movement following de Saussure, which includes many famous names, especially in the social sciences: Durkheim, Levi-Strauss, Piaget, Foucault, Barthes, Lacan, Althusser and many others. The structuralists like Barfield are "holists" rather than "reductionists." De Saussure emphasizes that the speaker must possess the entire structure of the language (*langue*) before particular speech (*parole*) is possible, just as each player must mentally grasp all the rules of movement before any physical game of chess can occur. Derrida comes from this tradition, but he has rejected much of it and founded "post-structuralism" in its stead. Derrida, using and some ways reversing the phenomenological philosophies of Heidegger and Husserl, examines the metaphysics implicit in structuralist thought and deals with topics fundamentally important not only to an understanding of his relationship to Barfield, but also to the general intellectual history of the twentieth century. Derrida's theories have more in common with Barfield's than at first appears. His radical prose style and Barfield's careful dialectic are more opposed than some of their conclusions, which is not at all to say that they would very frequently or at all agree. But they share major concerns of language, consciousness, history and Western culture's tradition of human individuality.

For Derrida, the very possibility of meaning begins with "writing," not language but the physical "trace" of consciousness, whether on neurons or clay tablets or paper. This concept allows Derrida to claim that he "may be a materialist," although the "trace" exists (just) before matter emerges from it as a kind of "presence" in the Heideggerian sense. The trace is simultaneously all there is of consciousness and/or of matter. It would be safer, perhaps, to say that Derrida is a monist than a materialist, but it is not of great importance because his philosophy is above all deeply skeptical. Each successive step in the trace reveals a "signifier" which achieves its significance by pointing "backwards" to other signifiers. The reality which emerges from this process is a chain of mutually referring signifiers which are constantly forging new links and new references to one another. Missing from this massively intricate network of signifiers is any outside "signified" reality. The trace meanders exquisitely through a primeval forest very reminiscent of Heidegger's but does not focus on "presences" among the chaotic growth; rather it reveals provocative glimpses of other parts of the trace itself.¹⁴

Derrida cannot so much as assume that the trace "goes through" Being or that human consciousness and culture are not simply exercises in solipsism. Heidegger expresses, or at least implies, a kind of "faith" in his forest with

pathetically small “clearings” illuminated by consciousness and somewhat impersonal “thought.” Barfield assumes that “true” metaphor allows us to relive the process of discovering patterns in “spiritual reality” which otherwise now seem invisible or at best chaotic because the dense and rigid crystallization of our concepts obscures the view and refracts what we receive of reality. These three authors’ images depict conflicting pictures of a single landscape. Derrida’s positions on logic and human individuality show that although Barfield and he express theories which profess spiritual reality on the one hand and skeptical materialism on the other, they have much in common; in fact, it is possible to say that Derrida is in some ways an incomplete Barfieldian.

Derrida attacks structuralism through comments on the anthropological work of Levi-Strauss, whose own reputation was made in part on a defense of the abstractness and complexity of “primitive” mentality. Derrida shows that Levi-Strauss’ assumptions in fact have much in common with the ideas of Rousseau in that they posit moral absolutes, nature against culture, and original good versus additive, unnatural human evil. Derrida’s apparent intent is to show that there is a tradition of immature romanticism running from Rousseau through Levi-Strauss. Derrida’s answer to this problem seems radical: he asserts that there is no “originary” nature to set against culture, no moral absolutes, no human addition to nature and therefore no fall from nature’s grace. The trace is what is. It refers only to itself and is as incapable of leading humanity away from “nature” as it is of leading it toward “truth” (*Of Grammatology* 112, 167).

Barfield, Levi-Strauss and Derrida (in chronological order) all assert that the mentality of early and tribal man is not “primitive” in the least and is just as capable of subtlety and complexity as modern man’s. All three also agree that “modern” man first appears in Western Europe in the seventeenth century; in fact, all three seem to feel that Descartes’ *cogito* is as good a way to date this appearance as any. All, in other words, would seem to agree that consciousness has changed drastically; perhaps the two Frenchmen would agree with Barfield that it has “evolved.” But probably not. Indeed the point Levi-Strauss makes about “primitive” mentality is essentially that it does not exist, that early man concocted marvelously subtle and complex intellectual structures that just happen to seem absurd to anyone who understands modern science. Implicit in both Levi-Strauss and Derrida is the possibility that science may be just as silly as primitive myths. Barfield, of course, holds myth and science as radically different but equally valid manifestations of a single reality.

Barfield and the post-structuralists generally concede that Descartes’ *cogito* is a convenient and useful point from which to date modern civilization for the reason that Descartes severed forever “subject” from “object” and set modern man adrift among a universe of lifeless things controlled entirely by blind physical laws.¹⁵ According to Barfield and Derrida, Descartes articulated for the first time the most important event in modern Western history. Further, Derrida saw the

“Cartesian moment” as illustrative not merely of an important historical event, but of “historicity itself.”

Derrida equates “reason” and “logos” and finds a profound problem in their historical emergence:

The unsurpassable, unique, and imperial grandeur of the order of reason, that which makes it not just another actual order or structure (a determined historical structure, one structure among other possible ones), is that one cannot speak out against it except by being for it, that one can protest it only from within it; and within its domain, Reason leaves us only the recourse to stratagems and strategies. The revolution against reason, in the historical form of classical reason (but the latter is only a determined example of Reason in general. And because of this oneness of Reason the expression “history of reason” is difficult to conceptualize, as is also, consequently, a “history of madness”), the revolution against reason can be made only within it...(*Writing and Difference*, 36)

This vision of a monolithic Reason with a capital R strikes Derrida as problematic because “if the decision through which reason constitutes itself...is indeed the origin of history, if it is historicity itself, the condition of meaning and of language...if the structure of exclusion is the fundamental structure of historicity” then the “classical moment” is at best an example and not at all a model or archetype. So, indeed, one finds other but different “reasons” in previous epochs of European history. In ancient and medieval times there were “logos” and “archaic reason”:

The reason and madness of the classical age [i.e., seventeenth and eighteenth centuries] had a common root. But this common root, which is a logos, this unitary foundation is much more ancient than the medieval period...There must be a founding unity that already carries within the “free trade” of the Middle Ages and this unity is already the unity of a logos, that is, of a reason; an already historical reason certainly, but a reason much less determined than it will be in its so-called classical form, having not yet received the determinations of the “classical age.” It is within the element of this archaic reason that the dissection, the dissension, will present itself as a modification or, if you will, as an overturning, that is, a revolution but an internal revolution, a revolution affecting the self, occurring within the self. (*Writing and Difference*, 39)

Barfield could probably find little to argue with here; implicit in this train of thought is both an “evolution of consciousness” and the motto that “all history is the history of ideas.” Derrida concludes very much what Barfield does but with a very great difference in tone and in implication:

To define philosophy as the attempt-to-say-the-hyperbole is to confess – and philosophy is perhaps this gigantic confession – that by virtue of the historical enunciation through which philosophy tranquilizes itself and excludes madness, philosophy also betrays itself (or betrays itself as thought), enters into a crisis and a forgetting of itself that are an essential and necessary period of its movement. I philosophize only in *terror*, but in the *confessed* terror of going

mad. The confession is simultaneously, at its *present* moment, oblivion and unveiling, protection and exposure: economy.

But this crisis in which reason is madder than madness – for reason is non-meaning and oblivion – and in which madness is more rational than reason, for it is closer to the wellspring of sense, however silent or murmuring – this crisis has always begun and is interminable. It suffices to say that, if it is classic, it is not so in the sense of the *classical age* but in the sense of eternal and essential classicism, and is also historical in an unexpected sense. (*Writing and Difference*, 62)

Here, of course, Barfield and Derrida are worlds apart but only in describing what reason feels like, not in *that* reason feels in the first place. To both of them reason *feels* because it emerges historically from non-reason, from “the wellspring of sense.” Derrida assumes that philosophy is the development of reason from non-reason; the only alternative to reason he offers is madness; the only feelings that seem available are those of crisis and terror as one faces the choice of a temporary and illusory veil of reason or the abyss of madness. As we have seen, Barfield labels this feeling “felt change of consciousness,” and it is the cornerstone of his entire theory. It is the evocation of these feelings that Barfield labels not terror but poetry.

And Barfield, as we have seen, finds that metaphor conveys the full range of feelings which accompany, or rather *are*, the evolutionary emergence of consciousness and the consequent illumination of reason. Metaphor is not nearly so central to Derrida, but has almost the same significance for him as for Barfield. The conclusions the two draw from that significance, however, are just about exactly opposite. Barfield would almost certainly agree with Derrida's discussion of Rousseau's “classic” theory that all language is at origin figurative. Derrida objects, as we have seen Barfield would also, that language cannot at its origin be figurative without its having been literal *before its origin* (*Of Grammatology*, 275-276). This objection to classic epistemologies is absolutely central to Barfield. Derrida does not focus on metaphor as Barfield does, but his theory would not operate unless he essentially agreed with Barfield. Derrida states the problem for both authors:

The paradox to which attention must be paid is this: natural and universal writing, intelligible and nontemporal writing, is thus named by metaphor. A writing that is sensible, finite, and so on, is designated as writing in the literal sense; it is thus thought on the side of culture, technique, and artifice; a human procedure, the use of being accidentally incarnated of a finite creature. Of course, this metaphor remains enigmatic and refers to a “literal” meaning of writing as the first metaphor. This “literal” meaning is yet unthought by the adherents of this discourse. It is not, therefore, a matter of inverting literal meaning and figurative meaning but of determining the “literal” meaning of writing and metaphoricity itself. (*Of Grammatology*, 15)¹⁶

Or, more succinctly, in a sentence that could stand as an epigraph for *Poetic Diction*, Derrida elsewhere states: “The history of metaphysics, like the history of

the West, is the history of these metaphors and metonymies" (*Writing and Difference*, 279).

For both Derrida and Barfield metaphor is important because it reveals origins, the origins of language, thought, meaning – humanity itself. As we have seen, Barfield places the actual origin of metaphor after the beginnings of consciousness, however, and he leaves the *origin* of consciousness obscure, although by implication, he would seem to suggest that direct perception of objects and events and the “signing” of them preceded and developed into consciousness and language through a process we can now perceive in our experience as metaphor. We must recall, however, that these were perceptions of a spiritual reality not filtered, as our perceptions are, through the consciousness which is both our glory and our prison. Barfield’s “spiritual reality” is the entire basis of his theory. This reality is the realm of Coleridge’s “imagination” rather than of “fancy.” It is also, as Barfield makes explicit in the 1972 “Afterword” to *Poetic Diction* (222-225), the realm intuited throughout the history of Neoplatonism as the source not merely of truth but of all reality whatsoever. This is Barfield’s assumption, and the experience of poetry is his evidence. Derrida does not consider such a thesis except to reject it out of hand:

...the name, especially the so-called proper name, is always caught in a chain or a system of differences. It becomes an appellation only to the extent that it may inscribe itself within a figuration. Whether it be linked by its origin to the representations of things in space or whether it remains caught in a system of phonic differences or social classifications apparently released from ordinary space, the properness of the name does not escape spacing. Metaphor shapes and undermines the proper name. The literal...meaning does not exist, its “appearance” is a necessary function – and must be analyzed as such – in the system of differences and metaphors. The absolute parousia of the literal meaning, as the presence to the self of the logos with its voice, in the absolute hearing-itself-speak, should be *situated* as a function responding to an indestructible but relative necessity, within a system that encompasses it. That amounts to situating the metaphysics or the ontotheology of the logos. (*Of Grammatology*, 89)

This is an occasion for skepticism:

Indeed, one must understand the *incompetence* of science which is also the incompetence of philosophy, the *closure* of the epistémè. Above all it does not invoke a return to a prescientific or infra-philosophic form of discourse. Quite the contrary. This common root, which is not a root but the concealment of the origin and which is not common because it does not amount to the same thing except with the unmonotonous insistence of difference, this unmanageable movement of *difference-itself*, that I have strategically nicknamed *trace*, *reserve*, or *differance*, could be called writing only within the *historical* closure, that is to say within the limits of science and philosophy. The constitution of a science or a philosophy of writing is a necessary and difficult task. But, a *thought* of the trace, of difference or of reserve, having arrived at these limits and repeating them ceaselessly, must

also point beyond the field of the *epistémè*In a certain sense "thought" means nothing. (*Of Grammatology*, 93)

At this point it is not clear whether Barfield would agree or not. His reaction would probably be complex, and perhaps ambivalent, because there is much in Derrida to agree with and a great deal that Barfield would be bound to reject. Barfield's critique of Derrida might go something as follows:

The notion that "'thought' means nothing" is at once intriguing, partially true, and of course quite silly; this is just the tone Mr. Derrida frequently achieves and seems to strive for. It is true that we must not invoke the realm of thought to explain thought; "meaning," however belongs simultaneously to various realms not only of science, philosophy and thought, but also, for example to those of music, painting and poetry. That we cannot explain thought with thought should be neither surprising nor dismaying. One mentions this instance because it is revealing and symptomatic. There is much to attend to in Mr. Derrida's work but also much to beware of and something simply (and apparently as intended) to smile at.

The "trace" is one such thing and provides such a contribution. It depicts an excellent image of the history of consciousness and could therefore be quite valuable. That the trace logically precedes history, metaphysics, etc. is entirely acceptable, but that it *in itself* precludes or at best ignores them also seems inevitable. When the trace combines time, space and meaning in proto-consciousness and pre-objectivity and, at the same time, describes their emergence, then one must applaud. But when "meaning" and "play" are equated and concrete noun and nonsense syllable are declared indistinguishable then one realizes that Mr. Derrida not only does not quite know what to do with his idea but that he appears not to be seriously interested in the difficult work of doing so. If the trace is declared to lie at a level beneath meaning, objectivity and logic, so be it. But then one surely is prevented from searching unarmed through the trace for "writings" with those properties and should not complain if one is prevented from doing so by one's own rules. Neither should one expect that to do just this, that is, to declare (a) that there is a level of consciousness where "play" and "meaning" are indistinguishable (a good point); (b) that we cannot rightly proceed without meaning (laudable if obvious); (c) that the trace as defined *contains* meaning as a subset (by previous definition); (d) that the trace cannot help with meaning, and therefore (e) that meaning has no meaning or some such – "'thought' means nothing."

The direction that we must know about to make sense of some part of the trace does by definition reside in the trace, but its presence is also hidden by definition *at the level of the trace*. This is not truly a problem at all, simply a matter of how we have previously agreed to observe the trace. That we can use one part of the trace to help us traverse another part of it is another logical possibility and one that we use constantly in order to make sense – or poetry – out of our experience. The trace by definition contains all that we are willing to call thought or meaning; at the same time the trace *per se* makes no provision for discovering that fact. Nevertheless, if we do discover such a fact, the discovery becomes part of the trace. None of this seems an occasion for irony or despair.

We have all of us from time to time wandered through the trace without making any or much sense of it. No one who has been able to read this far has not also

had the opposite experience of using one part of the trace to make sense of other parts of it. This is not to say that we have proved anything about meaning or the lack of it one way or the other either, only that the existence of the trace does not disprove our common feeling that the universe allows for the phenomena of "truth," "meaning," "thought," etc. both "outside" and "inside" our minds. When Mr. Derrida neatly and obligingly summarizes *Poetic Diction* by declaring that "the history of the West...is the history of...metaphors and metonymies" (*Writing and Difference*, 279), he uses his trace exactly as it should be used, but he does not follow through with the implications of what he says, that is, that one can find coherence in the trace and use that coherence to create new entries that are also coherent.

The big trick, of course, is separating the sense from nonsense. Mr. Derrida's treatment of metaphor provides insight into the cause for his despair of ever making definitive sense of anything. One can assert this primarily not because of what he says about metaphor but because of what he fails to say. What he does say in fact is quite insightful, although his central concern does not ever seem to be about metaphor but about "literalness," that is, "reality." We read that the "'literal' meaning of writing...[is] metaphoricity itself" (*Of Grammatology*, 15). This is exactly so, but here and elsewhere Mr. Derrida implies that the gulf between literal reality and a metaphorical representation of it means inevitably that falsehood has sneaked in while we have been unable to look. This is the worm in the apple of all Western metaphysics from before Plato, from the first emergence, that is, of nascent self-consciousness. Mr. Derrida has moved from a concern such as Plato's of whether poetry or "inspiration" might be a lie, to a certitude that all "writing" and therefore all "thought" have at best interconnections with themselves through the labyrinthine trace and that one connection in the trace, for all we can tell, is just as "meaningful" or just as arbitrarily "playful" as any other.

Nevertheless, the labyrinth can be most accommodating at times, as for example when it reveals the entire development of human thought:

It is this history...which is closed at the same time as the form of being of the world that is called knowledge. The concept of history is therefore the concept of philosophy...Even if it was only belatedly imposed upon what is called the history of philosophy, it was invoked there since the beginning of that adventure. It is in a sense unheard of until now...that history is the history of philosophy...[T]he history of philosophy is the history of prose; or rather the becoming-prose of the world. Philosophy is the invention of prose. (*Of Grammatology*, 286-287)

One can only applaud, but one is also at a loss to learn how the trace has helped with this. How does one find history, philosophy or prose in the trace? More importantly, how does one think of the trace at all without a metaphor? At one moment the trace is a tangle; at another it reveals elegant tracery, a profound network of conceptual relationships. The trace is what one wishes because it is a metaphor, perhaps a "true" metaphor, one destined utterly to transform – the trace itself, the history of prose, philosophy, thought. But if the trace is a metaphor, can it support "literal" language, "metaphoricity itself"? Isn't it true that we have

been led to *pretend* that meaning and play are interchangeable, all the while making judgments and generalizations based on the opposite belief? Are not the play, the despair and the irony all parts of the same immature pretense, the pretense that we could always really recognize meaning just as we can also presumably deal with syntax adequately enough to tell writing from non-writing, to recognize entries in the trace itself from whatever else there is of experience? Isn't this trace, this tangle, this network, this metaphor just another toy of an immature and incomplete romanticism trying to reason its way out of meaning and reason?

George Lakoff's and Mark Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By* combines the talents of a linguist and philosopher in a work which has gained notice and respect not only from colleagues in their fields but also from cognitive psychologists and computer scientists. This rather unlikely sounding alchemy is actually representative of a growing phenomenon within late twentieth-century culture: a syncretism, if not a synthesis, combining diverse academic disciplines, of which the critical literary tradition we have been examining is a prime example.¹⁷ *Metaphors We Live By* is not a study in literary theory, however, but rather in general epistemology. That should hardly be a surprise by this point, since nearly everything considered after de Saussure has been philosophical, with literature as a more or less essential starting or ending point. Lakoff and Johnson write philosophical linguistics and do not consider literature at all, in spite of what their title would seem to promise and, more surprisingly, in spite of the fact that their philosophical thesis involves what they term "experientialism," very much in a mold similar to the phenomenological tradition we have been following.

They base their arguments on "every day" language and what it implies about the quotidian consciousness that creates and understands it. In many ways Lakoff's and Johnson's theory is fully compatible with Barfield's view of language, although there are numerous differences; more striking is the incompleteness of the newer theory when compared with Barfield's. Lakoff and Johnson would not at all want to be considered "romantics" and would probably appreciate even less being called "immature." In anything like the usual sense of those terms, they are certainly neither one. Nevertheless, they seem blind to the fact that their theory belongs, however obliquely, in the romantic tradition, and this oversight contributes to the incompleteness of their epistemology when compared with Barfield's.

Absolutely central to Lakoff and Johnson, and also to Barfield, is the assertion that metaphor, far from being merely a literary device, is a clue to our understanding of human mental activity: "Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature" (*Metaphors*, 3). More than that, and surely more than Barfield could agree with, metaphor has the power "to create a reality rather than simply to give us a way of conceptualizing a preexisting reality...New metaphors have the power to create a

new reality" (*Metaphors*, 144-145). This can occur because "reality" is dependent upon "understanding" which

emerges from interaction, from constant negotiation with the environment and other people. It emerges in the following way: the nature of our bodies and physical and cultural environment imposes a structure on our experience in terms of natural dimensions...Recurrent experience leads to the formation of categories, which are experiential gestalts and with those natural dimensions. Such gestalts define coherence in our experience....We understand experience metaphorically when we use a gestalt from one domain of experience to structure experience in another domain...It is through such understanding that...[we arrive at] an account of truth. (*Metaphors*, 230)

It is necessary to place this theory into the context its authors have provided in order to clarify some of these terms.

Lakoff and Johnson see themselves and all of us at a fundamental crossroads in human thought. The longest and most distinguished of these roads is "objectivism," which has conveyed both rationalist and empirical philosophers since before Socrates. This they see as the major thoroughfare of Western culture, carrying nearly all of the traffic for modern science and social institutions (*Metaphors*, 195). "Subjectivism," on the other hand, is a short and seldom traveled path descending only from the romantics of the nineteenth century; subjectivism has not proved capable of carrying the heavy burdens of modern life (*Metaphors* 223-225). The authors wish to show us a new way, "experientialism," which includes the others but is more than a merging of them. A consideration of these three routes indicates how Barfield parallels the most current thinking of our time but at a higher altitude and with a perspective of somewhat more vantage.

Lakoff and Johnson equate objectivism with nearly everything in the Western philosophical tradition that is generally acknowledged to have contributed substantively to the most powerful institutions of modern culture, including the physical and social sciences, law, journalism, capitalism and Marxism. Both empirical and rationalist philosophical traditions accept "the myth of objectivism." The goal of this tradition is to place language and meaning "out there" with physical objects. This is a purpose that the neorationalism of modern linguistics shares with the somewhat more dated logical positivists whom Barfield rebuts in *Poetic Diction*. And Barfield would probably agree, in general, with Lakoff's and Johnson's account of objectivism as a genuine tradition and a potent force in our lives. He would also almost certainly find their account oversimplified; they would nearly as certainly agree that they were forced by the constraints of their work to simplify their discussion. One can imagine more serious qualms on Barfield's part with the theory of history implied by Lakoff and Johnson, but that we best defer for a more general appraisal.

Barfield would assuredly not agree with Lakoff's and Johnson's account of subjectivism as a nearly exclusively nineteenth-century phenomenon which

abandoned rationality and objectivity, resulted in the “alienation of the artist and poet from mainstream society,” and “played into the hands of...objectivism, whose power has continued to increase ever since” (*Metaphors*, 192). Such an account, from Barfield's point of view, is bound to seem like a grotesque misinterpretation without regard either for the philosophical tradition behind nineteenth-century romanticism or for the quite respectable intellectual achievements of romanticism over the last two hundred years.¹⁸ Nevertheless, the Lakoff and Johnson account is representative of the way the vast majority of social and physical scientists now assess the romantic tradition.

Lakoff and Johnson declare objectivism and subjectivism both to be inadequate. They propose a new idea, “experientialism,” as a substitute for the two of them and as a new departure for our failed culture. Barfield would almost certainly be interested in this solution, and he would just as certainly find fault with it, in spite of the many areas of agreement with his own thought. Lakoff and Johnson seem to feel that experientialism is almost an entirely new theory and not a synthesis of the two traditions they fault. They base experientialism on a double foundation. From the “out there” of objectivism comes the cognitive grounding of metaphor, and from within, a faith in individual human minds, but presumably not those minds – or not only those minds – which have been isolated and alienated by subjectivism. There is a narrow passage to traverse here and some very intricate philosophical tides on either shore of the subject/object gulf.

Lakoff and Johnson by no means wish to discount the notion that there is an explicable external objective reality. But they – and Barfield – cannot assume that such a reality simply presents itself to our senses. All three authors are acutely aware of the Kantian dilemma of *ding an sich* and reject as “objectivist” Kant's attempt to synthesize universal reason with relatively universal sense perceptions (*Metaphors*, 195; *Poetic Diction*, 192-194). Lakoff and Johnson, however, believe in an “ontological” reality which humans share. This realm furnishes what computer scientists might term “primitives,” universal concepts based on physical experiences such as “up,” “down,” etc. (*Metaphors*, 176-177). These yield concepts such as “good is up” which enable us to link physical experience with abstract concepts in a universally valid way, and more than that to create new meanings for ourselves from these metaphorical constructs based on valid “ontological” intuitions. The result is “imaginative reality,” a term Barfield or even Coleridge might applaud (*Metaphors*, 192-194).

For Lakoff and Johnson “imaginative reality” is essential for all that we would term “thought” or “culture.” Idiomatic structures such as “argument is war,” form our lives in fundamental ways which we scarcely realize at all. Lakoff and Johnson claim that our society and our own personal lives would be markedly different if we thought of an argument as a “game” or “project” rather than as a “war” which includes the possibilities of “defended positions,” “final defeat,” and so on. The point is valid and fascinating as they develop it through the book; it

would be difficult to maintain that our linguistic idioms are not revelatory and symptomatic as they suggest. We shall return to this topic shortly, but first we consider how meanings and even “realities” get generated through these metaphors.

The primary example of meaning created through metaphor is strangely anecdotal and negative. The authors tell the real life story of a non-native speaker of English who interprets the phrase “solution to my problems” as an image from chemistry in which a problem is merely a single form which precipitates out of the complex brew of life. To “solve” a problem then means merely to coax it back into solution without jarring something even worse into solidity (*Metaphors*, 143-144). The implication in this discussion is that the native speaker had no metaphor “in mind” at all, and that the non-native’s creative misunderstanding produced a psychological reality that we all can learn from. Barfield would undoubtedly find truth in this story, but not exactly Lakoff’s and Johnson’s truth. The differences between them provide leverage for us to begin placing Barfield in relation both to Lakoff and Johnson and to the late twentieth century’s dawning age of “cognitive science” which includes not only literary theory, but also linguistics, psychology and the “artificial intelligence” wing of computer science.

To Lakoff and Johnson the “mistaken” metaphor involving “the solution to problems” is an accidental illustration of an imaginative leap which could, but presumably will not, lead to the discovery of a truth our society might learn to live by. Barfield would see in the story something nearly the opposite: the non-native speaker *does* discover a metaphor, but one that has been latent in our language from the first; for the original meaning of “solve” (Latin *soluere*) is “to loosen, unbind,” a literalness which includes in its figurative extension not only the solution of problems but also of salt. It is then only half true to say we do not have the metaphor “in mind” when we use the word “solve.” We native speakers skip over the “poetry” implicit in our language. One of the traditional joys of learning a new language is the “discovery” of just such hidden wisdom. The metaphors are forever “in mind” although consciously so only when we must grapple with them through formal poetry or unfamiliarity.¹⁹

Barfield, then, differs from Lakoff and Johnson (and cognitive science generally) in two essential respects: He focuses on a “diachronic” interpretation of meaning where they offer a “synchronic” one, and he requires no “ontological” base upon which to build his metaphors. These turn out to be but two aspects of a single issue. Lakoff and Johnson devote several pages to debunking “the myth of objectivism.” They then declare that an essentially intact objectivism can be folded within experientialism. All the while their “ontological” groundwork seems to be simply another name for an empiricist act of faith that underlies all metaphors: “the nature of our bodies...imposes a structure on our experience in terms of natural dimensions” (*Metaphors*, 230). Physical experience seems to be simply and naively empiricist. “Objectivity” is at a level higher, constructed by the culture through an accumulation of metaphor and relative to that culture:

Objectivity is still possible, but it takes on a new meaning. Objectivity still means rising above individual bias, whether in matters of knowledge or value. But where objectivity is reasonable, it does not require an absolute, universally valid point of view. Being objective is always relative to a conceptual system and a set of cultural values. (*Metaphors*, 227)

Barfield is rather certain to see a hidden and flawed dualism in this theory. The grounding of sense experience is assumed to be universally based on “natural dimensions” and “our bodies.” The assumption of “common sense” comes from the eighteenth century. Physical science has long since found it inadequate, but the social sciences cannot wean themselves of it. Upon this antiquated foundation each culture erects its own relative objectivity. Presumably one culture’s objectivity is as good as that of any other. This is a situation well-suited to the cultivation of tolerance but hardly to the discovery of “truth” in any but the most strained sense of that term. Barfield would agree that a culture might discover truth but not at the same time insist that “individual bias” must be prevented from keeping this less than “reasonable.” Nor would Barfield allow that metaphors “may create realities” (*Metaphors*, 156). For to assert that only a “culture” and never an individual may certify an “objective” truth is to dictate by the statistical norm, and to pretend that we *create* reality is to embrace solipsism.

Barfield welcomes “individual bias” because for him reality may only be *discovered* and never *created*, and generally speaking that sort of discovery happens through the efforts, fortune or innate talent of a single mind whose major challenge then is to articulate the “new” reality and demonstrate its existence to the culture. When this happens successfully the truths *become* abstract concepts and do not remain at the consciously metaphorical level. “Solution” is a good example of a word that has become an abstract noun as well as remaining a concrete one, so that we may have solutions both in diplomacy and in the chemistry laboratory. While we owe Lakoff and Johnson a debt for discovering metaphors which govern many aspects of our thought, they do not go far enough and do not consider the substratum beneath the visible metaphorical layer. They never penetrate to the concept-bearing ore beneath.

Lakoff’s and Johnson’s metaphors are excellent indicators of the “style” of a culture but not, as they claim, deep level conceptual structures. Early in their book they ask the reader to imagine a culture where “argument” was viewed as a dance rather than as a war and where one then would analyze the results of such a conversation in terms of “grace” and “movement” instead of “victory” and “defense” (*Metaphors*, 4-5). The point is well made and should certainly provoke most readers into thought. Of course, it does so happen that the word argument implies contention, in part perhaps because it has attracted such images. But we have many words for conversation with different implications. The rather neutral “discussion” for example can easily take on the spirit of adventure with “findings” and even “discoveries.” The imagery of battle simply fleshes out what argument

already “means.” If our culture preponderantly favors such images over the other more joyous ones it has also produced, then we may fairly be said to have noticed an important fact. But we cannot in this way pretend that we have found a new sort of objective truth or the way in which reality is to be or has been created.

Lakoff and Johnson define metaphor quite conventionally: “*The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another*” (*Metaphors*, 5; italics in text). That is, metaphor links otherwise unrelated concepts together, for it is clear that Lakoff and Johnson do not in fact refer to “things” in the body of their discussion but rather to conceptual abstractions. When they talk of “one kind of thing” and “another” they refer to taxonomic relations among concepts and imply there are normal and abnormal relationships. The normal relations for “argument” might include concepts such as “word,” “conversation,” etc. but “war” only abnormally; “war” remains an abnormal relationship to “argument” in spite of the frequency with which it is invoked. It is important to insist upon these distinctions in order to make the following point about metaphor: Its joining of usually disjointed concepts means that there must be a stable and fairly complex system of conceptual relations in place for there to be a noticeable violation of the relations, that is, for there to be a metaphor at all. Metaphors should tend to happen in cultures with numerous and intricate concepts, and indeed they do seem to be more common in the literatures of modern, sophisticated languages than in ancient or “primitive” ones. This generalization, from one perspective at least, could serve as a synopsis of the theory of literary history implicit in *Poetic Diction*.

This definition of metaphor suffices for Lakoff's and Johnson's general discussion about how metaphorical usage shapes the style of a culture. It is not enough to demonstrate how metaphor might reveal or create previously unsuspected truth. Indeed, the definition of metaphor as the assertion of illustrative but essentially “false” relations between concepts precludes it by definition from discovering valid conceptual relations – “truth.” Hence the traditional reputation of metaphor as a trivial rhetorical device. Lakoff and Johnson present no compelling evidence to refute this. Indeed, they merely seem to state that metaphors *are* truth, which is contrary to their own definition and to normal usage. Lakoff and Johnson are stuck with their own contradiction because their view of conceptual relations is a static “synchronic” one in spite of their emphasis on the discovery and even the creation of “realities.” It does not seem to occur to them that “truth” expressed linguistically must be accessible to “literal” language; that is, it must be available through a *permanent* conceptual relation and not only through the merely *temporary* relation afforded by metaphor.

Lakoff and Johnson should not be taken too seriously to task for their failure to account for the dynamics of bringing new truth into conscious reality. So long as we think of truth as “out there” it makes relatively little difference. We may

remain content to imagine that the “world” changes whenever a Newton or an Einstein comes along. What “really,” or at least additionally, happens, of course is that the structure of conceptual relations shifts in sometimes alarmingly radical ways, new concepts “emerge,” old words are compelled to bear unfamiliar burdens, and, from an historical perspective, within a very brief time there are previously unknown and entirely literal meanings for words such as “gravity” and “energy.” It seems reasonable to expect that the new discipline of cognitive science will address this phenomenon; so far it has not done so. But this is exactly what Barfield has done. We have already seen that when Barfield wrote *Poetic Diction* before the New Criticism, literature was relegated to the domain of the “beautiful” – a sterile and largely irrelevant place in the age of science. Literature, in the waning years of a romanticism still content to be called such, was not seriously included in those pursuits which led to genuine truth. Contemporary theories of cognition revolved about the mathematical disciplines of set theory and predicate logic. That situation has changed a great deal during the course of our century. Increasingly, work on linguistics, literary theory, and cognitive science has tended to converge. The process, of course, is incomplete and the theories far from fully satisfactory. But the trend is clear and the cultural energy devoted to it is an encouraging sign.

One who reads *Poetic Diction* from the vantage of this historical perspective is due for a truly astonishing experience. Barfield seems to anticipate the intellectual history of the more than sixty years which separate his book from us. He has fully synthesized literary and cognitive theory. At a stroke he rejuvenated and educated the romanticism of the early century. He explains how imagination discovers truth and formulates it into valid conceptual structures. He fully realizes that such a formulation implies the building and changing of those structures and accounts for this with “evolution of consciousness.” But the evolving mind in no sense creates the reality it perceives; it rather discovers what is implicit in “spiritual reality” through an act of imagination. The changing of language reflects exactly these shifting structures. Poetry allows us not merely to perceive this evolution abstractly but to relive it through our imaginations. The experience of poetry is not so much the proof of Barfield's theory as it is the immediate perception of the reality he delineates. What Barfield presents as an essay on poetry is in fact a fully “diachronic” theory of human cognition. His contemporaries could not comprehend what he had done. They could not even perceive the problem he attempted to solve. We can see the problems very clearly indeed, but we as a culture have not fully considered Barfield's contribution to their solution. Perhaps his voice sounds to us as though it comes from a rather distant and somewhat romantic past; it actually calls from a future of greater maturity and hope than we can recognize through the din of our adolescent loneliness and anger. If Barfield's theory is correct, then he should expect to gain more listeners as we “mature.” The development of such schools as cognitive science, structuralism, phenomenology and deconstructionism, which all seem strangely consonant with *Poetic Diction*, is evidence that the times now may be

better attuned than they were in 1928 to appreciate the intricate harmonies of Barfield's thought.

Notes

¹ First published as Owen Barfield's *Poetic Diction* in *Renascence* 46.1 (Fall 1993), 3-38, and reprinted by permission of *Renascence*.

² There are some very recent signs that this may be changing somewhat. Derek Bickerton's *Language and Species* provides a good survey and a very useful bibliography.

³ References to *Poetic Diction* appear by page number in the text.

⁴ De Saussure's work, originally compiled as lecture notes during 1906-11, did not appear in print until 1915, several years after his death. The influence of his work has been great but slow in coming and only claimed for "structuralism" within the last thirty years or so. De Saussure's text was published in English in New York in 1966. See also Jonathan Culler's study of de Saussure as a structuralist: *Ferdinand de Saussure*.

⁵ John Sowa, in *Conceptual Structures: Information Processing in Mind and Machine*, offers a convenient summary of recent ideas in the fields of language and logic, and the computer implementation of them.

⁶ Mr. Barfield (in correspondence dated 2 May, 21 May and 10 June 1988) takes exception to using the phrase "felt change of consciousness" to apply both to poetry and to conversational or informational language. Let there be no ambiguity here. The coincidence of phrasing is merely an attempt to drive home the point that "phenomenology" in linguistics necessitates the reliance upon "spiritual" evidence just as much as the proper understanding of poetry does. But the "feelings" evoked by everyday cognition and by poetry are very different things. It is quite possible, for example, to read a poem cognitively without experiencing a twinge of poetic feeling, as anyone who has taught an introductory course in English literature can testify. There can perhaps be no poetry without the underlying experience of cognition, but there can be cognition in profusion without a hint of poetic experience. Ordinary understanding of a sentence we might wish to term the "advent of noticeably altered content of consciousness" to contrast with the change in mode from ordinary consciousness that poetry now causes. Mr. Barfield, in his correspondence, is surely too humble when he says it is of merely "anecdotal" interest "that the addition of the word 'felt' was suggested by [C.S.] Lewis when he read the book in MS."

⁷ This and the preceding quotations are all from the essay "The Origin of the Work of Art," originally delivered as a lecture in 1935 but not published in final form until 1960 after several additions and revisions.

⁸ This quotation is from the essay "Language," first presented as a lecture in 1950 and published in 1959. See *Poetic Diction*, p. 179. This idea has nearly become a *topos* in modern romanticism; it seems to descend from the Emersonian saying (from "The Poet"): "All language is fossil poetry." Heidegger and Barfield are alone so far as I know (certainly Emerson is not among them) in employing the idea as part of a coherent intellectual structure.

⁹ "...Poetically Man Dwells..." presented as a lecture in 1951, was first published in 1954. It is here cited from *Poetry, Language, Thought*, pp. 213-29.

¹⁰ This paragraph is a paraphrase of pp. 113-126 of *Poetic Diction*, with every attempt at remaining faithful to Barfield and little attempt at interpretation. Nevertheless, some interpretation has no doubt slipped in, if only through selection and arrangement. What follows is no longer paraphrase at all but purely interpretation of what seems implicit in Barfield's text.

¹¹ Several other works by Barfield are more directly expressive of the method outlined above, especially the very early book *History in English Words* (1926).

¹² This and all quotations from this volume are taken from "The Anaximander Fragment," translated by David Farrel Krell. This essay was first published in 1963 from material prepared as a treatise in 1946.

¹³ The view of history here imputed to Owen Barfield may be fully implicit in *Poetic Diction*. Two later works, however, give a more detailed exposition: *Saving the Appearances* (1957) and *History, Guilt, and Habit* (1979). See also the "Afterword" in *Poetic Diction*, pp. 212-225.

¹⁴ This summary of Derrida's position owes much to the general description of his philosophy in Richard Harland's *Superstructuralism*, London and New York (1987), pp. 122-154.

¹⁵ Barfield's *Speaker's Meaning*, pp. 110-111, and Derrida's review of Foucault's *Madness and Civilization*, "Cogito and the History of Madness," in *Writing and Difference*, pp. 30-63, are the primary texts for this discussion. Barfield's theory of the evolution of consciousness in *Poetic Diction* does not mention Descartes. The importance Barfield places on the emergence of "objectivity" is clearest perhaps throughout *Saving the Appearances*.

¹⁶ Cf. *Of Grammatology* also for some expansion on this assertion on pp. 70-71, 89, 239, 271, 275, 292-293.

¹⁷ See *Perspectives on Cognitive Science* to get a sense of the breadth of this new discipline. Earl R. MacCormac attempts a synthesis of analytical (Quine and Carnap) and "neo-Kantian" (Cassirer and Langer) philosophies to bring metaphor into the fold of symbolic logic and set theory, and also to propound the concept of "epistemological evolution." The parallels to Barfield's work are obvious, but this book is too detailed and technical to discuss in this space.

¹⁸ Cf. *Saving the Appearances* (*passim*) for Barfield's analysis of the pre-romantic ages.

¹⁹ Barfield discusses just this sort of reaction to foreignness as a prime example of "felt change of consciousness" when we encounter a strange form such as "pidgin" English, *Poetic Diction* 48-50.

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