

Barfield, Boyd, and Bringhurst: Consciousness, Cognitive Science, and Creative Nonfiction

A Presentation at the Barfield Society session
of the Conference of the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association
Albuquerque, New Mexico October 15, 2010,
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The word “evolution” first shows up in English in 1641, according to the *Chambers Dictionary of Etymology* (348). It is from the Latin *e* (“out”) plus *volvere* (“to turn around or about, or to roll”), and is related to “volume” (Chambers 1211), which comes from the form of a book before the fourteenth century, a scroll rolled around a stick and unfurled to reveal the text gradually in its entirety. So in its original meaning, evolution is a rolling-out of the story, a revealing of what has always been in potential. In the context of Owen Barfield’s phrase “the evolution of human consciousness,” “evolution” refers to the unfolding of “the sum total of [out species’] whole awareness of our environment” (qtd in Subbioni 412).

But we know that when Charles Lyell appropriated the word in 1832 “with reference to the theory that animals and plants developed from earlier forms” (Chambers 348), and when Charles Darwin borrowed it from Lyell 27 years later, the meaning of “evolution” *devolved* into something Owen Barfield would call idolatry. The Darwinian borrowing focuses on the apparent *material* causes of *material* forms; and we know that Barfield’s whole project was to assert and defend that the *immaterial*—the “unrepresented”—is as real as the material, and that we ignore it to our peril. According to Barfield, idolatry is a “collective state of mind, which perceives all things and no images” (*HGH* 70)—and for present purposes let us consider “image” to mean the *immaterial* that participates in material form, the metaphor that resides in and with reality. Idolatry is “the effective tendency to abstract the sense-content from the whole representation and seek that for its own sake [and] transm[ute] the admired image into a desired object” (*SA* 111).

We are familiar with the uproar that has developed around “evolution” as that term has come to mean Darwin’s theory—we’re familiar with the fracturing it has caused between those who consider themselves true disciples of modern science, and those who consider themselves disciples of some One True God whose immaterial will they believe they discern in all matter. One of the current iterations of the Darwinian notion of evolution has recently manifested itself in the discipline of literary theory. “Evolutionary literary theory,” also known as biocultural

theory or the cognitive theory of narrative (Boyd and Zunshine, among others), is explained perhaps most thoroughly by one Brian Boyd, a professor at the University of Auckland. Citing the discoveries of the cognitive sciences, neuroscience, biology, and evolutionary psychology, Boyd declares that the making of narrative—fiction—story—has a measurable adaptive function for the human species in at least three ways:

- making stories enables the story-maker to demand and secure attention, thus optimizing the story-maker's chances of survival
- making stories enables the story-maker to maximize his or her (and the audience's) awareness of options, therefore also optimizing the chances of survival; and
- story-making negotiates the [apparently inevitable] conflict between the individual and the social environment; as it facilitates self-awareness it also acts to alleviate the anxiety such self-awareness raises about the inevitability of mortality.

The implementation of these and other adaptive functions of story-making in the analysis of literature make evolutionary literary theory, according to Boyd, “the first really comprehensive and critical literary theory...to explain the power of literature in general and the particular power of especially successful works and authors” (Literature 19). (You can hear the idolatry in this declaration, I am sure.)

As an adherent of Barfield's notion of the evolution of consciousness, I wondered, upon encountering “evolutionary literary theory,” what a Barfieldian “evolutionary literary theory” would look like. I hypothesized that such a different evolutionary literary theory would acknowledge, at the least, three aspects of literature that Boyd et al. do not:

- first, that the literary enterprise is fundamentally participatory—inseparable from human evolution overall.
- Second, that the presence of the occult (as Barfield defines it) is inherent in the literary enterprise, as shown by Yates, Owen, Kripal, Warner, and others; and
- Last, the development of literary forms—including genres--as indicative of movements, changes, evolutionary turns, in human consciousness.

Because these three aspects of literature intertwine, in the rest of this paper I will present some responses to Boyd's biocultural “evolutionary literary theory” which seem to me more

complete embodiments of the functions and forms of literature. Not all of the words are Barfield's, but all are Barfieldian. In response to Boyd's assertion that the function of literature is to optimize the chances of survival by securing attention, maximizing awareness of options, and negotiating conflict between Self and Other, a Barfieldian evolutionary literary theory must redefine literature as inseparable from the rolling-out, the playing-out, of *all* human experience. Literature is participant. It is ecologically situated. It partakes of and perpetuates what Barfield in "Science and Quality" called the occult—the "qualities or forces which, although experienced as realities in the natural world, are not observable to the senses" (Fulweiler 46). And it acknowledges that form and consciousness evolve together.

I discussed in this venue last year the brilliant synthesis made by Frances Yates regarding memory systems and the occult in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in England. In her equally brilliant *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age*, she shows that even as the so-called "Enlightenment" was separating material reality from Consciousness, the great thinkers of the age not only acknowledged but actively worked within occult systems, systems that acknowledged that Mind or Consciousness came before or at least concurrently with form. As Barfield argues in *Saving the Appearances*, the notion that form is separate from Consciousness is a relatively recent development, highly useful for the purpose of studying the forms consciousness gives rise to in ever more material, divided detail. But Alex Owen, Jeffrey Kripal, Marina Warner and others follow Yates into the 19th century in chronicling writers' and artists' investigation into and inevitable expression of the occult as inherent in the human condition—think of W.B. Yeats, Arthur Conan Doyle, D. H. Lawrence, Robert Louis Stevenson, and so many others it is difficult to list them all. The occult is the exploration of participatory consciousness—and so, says Robert Bringhurst, is poetry:

Poetry is knowing. Knowing is moving in tune with being. The implication is that what-is is neither formless nor still—something physics and biology have been telling us for centuries. It is not surprising...that these domains of knowing were inseparable from poetry among the Presocratics, as they are in oral cultures around the world ("Everywhere" 16)...Poetry is present to begin with; it is *there*, and poets answer it if they can. The poem is the trace of the poet's *joining in knowing*. Its one and only use in this world is to honor the gods, the dead, and other nonhumans and humans—to honor

being, in other words—and maybe to honor non being as well—by allowing others to join in that knowing (“E” 17)

The occult rejects the idolatrous notion of the separation of matter from Mind. In this way, alternative or traditional healing is also occult. Permit me to share an occult explanation of Consciousness as set forth in a book I co-wrote in 2002 with a gifted energy healer, Lansing Gresham, *The Body’s Map of Consciousness*, which posits that consciousness and physical form co-evolve. This is, of course, Barfield’s contention in *History in English Words*: that the forms of language and of all arts and technologies evolve *with* the consciousness of those who use them. Lansing describes the relationship between Consciousness and form this way:

A “level of consciousness” in this context isn’t an esoteric or etheric construct you have to be psychic to experience. As you move naturally from one aspect of your life to another, you change the dominance and relative proportions of awareness through which you view and filter your experiences. Sometimes you focus on the physical level, sometimes on the emotional, [etc.] The magnificent truth related to these levels of consciousness is that all of them are at work all the time. Even when you don’t realize it, because you are focusing on only one or another aspect of any given situation, you’re still busy registering physical, emotional, and mental responses to stimuli all the time—because you are built to do so. (7)

We do not think of a tool, a word, a story, and then impose a meaning or a use upon it—the tool, the word, the story evolve as our need for it arises out of our choices as conscious agents in an environment full of options. Thus human evolution is a collaboration, a concurrent process between Consciousness and form—between what *is*, what is *desired*, what is *spoken*, and what is made, or what takes material form, and this includes bodily shapes, artistic media, and literary genres. What affects the emotions or the spirit inevitably, inextricably affects the physical structure and the mind within it. And vice versa. When one of these aspects of the human system alters, all other aspects are altered with it.

--Well, that’s the “occult” in alternative medicine. The occult also resides in traditional cultures, oral cultures, which are the ones Bringham studies and translates and writes poetry

from. About these, Bringhurst says this, if you will indulge me one more quote from Bringhurst—but you can see how gracefully, how beautifully, how much closer to poetic diction Bringhurst is than Boyd:

The imagination needs ideas and facts, which are the nutrients it feeds on. But until greed or hatred or dishonesty distorts it, the imagination is whole. It keeps making things that are real and complete. And the more specific and localized they are, the more real and complete they often seem to be. So works of art and works of literature are forever making a mockery of the partisan chronologies and hierarchies into which historians often try to place them. Every culture, like a language, is an endless set of possibilities that works with finite means. That is to say, it can and will transcend itself. Until we touch that self-transcending capability of language, we haven't learned to speak it—because we haven't yet let *it* speak *us*...(27-28).

The Barfieldian point this passage makes is that literature, art, is participatory in its essence. When we let language speak *us* we can achieve the “felt change of consciousness” that is the identifying quality of poetic diction, or literary language—only when we let language speak us, when we participate in its mystery, can it have that effect. To say, as the evolutionary literary theorists do, that literature is an adaptation for “increasing social attunement and social cohesion in a time of increased population with its attendant potential conflict and serious decrease in individual attention” may give us a certain degree of insight into the ways that material literary form may arise from a particular cultural or environmental circumstance. But it impoverishes our sense of the participatory nature of literature—the possibility of co-evolving, by using language's innate participatory qualities, toward final participation.

James Wood—whose name just wasn't alliterative enough to make it to my title J-- provides an important further insight about literary form and consciousness in an essay critiquing Harold Bloom's adulation of Shakespeare (“Shakespeare in Bloom”). --Incidentally, Wood asserts that adulation is a separative activity: “At the highest level of artistic understanding, admiration for Shakespeare strengthens, but incredulity about him evaporates” (17). Barfield's Coleridge sees Shakespeare as a fellow poet, not as a god, not as an idol to be worshiped—“feels a rightful proximity to [Shakespeare's characters, sensing them to be poetry's vivid phantoms,

living figments of language, and therefore something within his creative grasp” (ibid).
Worshipping a writer separates the genius from the species (that’s a pun), when the truly participatory attitude is that we are built, designed, to co-create new language forms that can effect the “felt change of consciousness” Shakespeare effected on all of us from his particular moment in history.

Wood asserts that postmodern literary theory is sickeningly separative, denying intention to poetry and focusing only on the unconscious impulses behind the poem. This is simply inaccurate, Wood declares: “a poem is the most delicate, the most realized form of intention there is. It is the quintessence of intention” (22). This seems a lovely rephrasing of Barfield’s definition of poetic diction. The relationship between consciousness and will is clear—and it’s a relationship the evolutionary literary theorists do everything they can to avoid.

In this essay, Wood explores the nature of soliloquy:

[It is] the means by which the character speaks to himself and also listens to himself speaking to himself. This double capacity, and the freedom it entails, is apparent as well in Chekhov, Woolf, Hamsun, and Toni Morrison (26)...the true Shakespearean freedom ...is the generosity to allow characters to run on, in private thought and public speech, into the apparent irrelevance that is actually the very mark and substance of the character’s personality. (27)

There may be, as Boyd and Zunshine insist, a materially adaptive function to this generosity. I suppose they might say it assures that at least someone will survive to carry on. But I think there’s a larger way to look at it. Wood says that “Shakespeare, effectively, invents novelistic stream of consciousness, which is merely mental soliloquy” (27), and that “metaphor is the very picture and analogy of the mind; metaphor *is* soliloquy.”

Soliloquy, I would argue, is the form of the personal essay, that fine-tuned and linguistically fashioned sub-genre of creative nonfiction that manifests in forms as varied as from Montaigne to David Foster Wallace, in all cases a striving for final participation with Mind in generous, metaphor-infused, free exploration of the interweaving of the “outside” world with the “inside” of the writer. This generosity, this freedom, as Bringhurst says, this ever greater choice, is the realm of the participatory imagination.

We are hearing a set of themes here: Consciousness, form, freedom...language, genre, possibility...participation, expansion, evolution. Creative nonfiction (and much of the mixed-genre literature we see today, prose poems, poetic novels, graphic novels, etc) embodies a movement to give form in language to current evolving human perception and understanding, to the “changing dominance and relative proportions of awareness through which we are viewing and filtering our experiences” as our technologies, our understanding, our factual knowledge change and our sense of what it means to be human expands. Literature is, in its nature, *transformative*, not adaptive. Adaptation’s goal is survival, which is the work of Ahriman in *Unancestral Voice*—let us never die. But the work of Consciousness is transformation. The true response to death is rebirth, not immortality (Bringhurst). I am not convinced that the evolutionary literary theorists, with their cognitive functions and their adaptive behaviors, have a handle on what’s really unfolding, what’s really rolling forth here, when humans make literature, when literature and humans co-evolve.

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define literature rather differently than Boyd in the context of human making, and that its take on literary *forms* would roll several turns of the story-making scroll further than Boyd in its examination of the relationship between the function of literature in the human environment and its form or genre. If the unfolding of human consciousness is traceable in the blossoming of classes of words through time, as Barfield shows so intriguingly in *History in English Words*, perhaps it is also traceable in genres. It seems to me that Barfield's contention in *HE* is applicable to all arts and technologies: they evolve *with* the consciousness of those who use them. We do not think of a tool, a word, a story, and then impose a meaning or a use upon it—the tool, the word, the story evolve as our need for it arises out of our choices as conscious agents in an environment full of options. Thus human evolution is a collaboration, a concurrent process between Consciousness and form—between what *is*, what is *desired*, what is *spoken*, and what is made, or what takes material form, and this includes bodily shapes, artistic media, and literary genres.