

Owen Barfield and Rudolf Steiner: The Poetic and Esoteric Imagination

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Introduction

Owen Barfield (1898-1997) was a thinker, literary scholar, writer, solicitor, and an eminent interpreter of Rudolf Steiner's spiritual philosophy, known as Anthroposophy. He studied at Oxford University and was a member of the literary group, the Inklings, which included J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis. After publishing a number of works, including *History in English Words* (1926) and *Poetic Diction* (1928), Barfield worked as a solicitor for twenty-eight years but continued to write during this period. In 1957 *Saving the Appearances* was published, and after retiring as a solicitor in 1959, Barfield taught as a visiting professor at a number of universities in the United States. He wrote many more articles and books, among them, *Worlds Apart* (1963), *Speaker's Meaning* (1967), and *What Coleridge Thought* (1971). Barfield's theoretical writings on the subjects of poetic imagination, the evolution of consciousness and semantic history, British Romanticism (especially Coleridge) and Anthroposophy have been highly regarded by numerous writers and academics such as the American Poet Laureate Howard Nemerov, the Nobel Prize winning novelist, Saul Bellow, T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden, the French Christian Existentialist Gabriel Marcel, and C. S. Lewis, who referred to Barfield as the "best and wisest of my unofficial teachers."¹

In this article I will discuss key ideas in Barfield's conception of the poetic imagination and illustrate some of the debts that his work owes to Rudolf Steiner's philosophy and Anthroposophy. Two of the most significant texts in which Barfield discusses the theme of poetic imagination and poetic language are *Poetic Diction* and *Saving the Appearances*. Barfield's view of imagination in these and other works is inseparable from his conception of the *evolution of consciousness*, especially in so far as it is manifest in semantic history. 'Imagination' and the 'evolution of consciousness' are two of the most central expressions in Barfield's entire philosophy. For these reasons my

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¹ Barfield and C.S. Lewis were close friends throughout their lives although they disagreed on some central philosophical matters. See Lionel Adley, *C.S. Lewis's "Great War" with Owen Barfield* (Victoria, Canada: English Literary Studies, 1978), p. 11ff.

treatment of imagination will necessarily include a consideration of Barfield's understanding of the evolution of consciousness.

I have chosen to focus on Barfield and Steiner's view of the creative imagination as they attribute a much deeper epistemic and ontological significance to poetry than is typical today. They argue that imagination can be developed into an organ of knowledge or a kind of *gnosis* that transcends ordinary intellectual consciousness.² This is far from the widespread equation of imagination with subjective fancy and the related view of poetry and art as arenas for personal self-expression. Barfield and Steiner's elevated view of imagination is continuous with the conception of imagination held by great poets and thinkers of the Romantic era, such as Coleridge and Goethe. Their understanding of imagination also finds predecessors in the Christian esoteric tradition via figures such as Paracelsus and Jakob Boehme, and in Sufism as discussed by Henry Corbin.³

In the first section of this article I outline Steiner's understanding of thinking and imagination. In the subsequent section I sketch Steiner's view of the evolution of consciousness. The third, lengthiest section is devoted to elaborating Barfield's conception of the poetic imagination so as to indicate his debt to Steiner. I conclude with some remarks on the importance of Steiner and Barfield's conception of imagination for our understanding of poetry.

Steiner's Conception of Imagination

In chapter three of *The Philosophy of Freedom (Die Philosophie der Freiheit)* – Steiner's major work prior to lecturing within the context of the Theosophical and later the Anthroposophical Society⁴ – *observation* and

² I mean *gnosis* here as defined by Antoine Faivre and not as a specific reference to Gnosticism. See Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1994), p. 19ff.

³ See Arthur Versluis, *Wisdom's Children: A Christian Esoteric Tradition* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1999), p. 157ff; Henry Corbin, *Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Sūfism of Ibn Arabī*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998 [1958]). There has been a fair amount of recent scholarship done on the connections between Romanticism and esotericism. See, for instance, Wouter J. Hanegraaff, 'Romanticism and the Esoteric Tradition', in *Gnosis and Hermeticism: From Antiquity to Modern Times*, eds Roelof van den Broek and Wouter J. Hanegraaff (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1998), pp. 237-268.

⁴ From 1902 Steiner was the head of the German Section of the Theosophical Society, but for philosophical and other reasons he separated from the Theosophical Society in 1912 and the Anthroposophical Society was formed.

thinking are identified as the two central components of human mental life.⁵ Observation for Steiner refers to all content that is passively given to consciousness. While observation ultimately presupposes thinking (Steiner here anticipates Husserl's conception of the role of intentionality in all conscious experience) and we would never grasp the full nature of reality without the contribution that our thinking makes to the picture of the world, thinking itself ordinarily remains *unobserved*, and for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is a characteristic of thinking to give itself over to its object and to forget itself in the process. Secondly, observation involves passivity, but thinking only occurs through independent *activity*. Only an object can be given to ordinary observation, whereas thinking is an *act* rather than an object. As I am intimately involved in thinking I cannot detach myself from my thinking such that it stands before me as an object. Thirdly, it is characteristic of ordinary thinking that I am only aware of its *results*, namely *thoughts*, and not of *thinking* as such.

In spite of these factors, Steiner calls the reader to bring about an extraordinary state of mind and to observe his or her thinking. In chapter three of *The Philosophy of Freedom* Steiner claims that we can only observe thinking *after* it has been actively generated, but through this extraordinary act we nevertheless achieve a qualitative identity between the observer and the observed; thinking grasps itself.⁶ The thinker thereby becomes aware of thinking as a self-sustaining spiritual reality; a self-grounding ground. Thinking also transcends the subject-object distinction, as it is thinking that determines the content of subject and object and sets them in contradistinction to one another.⁷ Moreover, in the activity of thinking we are united with the divine, or to be more specific, "we are the all-one being that pervades everything."⁸ While thinking can only occur through my independent activity, the essence of thinking is universal. Steiner's view of thinking in *The Philosophy of Freedom* recalls earlier Thomist and Aristotelian ideas about the divine nature and universality of the active intellect or *nous*.⁹ However,

⁵ Rudolf Steiner, *The Philosophy of Freedom*, trans. Michael Wilson (London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 2000 [1894]), p. 23ff; Rudolf Steiner, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 4 (Dornach: Rudolf Steiner Verlag, 1995), p. 33ff.

⁶ See n.17.

⁷ Steiner, *The Philosophy of Freedom*, p. 42f; Steiner, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 4, p. 297f.

⁸ Steiner, *The Philosophy of Freedom*, p. 70; Steiner, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 4, p. 331.

⁹ See n. 11. For Steiner's view of Thomism see Rudolf Steiner, *The Redemption of Thinking: A Study in the Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas*, trans. A.P. Shepherd and

Steiner's philosophy involves an individualism that is not present in classical philosophy. This is evident in his philosophical method that calls the reader to reflect on his or her own mental activity, and is especially clear in the moral part of *The Philosophy of Freedom* where Steiner vouches for a position that he calls "ethical individualism."¹⁰ Steiner characterised his philosophy as a synthesis of Fichte and Aristotle and there are many connections in his work to both of these thinkers.¹¹ With respect to the theme of thinking, it can be said that Steiner unites a modern Fichtean emphasis on the self with an Aristotelian sense of the universality of thinking.¹²

This foundational significance of thinking is maintained in all of Steiner's writings. Moreover, Steiner was of the view that the power of thinking can be transformed and that there are no absolute limits to knowledge. In Goethe's scientific studies, Steiner already found evidence for the possibility of *enlivening* the processes of thinking and perception in order to gain deeper insight into the living processes of nature.¹³ In his anthroposophical works Steiner outlines numerous spiritual exercises, with the goal of enabling a deeper insight into reality. These exercises include: thought-concentration, meditation on sacred texts and symbols, and attentive observation of nature. Steiner claims that through carrying out such exercises and developing ourselves morally, our cognitive powers can be transformed. He outlines three levels of consciousness above that of intellectual thought and sense perception, which he calls: Imagination, Inspiration, and Intuition.¹⁴ Each of these

Mildred Robertson Nicoll (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1956 [1920]); Steiner, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 74.

¹⁰ Steiner was also an earlier appreciator of Nietzsche and his views share aspects in common with Nietzschean individualism, but without resulting in nihilism. In 1895 Steiner published the book *Friedrich Nietzsche: Ein Kämpfer gegen seine Zeit*, which has been translated under the title *Friedrich Nietzsche: Fighter for Freedom* (Garber Communications, 1985); Steiner, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 5.

¹¹ See Rudolf Steiner and Walter Johannes Stein, *Dokumentation eines Wegweisenden Zusammenwirkens*, ed. Thomas Meyer (Dornach: Philosophisch-Anthroposophischer Verlag am Goetheanum, 1985), p. 42ff, p. 191ff.

¹² See Steiner's discussion of Fichte in his doctoral thesis *Truth and Science*. Rudolf Steiner, *Truth and Science*, trans. William Lindeman (Spring Valley, NY: Mercury Press, 1993 [1892]), p. 42ff; Steiner, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 3, p. 71ff.

¹³ See, for instance, Rudolf Steiner, *Goethe's World View*, trans. William Lindeman (Spring Valley, NY: Mercury Press, 1985 [1897]), p. 75ff; Steiner, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 6, p. 101ff.

¹⁴ See Rudolf Steiner, *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds: How is it Achieved?*, trans. D.S. Osmond and C. Davy (London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1969 [1904]), p.

cognitive powers, as well as modern intellectual consciousness, is correlated with a distinctive ontological order.¹⁵

Modern scientific thought according to Steiner is uniquely adapted to grasping the nature of the physical order. As mentioned above, ordinarily we are only self-conscious in the moment when the mental activity of thinking *crystallises* or *results* in determinate thoughts. Another way of putting this is to say that conscious awareness lights up in the moment when thinking *dies* in thought, when it makes the transition from a dynamic to a static existence. In line with the ancient conception that ‘like knows like’ Steiner views such thought as uniquely suited to understanding what is dead in nature, namely the *inorganic* or physical realm.¹⁶ However, through a Goethean approach to organic morphology and meditative practices, our thinking can be *enlivened* and eventually *experienced* in its *present activity*. Steiner calls this *living thinking* and Imagination.¹⁷ Goethe already claimed that to understand nature “we must remain as quick and flexible as nature” and spoke of the possibility

69f; Steiner, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 10, p. 66f. See also Rudolf Steiner, *The Stages of Higher Knowledge*, trans. Lisa D. Monges and Floyd McKnight (Great Barrington, MA: Steiner Books, 2009 [1905]); Steiner, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 12.

¹⁵ See Rudolf Steiner, *Cosmology, Religion and Philosophy*, trans. Harry Collison (Kessinger Publishing, 2003 [1922]); Steiner, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 215. See also Carl Unger, *Principles of Spiritual Science* (Spring Valley, NY: Anthroposophic Press, 1976).

¹⁶ See Rudolf Steiner, *The Origins of Natural Science*, trans. Maria St Goar (Spring Valley, NY: Anthroposophic Press, 1985 [1922-1923]), p. 24ff; Steiner, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 326, p. 33ff. Steiner is not denying the factual existence of other sciences such as biology (or the human sciences). Yet, he does not regard modern bio-logy as living up to its name. Although biology is the ‘science of life’, in practice this science has come to focus on the chemical and physiological aspects of organisms and does not recognise the distinctive nature of *living organisms* or life as an ontological order that is irreducible to the merely physical. Goethe, for Steiner, was the Newton of biology; he developed a methodology and a *living thinking* that was capable of grasping the essential nature of life.

¹⁷ See n. 13, n. 14 and n. 15. While in the first half of *The Philosophy of Freedom* Steiner states that we cannot reflectively grasp our present thinking, in the second half of the book, and more clearly in his later work, Steiner describes how through an *intensification* of the activity of thinking we can come to an intuitive *experience* of its *presence*. See Georg Kühlewind, *Die Esoterik des Erkennens und Handelns in der Philosophie der Freiheit und der Geheimwissenschaft Rudolf Steiners* (Stuttgart: Verlag Freies Geistes Leben, 1995), p. 22ff.

of “participating spiritually in its [nature’s] creative processes.”¹⁸ Living thinking or Imagination, in contrast to the ordinary intellect, is especially suited to grasping the living processes in nature, and the formative forces (*bildende Kräfte*) or *life* of nature, what Steiner calls the ‘etheric world’.¹⁹

Imagination involves thinking in images. The image-character of Imagination makes it akin to dreaming. However, whereas dreaming involves a diminishing of consciousness, Imagination involves a heightening of awareness. Steiner’s view is very similar to Henry Corbin’s articulation of the creative imagination as a kind of *intermediate* consciousness that lies between the sensible world and the spiritual world. In Imagination, divine realities reveal themselves in the form of symbolic images. It is only at the level of what Steiner calls Inspiration that these spiritual realities disclose themselves in an unmediated fashion. Nevertheless, Imagination is a cognitive organ that stands higher than the ordinary intellect.

Building on the earlier esoteric tradition, Steiner elaborates numerous relationships between the microcosm (human being) and the macrocosm (universe). His works are filled with explications of connections between: the earthly and the heavenly; plants, the planets and metals; the human being and nature’s archetypes, and so on. Such relationships or ‘correspondences’ first become evident at the level of Imagination. Whereas for the discursive intellectual thought that is predominant today, the universe appears to be made up of disconnected physical objects, Imagination reveals the universe as interwoven with meaningful relationships.

Antoine Faivre, in his pioneering academic study *Access to Western Esotericism*, outlines a number of features that are central to the esoteric tradition including Imagination and ‘correspondences’.²⁰ Faivre specifies that the former is the cognitive organ that perceives the latter. Steiner in these respects is a paradigmatic esotericist and his conception of the Imagination can, in short, be referred to as the ‘esoteric Imagination’.

¹⁸ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Scientific Studies*, trans. Douglas Miller (New York: Suhrkamp Publishers, 1988), pp. 64, 31.

¹⁹ For Steiner’s understanding of the ‘etheric’ and the ‘subtle bodies,’ see Rudolf Steiner, *Theosophy*, trans. Henry B. Monges (Great Barrington, MA: Anthroposophic Press, 1994 [1904]), p. 31ff; Steiner, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 9, p. 30ff.

²⁰ Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, p. 10ff.

Steiner's Narrative of the Evolution of Consciousness

For the present purposes I can only touch on a few key features of Steiner's vast and complex view of natural and spiritual evolution.²¹ I will briefly introduce the notion of the evolution of consciousness and then offer a synopsis of Steiner's evolutionary narrative.

In studying the history of ideas we customarily assume that what changes historically is not the world itself but the thoughts of human beings *about* the world. The idea of the evolution of consciousness is far more radical, in that it sees in pre-history and history a transformation in the very structure and character of consciousness, the world, and their interrelationship. The history of ideas is thus only the expression of a deeper evolution.²²

Steiner's concept of the evolution of consciousness provides a distinctive hermeneutic angle on the history of ideas.²³ It offers a deeper explanation for *why* humanity's ideas have transformed over time. When considering the major shifts in ideas that occur even over just a few millennia (or even a few centuries) it is instructive to ask the question: how could ideas that appeared self-evident to earlier cultures seem so strange to us today? If people's consciousness was more or less identical to our own, why were their views theocentric or polytheistic, why did they describe reality in mythological terms, why did they pursue 'sciences' such as alchemy and astrology? The concept of an evolution of consciousness makes sense of earlier 'worldviews'

²¹ See Rudolf Steiner, *An Outline of Esoteric Science*, trans. Henry B. Monges (Great Barrington, MA: Anthroposophic Press, 1997 [1910]), p. 117ff; Steiner, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 13, p. 137ff.

²² See Rudolf Steiner, *The Riddles of Philosophy*, introduction by Fritz Koelln (Spring Valley, NY: Anthroposophic Press, 1973 [1914]); Steiner, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 18.

²³ Although the conventional approach to intellectual history is not informed by the notion of the evolution of consciousness, there are a number of scholars from various disciplines whose approach to the history of ideas bears a close affinity in certain respects to Steiner's view, even if they do not use the expression 'the evolution of consciousness'. See, for instance, Bruno Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind: in Greek Philosophy and Literature*, trans. T.G. Rosenmeyer (New York: Dover Publications, 1982); Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms: Vol. III: The Phenomenology of Knowledge*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1957); Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, *Primitive Mentality*, trans. Lilian A. Clare (London: Allen and Unwin, 1923); Martin Heidegger, *Parmenides*, trans. André Schuwer and Richard Rojcewicz (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992 [1942/1943]).

through interpreting them as the expression of a consciousness that was qualitatively different from contemporary consciousness.²⁴

We find a similar transformation in the mind-world relation in the development of our own consciousness from childhood into adulthood. The difference between the consciousness of the child and the adult has been a recurring theme in poetry since the Romantic era (perhaps the most famous example is Wordsworth's ode, 'Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood'); countless poets have drawn attention to the childhood sense of oneness with the world which is gradually lost in the process of maturation. Steiner and Barfield, moreover, regarded the development of the individual psyche as a kind of recapitulation of the evolution of consciousness; they applied the well-known evolutionary idea that ontogenesis follows phylogenesis to the development of *consciousness*.²⁵

In order to give a specific example of how an understanding of the evolution of consciousness differs from the customary approach to the history of ideas we can consider the prevalence of astrology in earlier cultures (of course, astrology in a superficial and derivative form is still popular today but this does not explain its original significance).²⁶ From a conventional perspective on the history of ideas (one that is not informed by the view of an evolution of consciousness) it seems that earlier cultures simply speculated that spiritual influences proceed from the firmament. To approach the same matter from the view of the evolution of consciousness is to assume that (or at least question whether) the very *phenomena* of the stars and planets were *experienced differently* in the past. People had a *qualitative* experience of what today has become a realm of merely mechanical relationships; they actually *felt* that the firmament was a source of distinctive spiritual, psychological and formative influences on the earth. Astrology thus appears not as a fanciful speculation lacking any reason; rather the views of astrology were supported by an experience of the world that was qualitatively different from our own. This same approach can be applied to the development of all aspects of history and culture. The theocentricity of earlier cultures, for instance, can thus be explained as being grounded in a genuine experience of the *proximity* of the divine – the experience of the world as theophany – which no longer holds for

²⁴ See Steiner, *The Riddles of Philosophy*; Steiner, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 18.

²⁵ See, for instance, Rudolf Steiner, *The Kingdom of Childhood*, trans. Helen Fox (London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1974 [1924]); Steiner, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 311; and Owen Barfield, *Poetic Diction, A Study in Meaning* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1973 [1928]), p. 82ff.

²⁶ See Owen Barfield, *Saving the Appearances* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1988 [1957]), p. 76ff.

our common experience. It is precisely such an approach that informs Steiner's entire view of evolution, history and the future.

Earlier we mentioned Steiner's view that the ordinary intellect is uniquely suited to grasping the physical order; the beginnings of this consciousness can be more or less identified with the birth of the modern scientific revolution. Steiner identifies the rise of rationality in a much broader sense with the emergence of philosophy out of a mythological worldview in the Pre-Socratics.²⁷ In Steiner's general picture we find that the further we go back in time the more expansive and less individual consciousness appears. In the past, human consciousness experienced itself as participating in a divine intelligence and world, and was more *communal* than individual. If we follow the evolution of consciousness in reverse order – from the present to the distant past – we find that consciousness gradually moves from a more conscious rational form to a semi-conscious equivalent of Imagination, Inspiration, and finally, Intuition.²⁸ Thus mythology is an expression of a kind of pre-individual Imagination. The birth of a more independent rational consciousness begins with the ancient Greeks but this does not mean that the Greeks suddenly lost all sense of participation in a greater reality.²⁹ A more decisive emergence of individualised self-consciousness begins with the renaissance and the modern scientific revolution, and it is with modern physicalism and scientism that all sense of participation in reality is finally expunged.

According to Steiner the great significance of philosophy and, even more so, of modern scientific thought, is the way they have assisted in the emergence of self-consciousness. Modern science has established a view of the world devoid of anything animate or spiritual. Thus it creates a strong sense of opposition between I and not-I, subject and object, self and world.³⁰ Modern science estranges us from the cosmos, but thereby increases a sense of separate self-identity. Thus, paradoxically, *materialistic* science enhances our awareness of *self*. However, the self that exists through this opposition is only an immature form of self-consciousness. The task of the future is to self-consciously regain the breadth of ancient consciousness. The evolution of consciousness is a descent from a state of unconscious participation in the

²⁷ See Rudolf Steiner, *The Riddles of Philosophy*, p. 12ff; Steiner, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 18, p. 35ff.

²⁸ See, for instance, Steiner, *Cosmology, Religion and Philosophy*; Steiner, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 215.

²⁹ See Steiner, *The Riddles of Philosophy*, p. 12ff; Steiner, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 18, p. 35ff.

³⁰ See, for instance, Steiner, *The Origins of Natural Science*; Steiner, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 326.

divine that gradually leads to greater self-consciousness and implication in the physical world and potentially, in the future, will lead to a self-conscious 're-ascend' and participation.³¹ The first stage in the further transformation of our cognitive capacities is Imagination (self-conscious Imagination).

Steiner's 'grand narrative' of the evolution of consciousness shares some features in common with Hegel's philosophy of history and other features in common with Heidegger's 'history of Being', but also includes many unique aspects.³² The evolution of consciousness involves both loss and progress. There has been a loss in our awareness of greater natural and spiritual realities but a progress in the development of self-consciousness. From an anthroposophical point of view one could say that Heidegger was right to see modern consciousness as impoverished in contrast to the ancient Greeks, and was even to some extent justified in his identification of significant problems with the modern self. However, his critique of the self is in certain respects one-sided as he fails to see the progressive aspects in the development of self-consciousness and its potential for maturation. Further, his emphasis on the ancient Greeks (coupled with his critique of the self) at times inclines towards the regressive. Hegel, in contrast, while placing the development of self-consciousness at the centre of his view of history, did not see any loss in this development and had little to say about the future. According to Steiner the task of the future is for individuals to regain, in a new and conscious way, the breadth of ancient consciousness. Having sketched Steiner's view of Imagination and the evolution of consciousness in bare outlines, we can now turn to the thought of Barfield.

Barfield on Poetic Imagination

Owen Barfield's seminal work for our theme, *Poetic Diction*, began as his Bachelor of Letters thesis at Oxford University. Following his encounter with Steiner's thought in the early 1920s, Barfield continued to work on the manuscript, which was published in 1928. Barfield tells us that two experiences laid the foundation for this book. Firstly, in his early twenties he

³¹ Steiner's Christology plays a central role in his view of the evolution of consciousness but there is not sufficient space to discuss this here. For an introduction to his Christology see Rudolf Steiner, *Christianity as Mystical Fact*, trans. Andrew Welburn (Great Barrington, MA: Steiner Books, 2006 [1902]); Steiner, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 8.

³² See, for instance, G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, trans. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Martin Heidegger, *The End of Philosophy*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973).

experienced an intensified appreciation of certain passages of lyric poetry, in particular the poetry of British Romanticism. He noticed a “felt change of consciousness,” which involved an enhancement of the meaning of individual words through their poetic combination, and a correlative transformation of the way he perceived nature, history, and art.³³ This experience led him to the conviction that poetic imagination was not a matter of mere fantasy, but the source of meaning and a faculty of cognitive insight. Secondly, through the study of philology, in particular the semantic history of words, he was also beginning to formulate the idea of an evolution of consciousness without any awareness of Steiner. Barfield subsequently discovered in Steiner a closely-related but far more developed approach to the evolution of consciousness and imagination. He states that “my most daring and (as I thought) original conclusions were *his* premises” and “anthroposophy included and transcended not only my poor stammering theory of poetry as knowledge, but the whole Romantic philosophy. It was nothing less than Romanticism grown up.”³⁴

Barfield devoted much time to developing a theory of the poetic imagination, to an interpretation of the semantic shifts in languages as an expression of the evolution of consciousness,³⁵ and to an exegesis of British Romanticism in relation to anthroposophical ideas. While Steiner presents his ideas as a further evolution of German Romanticism and idealism, Barfield illustrates this continuity with regard to British Romanticism.³⁶ One particularly relevant example is the close connection between Coleridge and Steiner’s view of imagination (they share, for instance, an identification of imagination with the *living* and with the understanding of symbols). There is a significant amount of recent research that demonstrates the relationship between Romanticism and the Western esoteric tradition, and this implies another important affinity between Romanticism and Anthroposophy.³⁷

³³ Owen Barfield, *Romanticism Comes of Age* (London: Anthroposophical Publishing Company, 1944), pp. 5-6.

³⁴ Barfield, *Romanticism Comes of Age*, pp. 8-9.

³⁵ See, for instance, Owen Barfield, *History in English Words* (Great Barrington, MA: Lindisfarne Books, 1967 [1926]).

³⁶ See Owen Barfield, *What Coleridge Thought* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971); Barfield, *Romanticism Comes of Age*; Rudolf Steiner, *The Riddle of Man* (Spring Valley, NY: Mercury Press, 1990 [1916]); Steiner, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 20. See also R.J. Reilly, ‘Owen Barfield and Anthroposophical Romanticism’, in *Romantic Religion: A Study in the Work of Owen Barfield, C.S. Lewis, and J.R.R. Tolkien* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1971), pp. 13-97.

³⁷ See, for instance, Wouter J. Hanegraaff, ‘Romanticism and the Esoteric Tradition’, pp. 237-268.

In the first instance, for Barfield, the poetic imagination is essentially the mind in its mode of creative discovery, and its operation is not limited to the sphere of poetry, but is responsible for the emergence of unprecedented insights in all disciplines. Barfield devoted most attention to demonstrating the evidence for this operation of the poetic imagination through a consideration of language.

The work of poetic imagination in relation to language can be traced through considering cases where one can identify that a word or phrase has been granted new meaning. One of the main ways in which this semantic development is achieved is through the use of metaphor, which Barfield conceives as a suggestion of the unknown by means of the known.³⁸ It is now fairly common knowledge in the academic literature that the meanings of many words in poetry, science, philosophy, and other realms of discourse, have their origin in metaphorical usage.³⁹ Thus metaphor, which at one time was regarded as a special feature of poetry, is now widely perceived as a general source of new meaning and of the polysemy of words.

In order to see the way in which the use of metaphor introduces new meaning into language we need to consider the senses of a word prior to its acquisition of an additional meaning and the way in which this new meaning emerges. Thus, the word 'gravity' prior to Isaac Newton meant 'weight'. In order to articulate his scientific discovery, Newton used the word 'gravity' as a metaphor; he thus was able to suggest the previously unknown concept of gravity by means of the already known meaning of 'weight'.⁴⁰ In conceiving gravity Newton came to an unprecedented insight, and in using the metaphor he stimulates his readers to make the poetic discovery of this new meaning. Barfield gives other examples such as 'focus' and 'point of view'. Prior to Johannes Kepler 'focus' meant 'hearth' and Kepler used it as a metaphor to suggest 'focus' in the geometrical sense.⁴¹ Prior to Coleridge's time the expression 'point of view' meant one's point of view when looking at a landscape, and "Coleridge or somebody else either said or thought... 'x is to the

³⁸ Barfield, *Poetic Diction*, p. 112.

³⁹ See, for instance, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); Theodore L. Brown, *Making Truth: Metaphor in Science* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003); Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multidisciplinary studies of the creation of meaning in language*, trans. Robert Czerny (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977); Colin Turbayne, *The Myth of Metaphor* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1970 [1962]).

⁴⁰ Barfield, *Poetic Diction*, p. 138.

⁴¹ Barfield, *Poetic Diction*, p. 138.

mind what *point of view* is to an observer of a landscape'. And in so doing he enriched the content of the expression 'point of view.'"⁴² The same process and enrichment of meaning can be shown for numerous philosophical and scientific terms. This creative employment of language does not stick with the already given meanings of words but rather mediates the emergence of new meaning through suggesting a metaphorical resemblance between an existing sense and the as yet unnamed. Barfield's understanding of the mental process involved in this genesis of meaning can be paraphrased in the following way.⁴³ Firstly, through the activity of the poetic mind or imagination, the poet, scientist, or philosopher thinks a new meaning. Secondly, the meaning of an already known word or phrase is used as a metaphor to suggest the new meaning. The reader approaches the situation from the other direction. The reader confronts a linguistic usage that does not make sense literally, and thereby recognises that a word is being used metaphorically. Through a poetic act of interpreting the metaphor the reader then lights on the new meaning. In this way the collective meaning of words and language is enriched and transformed (even if the additional meaning does not become an enduring sense of the word or phrase).

While the poetic imagination is operative in all disciplines, poetry in the more limited sense is arguably the place in which language is *most* creatively employed in order to generate new meaning. In the case of English, the example of Shakespeare suffices to illustrate the profound way in which poetic language can increase and transform the meanings of a language, as Shakespeare was the author of numerous meanings and words that are central to academic disciplines as well as everyday parlance.⁴⁴ In this function, poetry literally fulfils its etymological sense of *making* (*poiesis*) meaning and Barfield conceives one of the fundamental tasks of poetry to be the maintenance of the *vitality* of a language. Poetry is language in a state of becoming and transformation, rather than language that is fixed and dead; language as cliché and so on.

Barfield's view of imagination, metaphor and new meaning bears a clear resemblance to Heidegger's view of poetry as the "founding of being in the word," in that poetry is a naming which first makes known (at the very least in the sense of the collective knowledge of a linguistic community) the very phenomenon which it names.⁴⁵ From what has been said it should also be clear

⁴² Barfield, *Poetic Diction*, pp. 112-113.

⁴³ See Barfield, *Poetic Diction*, pp. 140-141.

⁴⁴ See Barfield, *Poetic Diction*, pp. 135-136.

⁴⁵ Martin Heidegger, 'Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry', in *Elucidations of Hölderlin's Poetry*, trans. Keith Hoeller (Amherst: Humanity Books, 2000 [1936]),

that Barfield's view of poetic imagination is related to Steiner's understanding of thinking. Most poets (as well as philosophers and scientists when they come to new insights) acknowledge that there is something mysterious and unconscious at work in the creative act. Creative activity cannot be grasped or determined in an entirely reflective manner. Barfield thinks of the poetic imagination as operating above the threshold of consciousness and relates this in a number of places to Steiner's view of thinking (in contrast to thought). However, before elaborating these connections we should consider language (and the mind) in its polar state from the poetic.

Through customary usage the meanings of words contract and the living metaphors become dead metaphors and literal meanings.⁴⁶ In our habitual relationship to language we treat the senses of words as relatively fixed and unchanging properties and we give little or no thought to the origin of meanings. In daily parlance we do not reflect on the original metaphoricity of an expression such as 'I *grasp* what you mean', nor do we have any idea that "our feelings are... Shakespeare's 'meaning'."⁴⁷

This rigid relationship to linguistic meaning is for Barfield not only characteristic of everyday discourse, it is also the case for the mind in its *logical* operation. According to Barfield the logical or rational function of the mind enables a reflective self-consciousness but is unable to create fresh meaning.⁴⁸ The rational is reflective and formal, rather than being the creative originator of new content. The purest expression of this mode of the mind is symbolic logic with its entirely formal status. Nevertheless, Barfield does not value one operation of the mind in total exclusion from the other (were this to be possible). He is of the view that a poetic mind without the rational function would be creative but entirely unconscious, whereas the rational mind without the creative function would be self-conscious but lack all content. Barfield projects the goal of a higher marriage of the creative and the reflective such that ultimately one could be self-conscious and creative at the same time.⁴⁹

There is therefore an obvious parallel between Steiner's view of thinking as an ordinarily unobserved, spiritual activity that only becomes self-conscious in the moment when the thinking process is arrested in determinate thoughts, and Barfield's view of the poetic imagination and poetic language

p. 59; cf. John J. Mood, 'Poetic Language and Primal Thinking: A Study of Barfield, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger', *Encounter*, vol. 26 (1965), pp. 417-433.

⁴⁶ See Owen Barfield, *Speaker's Meaning* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1967), p. 31ff.

⁴⁷ Barfield, *Poetic Diction*, p. 137.

⁴⁸ Barfield, *Poetic Diction*, pp. 103, 131-132, 143-144.

⁴⁹ Barfield, *Poetic Diction*, pp. 109-110.

(new metaphors, for instance) in contrast to the logical mind and static language. The poetic imagination in this sense is a kind of living thinking and poetic language could be called *living* language in contrast to *dead* language, or even *original* language in contrast to *derivative* language. In the essay 'Speech, Reason and Imagination' in *Romanticism Comes of Age*, Barfield elaborates this idea in the following way:

As users of language, the poet and the logician stand at opposite poles. To the logician the *sound* of a word means nothing at all, while to the poet it is of utmost importance. To the logician those words are of most value which change their meaning as little as possible, when they are used in different contexts; the poet likes meanings which change most, and is always trying to change them further himself. The logician tries for statement, the poet for suggestion. And so we could go on. But the object of this digression was to point out that, while this other kind of thinking [namely living thinking in Steiner's sense] is certainly not expressible in words taken in the first sense... it has a very close connection indeed with words taken in the second sense... there we should listen for its voice.⁵⁰

While some of the ideas about metaphor and language that have thus far been discussed are quite well-known in the literature today, Barfield's perspective has more philosophical depth than the majority of writers on this theme, in that he does not approach metaphor and meaning as a specialised area of study but rather integrates various disciplines in a way that is informed by a philosophical conception of the nature of thinking, language, meaning and world. Poetic imagination, for Barfield, is a kind of living thinking that facilitates the emergence of new meaning in language. As a source of meaning it is essential to *meaningfulness* as such, and to the maintenance of the vitality of a language. We will now consider another aspect of Barfield's view of metaphor, an aspect that is informed by his understanding of the evolution of consciousness.

While metaphor is a major source of lexical polysemy and new meanings, metaphor also *presupposes* existent meanings, which it employs in strange and unprecedented ways. For this reason metaphor cannot be the origin of all meaning in language. Due to this fact many authors on the subject of metaphor argue that the earliest words had a purely literal meaning and these words were only later employed in a metaphorical sense. Moreover, 'literal' is often thought to be synonymous with 'physical' or 'material'. Thus, so the story goes, physical or literal meanings are the oldest; these meanings are later applied in a metaphorical sense and immaterial (psychological, spiritual,

⁵⁰ Barfield, *Romanticism Comes of Age*, pp. 61-62.

abstract, and so on) meanings are thereby introduced into language. Barfield, in contrast, believes that this view is partially true when it comes to the origin of many *modern* meanings but is totally opposed to the view that the original meanings of words were literal or material.⁵¹

An exclusively physical or literal view of the universe is only a recent development in the evolution of consciousness. When we look at the historical and philological evidence we find that the further we travel back in time, the more religious and mythological worldviews appear, and there is no evidence of a time when human beings perceived the world in purely physical terms. According to Barfield, the view that primordial human beings saw the world in entirely physical terms is nothing more than an anachronistic projection of modern and contemporary consciousness on the distant past.⁵²

An example of this anachronistic view would be to claim that primeval humanity first perceived light as a purely physical phenomenon, and at a later date human beings employed this material sense of light as a metaphor and thereby established the idiom connected to ‘the light of the mind’.⁵³ In contrast, Barfield argues that older meanings give evidence of a consciousness that had not yet separated the material from the spiritual. Rather than ancient meanings being physical, Barfield insists that the study of language suggests that they were pre-dualistic, that the rigid opposition between inner and outer is a much later development in consciousness.⁵⁴ In this respect, one of his most striking discussions is of the Greek word *pneuma*, and its Latin equivalent *spiritus*. The ancient Greek word *pneuma* and the Latin *spiritus* can be translated as ‘breath’, ‘wind’ or ‘spirit’. Barfield criticises the views of Max Müller who held that first the literal meaning of wind or breath must have existed and this was later

⁵¹ See Barfield, *Poetic Diction*, p. 72ff; Barfield, *Speaker’s Meaning*, p. 52ff; Owen Barfield, ‘The Meaning of “Literal”’, in *The Rediscovery of Meaning, and Other Essays* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1977), p. 44ff.

⁵² Darwinian evolutionary theory with its view that the psychological and spiritual have their origin in the material is one of the major influences on this projection. See Barfield, *Saving the Appearances*, p. 61ff. See also R.H. Barfield, ‘Darwinism’, in *Evolution of Consciousness: Studies in Polarity*, ed. Shirley Sugeran (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1976), pp. 69-82.

⁵³ See Barfield, *Poetic Diction*, pp. 88-89.

⁵⁴ Susanne K. Langer rightly notes the similarities between Ernst Cassirer’s and Barfield’s views in this respect. Susanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953), p. 236ff.

employed metaphorically to mean ‘spirit’ or “the principle of life within man or animal.”⁵⁵ In *Poetic Diction* Barfield responds as follows:

such an hypothesis is contrary to every indication provided by the study of the history of meaning; which assures us definitely that such a purely material content as ‘wind’, on the one hand, and on the other, such a purely abstract content as ‘the principle of life within man or animal’ are both *late* arrivals in human consciousness... We must... imagine a time when ‘spiritus’ or *πνεῦμα*, or older words from which these had descended, meant neither *breath*, nor *wind*, nor *spirit*, nor yet all three of these things, but when they simply had *their own old peculiar meaning*, which has since, in the course of the evolution of consciousness, crystallized into the three meanings specified.⁵⁶

In other words *pneuma* points to a distinctive meaning in which the outer reality of wind and the inner reality of spirit were not yet divided.⁵⁷ According to Barfield the evidence suggests that early meanings were neither literal nor metaphorical but prior to such a distinction. He sometimes uses the word ‘figurative’ to distinguish ancient meanings from metaphor and literal meaning, and characterises his sense of figurative as follows: “We look back and we find concomitant meanings...; we find an inner meaning transpiring or showing some way through the outer.”⁵⁸

Another way of putting this is to say that for ancient consciousness the world was ‘symbolic’ but not in the sense that brute objects were attributed a

⁵⁵ Barfield, *Poetic Diction*, p. 74. The same criticism could be made of more recent writers on metaphor – such as Colin Turbayne, Lakoff, Johnson, and others – who in different ways suggest that the origin of abstract and metaphysical ideas is in the metaphorical application of physical concepts (see n. 39).

⁵⁶ Barfield, *Poetic Diction*, pp. 80-81. William Empson criticises Barfield’s position as a kind of primitivism and proceeds to repeat a view that is almost indistinguishable from Max Müller’s. To my mind Empson’s charge of primitivism fails to appreciate the distinction between ‘original participation’ and ‘final participation’ in Barfield (see the later discussion), a distinction that is already present in *Poetic Diction* but expressed using different terminology. Furthermore, Empson fails to grasp the key point that a notion and perception of the ‘exclusively physical’ did not exist in ancient cultures. William Empson, *The Structure of Complex Words* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1985), p. 375ff.

⁵⁷ See also Barfield, *Speaker’s Meaning*, p. 56ff. Compare Barfield’s views with Steiner’s discussion of the elements in Pre-Socratic philosophy. See Rudolf Steiner, *The Riddles of Philosophy*, p. 12ff; Steiner, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 18, p. 35ff.

⁵⁸ Barfield, *Speaker’s Meaning*, p. 58.

symbolic significance; rather the things themselves naturally had a symbolic meaning; they *were* symbolic. However, one need not go that far back in time to discover meanings that retain something of a pre-dualistic or figurative character. In medieval physiology, for instance, we find that the body's internal organs and fluids were associated with distinctive emotions.⁵⁹ Thus we have the word 'choleric', and the French have 'en colère', meaning to be angry; 'choler' etymologically has the meaning of 'bile', which was associated with anger in medieval medicine. Or we can turn to the numerous words of astrological provenance that suggest an intrinsic relationship between the inner and outer, such as 'saturnine' and 'jovial'. We can even find contemporary instances that still reveal a partial connection between inner and outer, such as the sense of the word 'heart' as an emotional centre.⁶⁰ While the emotional sense of 'heart' plays no role in conventional modern medicine, I think it is wrong to see this sense as merely metaphorical. Even if science inclines us to think that we feel with our brains, if we turn to our experiences, most of us, I assume, will find that our feelings have their centre in the physiological location of the heart. Thus, there is no shortage of examples of meanings where the inner and the outer are closely intertwined and not yet entirely divided and one can easily picture how in the course of the evolution of consciousness unified meanings gradually separated.

According to Barfield it is with the development of the discursive, intellectual mind that a division or "'polarization' of an ancient unity into an outer and an inner meaning" occurs.⁶¹ Thus figurative meaning is earlier than literal meaning and human consciousness gradually divides the figurative into the separated senses of the inner and the outer. The evolution of consciousness is a process of de-animating the world and dividing the mind and nature. It is only after this division occurs that purely physical meanings exist and these can be applied metaphorically to suggest the immaterial. Therefore, it is only in recent times that the common theory of the relation between the literal and the metaphorical truly applies. Before elaborating other aspects of Barfield's view of metaphor, more needs to be said about his conception of the evolution of consciousness.

Above I mentioned that for ancient consciousness things *were* symbolic. In *Saving the Appearances* Barfield draws on the anthropological writings of Levy-Bruhl and refers to ancient consciousness as one of "original participation" and defines participation as an "extra-sensory link between the

⁵⁹ See Barfield's discussion of medieval consciousness in Barfield, *Saving the Appearances*, p. 76ff.

⁶⁰ See Barfield, *Speaker's Meaning*, p. 57ff.

⁶¹ Barfield, *Saving the Appearances*, p. 122.

percipient and the representations.”⁶² ‘Original participation’ for Barfield is not something that arose through a special conscious act, rather ancient humanity naturally participated in the cosmos. Thinking and perceiving were not yet experienced as possessions of the individual mind, but as divinely granted, and human beings experienced themselves as incorporated into a larger reality. Just as a child’s earlier development occurs more or less unconsciously, so human development in its earlier stages was not a wholly conscious achievement.

There is a great deal of philological evidence for this view. For our present purposes we can refer to the changing meaning of poetic ‘inspiration’. While ancient poets referred to inspiration as a state in which a god took possession of the poet’s mind – thus the *Odyssey* begins with “Sing to me, O Muse,” and the poet’s task is to channel the inspiration of the Muse (and ‘Muse’ at this point in time did not have a metaphorical meaning) – for modern poets inspiration assumes a relatively minor role. Whatever the precise role that a modern poet attributes to inspiration, the writing of poetry is largely a matter of individual effort.⁶³ While this example applies specifically to the poet, Barfield’s view is that the general consciousness in the past had a more *participative* and less individual character than modern consciousness.⁶⁴ The evolution of consciousness leads to an increasing autonomy of human thought and self-consciousness and a correlative disenchantment of the world, such that the world becomes a merely *outer* world in contradistinction to an enclosed inner life. In a very real sense, Barfield views this as a process in which the spirit withdraws from nature into the human interior. However, in this divided consciousness, Barfield identifies a deeper task of the poetic imagination and metaphor, which he names “final participation.”⁶⁵

Final participation relates to what Barfield in *Poetic Diction* calls a “felt change of consciousness,” which occurs in the shift from a prosaic to a poetic state of mind. Whereas prosaic consciousness regards the world as a universe of brute and detached physical objects, poetic metaphors and symbols enable a *meaningful re-animation of appearances*. This poetic consciousness, moreover, bears an affinity to original participation but with important differences. If original participation involved a unity, which we call ‘a’, then in the course of the evolution of consciousness ‘a’ divides into ‘x’ (exterior) and ‘y’ (interior).

⁶² Barfield, *Saving the Appearances*, p. 54.

⁶³ See Barfield, *Speaker’s Meaning*, p. 68ff.

⁶⁴ The evolution of the meaning of ‘genius’ is another instructive example. While ‘genius’ and its Greek equivalent *daimon* originally referred to a guardian spirit, by the Romantic era it had come to mean the creativity of an individual mind, while still maintaining a divine aura. See Barfield, *History in English Words*, p. 208ff.

⁶⁵ See Barfield, *Saving the Appearances*, p. 126ff.

What a poetic metaphor, symbol, or ‘objective correlative’ achieves is a synthesis of ‘x’ and ‘y’, which in a metaphor assumes the form ‘x is y’. Thus the poetic metaphor reconciles what has been divided, it achieves a meaningful translucence of the inner through the outer. To offer an example, we can turn to the line from T. S. Eliot’s ‘The Hollow Men’, which suggests that the hollow heads of the hollow and “stuffed men” are a “Headpiece filled with straw.” While the theme or tenor of the poem is the ‘hollow men’ (which is already metaphorical) we also perceive the vehicle of the metaphor, the ‘straw’, in a different light through these lines.⁶⁶ The straw suggests a *quality* of mental vacuity, which is translucent in the ‘objective correlative’. Numerous and varied examples could serve to illustrate how poetry grants ‘outer’ phenomena an inner meaning. Thus, there is a resemblance between ancient figurative language and modern poetic language but there are also significant differences. Firstly, poetic language reconciles the inner and the outer but it does not completely identify them. Secondly, this synthesis presupposes that a *division* has occurred. Thirdly, these meanings are not *given* but are *achieved through an imaginative act of the individual mind*. This third point requires further elaboration.

Above we distinguished ancient inspiration from the situation of the modern poet. It is instructive to contrast, as Barfield suggests, the invocation “Sing to me, O Muse” with these lines from Coleridge’s ‘Dejection: An Ode’: “O Lady! We receive but what we give,/ And in our life alone does nature live.”⁶⁷ Coleridge’s poem encapsulates the position of the modern poetic imagination. Whereas for the ancient mind meaning was bestowed by nature and the divine, the modern poet is a *creator* of meaning, and a *creator* or at least co-creator in the deep sense of the word. Thus the synthesis of inner and outer achieved by the modern poetic imagination is intimately connected to the free and creative activity of the individual. This situation of the modern poet is deeply connected to the evolution of consciousness. For Barfield, at the present point in evolution the human being has emerged from the status of a creature and is stepping into the role of a kind of creator. Barfield interprets Coleridge’s statement about imagination being “the repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation” in these evolutionary terms.⁶⁸ In *Saving the Appearances* he elaborates this point in speaking of the analogy between original participation and final participation. He states,

⁶⁶ The terminology of ‘tenor’ and ‘vehicle’ derives from I.A. Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1936).

⁶⁷ See Barfield, *Saving the Appearances*, p. 130; *History in English Words*, p. 218; *Speaker’s Meaning*, p. 68ff.

⁶⁸ See Barfield, *History in English Words*, p. 218.

[t]here is a valid analogy *if*, but only if, we admit that, in the course of the earth's history, something like a Divine Word has been gradually clothing itself with the humanity it first gradually created – so that what was first spoken by God may eventually be respoken by man.⁶⁹

Thus the 'Divine Word' has gradually united with the individual human being and final participation is a kind of creative restoration of an original unity that has been divided, a creative giving back ("we receive but what we give") to nature of what we have taken from nature; its creative principle. The statement that the human being is stepping into the role of a kind of creator could be misinterpreted as a *hubristic* conception. However, Barfield's (and Steiner's) view is subtle and complex and involves a genuine paradox, namely, that inspiration now requires that the individual mind be in an *active* state and in this state the individual can be both free and inspired. Thus, inspiration cannot be merely willed (this would be hubris), but it does depend on the active involvement of the individual. While this sounds paradoxical and perhaps *is* paradoxical, I think that it reveals the authentic character of modern artistic experience.⁷⁰

The final aspect of the poetic imagination that I would like to discuss concerns the relationship between metaphor and esoteric 'correspondences'. The doctrine of correspondences relates to what has already been stated about the synthesis of the inner and the outer, as correspondences include intrinsic relationships between the psychological and the spiritual on the one hand and the material world on the other. Barfield, moreover, *implicitly* relates his conception of final participation to the esoteric idea of the correspondence between the microcosm (human being) and the macrocosm (universe). He asserts that, "[h]enceforth, if nature is to be experienced as representation, she will be experienced as representation of – Man."⁷¹ By this Barfield is not making a solipsistic point about human consciousness being confined to its own representations. Rather he is implying that nature itself is the *macroanthropos*; however, in contrast to earlier esoteric views this must be understood in relation to the evolution of consciousness. The Divine Word that has been at work in the evolution of nature and the human being has become intimately associated with the free activity of the individual mind. If art and poetry are created out of genuine imagination then the same spirit, so to speak, that created nature will be manifest in the works of art, and this art will

⁶⁹ Barfield, *Saving the Appearances*, p. 131.

⁷⁰ The same paradox is inherent in another key Romantic word, namely 'genius'. See n. 63 and n. 64.

⁷¹ Barfield, *Saving the Appearances*, p. 131.

represent ‘Man’ or the ‘higher self’ rather than the finite personality. Furthermore, final participation in so far as it is achieved through the poetic imagination requires *true* syntheses or correspondences of the interior and the exterior. This view places a high demand on the future of poetry. Poetry, according to Barfield, has been and can be concerned with merely personal self-expression and symbolisms. However, poetry of this sort does not facilitate the imaginative reconciliation of final participation, rather it brings about the very opposite, a reinforcement of the alienated subjectivity that it is the task of the future to transcend.⁷²

We have focused primarily on the role of metaphor as a reconciliation of the inner and outer; however, a metaphor can draw connections between objects of any kind. Some metaphors draw more superficial connections between things, but there also exist deeper metaphors or what Barfield calls “true metaphors:”

Men do not *invent* those mysterious relations between separate external objects, and between objects and feelings or ideas, which it is the function of poetry to reveal... The language of primitive men reports them as direct perceptual experience. The speaker has observed a unity, and is not therefore himself conscious of *relation*. But we, in the development of consciousness, have lost the power to see this one as one... now it is the language of poets, in so far as they create true metaphors, which must *restore* this unity conceptually, after it has been lost from perception... imagination can see them [the relationships] again.⁷³

It seems to me that Barfield’s ‘true metaphors’ are nothing less than ‘correspondences’ as understood by Steiner and the broader esoteric tradition.⁷⁴ When Paracelsus, for instance, claims that iron is mars, the statement has the character of a metaphor (‘a is b’) in that two objects normally treated as separate are identified.⁷⁵ Conversely, when Judith Wright calls the wattle blossoms “a million images of the Sun,” and concludes the poem with “... the Sun, my God,” perhaps she is not revealing unprecedented resemblances or making a merely emotive statement, but rather surmising in a new way connections between the astronomical and the plant realm, the sun and the

⁷² See Barfield, *Saving the Appearances*, p. 131f.

⁷³ Barfield, *Poetic Diction*, pp. 86-87.

⁷⁴ Barfield does not explicitly refer to “true metaphors” as ‘correspondences’ but I think this esoteric idea informs his conception of metaphor.

⁷⁵ Paracelsus (Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim, 1493-1541), *Essential Theoretical Writings*, trans. Andrew Weeks (Leiden: Brill, 2008), p. 133.

divine, that were a given for the ancient mind.⁷⁶ The opening of Pattiann Rogers' poem 'Alpha and Omega' offers a related example: "Three blackbirds tear at carrion/ in a ditch, and all the light/ of the stars is there too, present in their calls, embodied in their ebony beaks."⁷⁷

Conclusion

In his writings, Barfield develops Steiner's ideas about Imagination and the evolution of consciousness in relation to semantic history and the poetic imagination. The esoteric view of Imagination that is found in Steiner, and the way in which Barfield elaborates this view, offer a far deeper foundation and significance to poetry than is common today. The poetic imagination at its most profound is an organ of truth that creatively discloses integral relationships between things, and I would add that even if poetry does not always or even often reveal esoteric correspondences, in so far as it is metaphorical and seeks out resemblances between phenomena, it approaches Imagination in this deeper sense. If the world is a tapestry whose threads have been unravelled by science and the operation of the discursive mind, poetry weaves these threads back together into a meaningful image. Or as Barfield puts it in *Poetic Diction*, "[t]he world, like Dionysus, is torn to pieces by pure intellect; but the poet is Zeus; he has swallowed the heart of the world; and he can reproduce it as a living body."⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Judith Wright, *Collected Poems 1942-1985* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1994), p. 142.

⁷⁷ Pattiann Rogers, *Fire Keeper: Selected Poems* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2005), p. 234.

⁷⁸ Barfield, *Poetic Diction*, p. 88.