The Romantic Modernism of Owen Barfield's *Poetic Diction*

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Poetic Diction is Owen Barfield's attempt to transform and rehabilitate the romantic tradition as it stood in the century's first three decades. Taken together, one might say that for Barfield in the 1920s, the romantic legacy had devolved into Lawrence's anti-intellectual sensualism, the Bloomsbury set's cult of beauty and Fabianism, Yeats's 'private store of "wisdom" in a castle' and Walter de la Mare's wise but limiting decision to remain 'speculative, doubtful, liking questions better than answers'[1] in order to preserve his 'clear child-vision'.[2]

Poetic Diction also tries to make good on Barfield's call for a 'new kind of criticism'. The prevalent and sterile variety he describes in this way:

> The non-creative critic can never be the interpreter proper; … he can only be the *collector*. As time passes and the dammed springs of poetic impulse which first impelled him to criticism dry up, his criticism becomes no more than a hunting for subtle sensations and high flavours, and then a nice classification of these according to similar sensations and flavours enjoyed in the past. He invents proper epithets like *Dantesque, Dickensian, Shavian*, to save himself the trouble of interpretation; and these become less and less significant as they are drawn from more and more minor artists; till at last his work tells us nothing about the subject-matter and too much about its author.[3]

This is the 'gentle' decadent criticism of the previous generation, masking its lack of method and insight with euphemistic and academic vagueness, a 'cat and dog business' that must 'peter out into expressions of personal taste' for lack of 'fresh air' and a 'ground-plan' in 'theorizing on the problems of poetic diction … [and speculating] as to what was or was not beautiful or justifiable in the poetry of the past' (*Poetic Diction*, 59). This 'fresh air' would come in the form of a 'poetic' criticism, a 'kind of criticism … that attempts to know, by sharing in, the poetic process itself' rather than 'the fastidious sort which can only moon aimlessly about the room with its hands in its pockets' (Poetic Diction, 132).

Barfield instead aims to present the objective, methodologically self-aware criticism he thought the time demanded, while also being 'poetic' in its own right. This is similar to the project launched by I. A. Richards in books like *The Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924). Barfield, well aware of Richards, dismissed this as 'Behaviorist nonsense,'[4] a view he came back to in his preface to the second edition of *Poetic Diction* (1951), where he challenges Richards for having 'sought no less than to define imagination in terms of a philosophy of Behaviourism—when it is precisely the fact of imagination which makes

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1 Owen Barfield, 'Walter de la Mare,' *Anthroposophical Quarterly*, Autumn 1956, 7-10; 8.
2 Owen Barfield, 'Walter de la Mare', *New Statesman*, November 6, 1920, 140-142; 141.
3 Owen Barfield, *Poetic Diction*. 3rd ed. (Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 1973), 169.
4 Owen Barfield, 'Review of *Deucalion* by Geoffrey West,' *Spiritual Science*, November 1930, 8-10; 10.

Behaviourism at once untrue and dangerous' (*Poetic Diction*, 34). More importantly in this context, Barfield takes Richards (and his co-author Ogden) to task for writing a book about meaning without accounting for metaphor and 'without having practiced the gentle art of *unthinking*'; as a consequence, 'they are absolutely rigid under the spell of those verbal ghosts of the physical sciences, which today make up practically the whole meaning-system of so many European minds' (*Poetic Diction*, 134). They have written about the 'science of symbols' without recognizing that 'linguistic symbols have a *figurative* origin' (*Poetic Diction*, 134).[5]

The inability of Richards to see that any theory of meaning, and any methodologically sound literary criticism, had to give a central place to the 'figurative origin' of linguistic symbols had a corollary for Barfield that seems to align him with T. S. Eliot: 'the perfect poet is also the perfect critic' (*Poetic Diction*, 170). This of course is a direct reference to one of Eliot's landmark essays, 'The Perfect Critic', which ends by recalling that 'the poetic critic is criticizing poetry in order to create poetry.'[6] Eliot's essay begins with a (for Barfield) promising reference to Coleridge as 'perhaps the greatest of English critics' (*Complete Prose*, 262) but we soon learn that this comparative greatness is due to the poverty of English criticism in general. Coleridge had 'natural abilities' that were 'probably more remarkable than any other modern critic' but his intelligence 'cannot be estimated as … completely free' due to 'the pernicious effect of emotion' (*Complete Prose*, 268). This is a somewhat tamer description than one offered by Eliot a year earlier, of 'the wakeful and wasteful mind of Coleridge which wasted its metaphysical sleep on Highgate Hill' (*Complete Prose*, 79). Eliot contrasts Coleridge and his bathetic squandering with Aristotle, who though no poet is the perfect critic of the essay's title because his precise yet systematic intelligence is undiluted by emotion or prejudice. He 'looked solely and steadfastly at the object; in his short and broken treatise he provides an eternal example—not of laws, or even of method, for there is no method except to be very intelligent, but of intelligence itself swiftly operating the analysis of sensation to the point of principle and definition' (*Complete Prose*, 267). Intelligence may not have a method but it consists of several things at least: first, of recognizing the 'manifest fact of the existence of two types of mind, an abstract and a concrete', though this is of less importance to Eliot than recognizing that 'there are two ways in which a word may be "abstract"' (*Complete Prose*, 266). The first is simply to have 'a meaning which cannot be grasped by appeal to any of the senses'—Eliot holds up the experience recorded by Pascal and 'Mr. Bertrand Russell' of mathematics as an example of this understanding—and the second is 'the tendency of words to become indefinite emotions' (*Complete Prose*, 266), with Hegel's 'dealing with his emotions as if they were definite objects which had

[5] Of course, Richards in later years had much to say about metaphor, and Barfield was happy to capitalize on his distinction between 'tenor' and 'vehicle'.

[6] T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot, The Critical Edition, Volume 2: The Perfect Critic, 1919-1926* (Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins UP & Faber and Faber, 2014), 270.

aroused those emotions' being the chief philosophical transgressor. The latter is a 'corruption [that] has extended very far' beyond Hegel, though, such that 'you will observe that words have changed their meanings. What they have lost is definite, and what they have gained is indefinite' (*Complete Prose*, 266-267). Thus Eliot calls for critics to overcome the merely 'appreciative and imprecise style' in order to produce 'true generalizations' upon 'a structure' of perceptions: 'criticism is a statement in language of this structure; it is the development of a sensibility' (*Complete Prose*, 270). In this way, the poetic critic has true insights about poetry to offer its practitioners, and critical poets can pass along their own insights, through their practice, to poets and critics alike.

Barfield offers a different picture of the way in which 'the perfect poet is also the perfect critic':

> Surely, if criticism is anything worth while, it must be a sort of midwifery—not, of course, in the Socratic sense, but retrospectively. It must try to alter the state of mind of the artist's audience, from mere wondering contemplation of an inexplicable *result*, towards something more like sympathetic participation in a process. And in poetry, as far as it is merely semantic, and not dramatic, or sentimental, or musical—this process is the making of meaning. What kind of criticism, then is dilettante: that which attempts to know, by sharing in, the poetic process itself, or the fastidious sort which can only moon aimlessly about the room with its hands in its pockets, till the infant is nicely washed and dried and ready for inspection? (*Poetic Diction*, 132).

Because 'the *raison d'être* of all criticism' is 'to increase appreciation' ('Form in Poetry', 501),[7] and appreciation increases most readily when we participate in 'the making of meaning', that is to say in 'the poetic process itself', the critic's task is to transform reading from an 'absolutely rigid' reception, into a 'sympathetic participation in a process'. This is not to confirm Eliot's possible fear that Barfield has invited the chaos of indefinite emotion through the critical back door. Barfield envisions a different kind of gentleness, born of insight, in a critic with 'a controlled and fundamentally sane consciousness, a gentle sympathetic imaginative understanding, not only of "human nature" in the ordinary sense, but of the nature of inspiration and of its function in human evolution' (*Poetic Diction*, 170).

The idea that criticism is a controlled creative or poetic activity begins with the romantic generations, and Barfield's own new science of poetic criticism owes a great deal to Coleridge and to Shelley. For example, near the end of *Poetic Diction* Barfield rehabilitates Coleridge's time-worn, by that time clichéd, concepts of fancy and imagination, and stresses their urgent contemporary importance:

> the distinction between Fancy and Imagination is one which ought to be particularly emphasized in an age like ours, divorced from reality by

[7] Owen Barfield, 'Form in Poetry,' *The New Statesman,* August 17, 1920, 501-502; 501.

> universal abstraction of thought, and in which the fanciful poetry of 'escape', as it is sometimes called, is so popular. … [I]t is a tragedy of art in our time that most of those who—whether they desire it or not—are regarded as the living representatives of the poetic, are under the spell of a Kantian conception of knowledge, or, worse still, a popular conception of 'Science' (*Poetic Diction*, 202).

In Barfield's view, there is an urgent need for a revitalized interest in Coleridgean fancy and imagination because they offer an antidote to the dualist epistemology endemic in modern life, our felt perception that we are surrounded by spectral appearances and divorced from the supposed *ding-an-sich*. This mostly unexamined assumption undergirds almost all of the major and lesser writers, thinkers and artistic movements of the time, like the 'definite objects' which Eliot assumes lie undisturbed and undiscerned at the back of Hegel's 'emotions'. Coleridge, by contrast, suggests that only our way of thinking can become fancifully 'fixed and dead'—that is to say, to redeploy Eliot's critical terminology, classical. Instead, Coleridge offers a vitalist, dynamic and 'romantic' system that assumes 'two contrary forces, the one of which tends to expand infinitely, while the other strives to apprehend or *find* itself in this infinity' (*Biographia*, 1: 297).

In this picture of self-consciousness, there is nothing from which to be divorced, only the fanciful means of convincing oneself that one is. Bringing Coleridge's distinction and his 'two forces' before the public is important to Barfield, then, because only something like them will help to undo our condition, with its manifold psychological and social ills, of being 'divorced from reality by universal abstraction of thought' (*Poetic Diction*, 202). Richards and Eliot are prime examples of what goes wrong when the metaphysical presuppositions that support our critical reflections go unexamined. Coleridge proposes that behind individual, subjective consciousness—standing over against me as 'not me'—is more consciousness. Adducing Rudolf Steiner's philosophical writings, Barfield underscores this by saying that 'it is not justifiable, in constructing a theory of knowledge, to take subjectivity as "given" … [b]ecause, if we examine the thinking activity carefully … we shall find that in the *act* of thinking, or knowing, no such distinction of consciousness exists' (*Poetic Diction*, 208).

Though Barfield would go on to make major contributions to the study of Coleridge, in *Poetic Diction* he uses Shelley's 'Defence' more extensively. Andrew Welburn noted some time ago that *Poetic Diction* is 'remarkably Shelleyan in much of its thought'.[8] The most important Shelleyan distinction for Barfield is that between the 'rational principle' and the 'poetic principle,' το λογιζειν and το ποιειν. For Barfield, the 'subtle interaction of the two principles … is implied in the mere existence of language' (*Poetic Diction*, 109) and considering 'man … as knower, we shall find that he always knows by the interaction within himself of these poetic (ποιητικός) and logistic principles'

[8] Andrew J. Welburn, *Power and Self-Consciousness in the Poetry of Shelley* (London: Macmillan, 1986), 225 n28.

(*Poetic Diction*, 139). Without the existence and interaction of these 'principles', in other words, neither knowledge nor language could exist. One may even go further: 'in the whole development of consciousness … we can trace the operation of [these] two opposing principles, or forces' (*Poetic Diction*, 87).

Let us begin with the 'logistic principle' since for Barfield 'the natural progress of language, if left, as it were, to itself, is a progress from poetic towards prosaic' (*Poetic Diction*, 152). Barfield retains much of Shelley's account. 'The το λογιζειν of Shelley's *Essay*', he says, is 'the force by which … simple meanings tend to split up into a number of separate and often isolated concepts' (Poetic Diction, 87). Considered as the 'absolute rational principle' it 'is that which makes conscious of poetry but cannot create it' (*Poetic Diction*, 103). As with Shelley, for Barfield it 'can clear up obscurities, it can measure and enumerate with greater and ever greater precision … but in no sense can it be said … to *expand* consciousness' (*Poetic Diction*, 144).

Barfield's additions to Shelley's account tend to add scope to the latter's claims. For example, the rational principle consists of 'death-forces' (*Poetic Diction*, 168) that 'would kill, alike the given Meanings of which language, at its early stages, still retains an echo, and the meanings which individual poets have inserted into it later by their creative activity in metaphor' (*Poetic Diction*, 179).[9] It carries out its Jovian function in two ways, by creating abstractions and by locking language into sclerotic regularity. The latter produces the former. To say:

> that words lose their freshness through habit … will do well enough, as long as we remember that 'habit' is itself only a familiar name for the repetition of the identical, and that the repetition of the identical is the very essence of the rational principle—the very means by which the concrete becomes abstract—the Gorgon's head. (*Poetic Diction*, 115).

The entropic drift to rigid fixity, the shriveling of imagination into fancy, is evident not just in the evolution of grammar towards the increasingly logical and abstract (*Poetic Diction*, 154) and the increasing fixity of word order (*Poetic Diction,* 148), but also in the efforts by contemporary logicians like Bertrand Russell to develop arcane systems of symbolic logic in order to wrestle words into pinned submission:

> The Logician … in his endeavor to keep them steady and thus fit them to his laws, is continually seeking to *reduce* their meaning. I say seeking to do so, because logic is essentially a compromise. He could only evolve a language, whose propositions would really obey the laws of thought by eliminating meaning altogether (*Poetic Diction*, 131n).

For Barfield it is not Hegel but Russell who best exemplifies how to drain meaning from language. The logician who achieved the dream of the totally closed formal logic would have to completely excise meaning because meaning

[9] Barfield makes idiosyncratic use of capitalization in both his poetry and his critical prose, perhaps under the influence of William Blake and with no pattern than I have been able to discern.

cannot be wholly abstract. In fact:

> A purely abstract term—which, with the possible exception of numbers, can nowhere exist—is a mark representing, not a thing or being, but the fact *that* identical sensations *have been* experienced on two or more occasions. It is in fact a *classification* of sense-perceptions. Purely abstract thinking, carried to its logical conclusions, is thus—counting; as was realized by Hobbes, who described all thinking as addition and subtraction (*Poetic Diction*, 185).

We are reminded again that for Shelley and Barfield alike the rational principle is essentially enumerative. In the empiricist lineage begun by Hobbes and culminating in Barfield's day with Russell's logical atomism, meaningful thinking reduces to stasis, as if the essence of language were the abstract noun.

It is not difficult to see behind this simple picture many of the complex theories of the origin of language that preoccupied linguists like Max Müller as well as the efforts of Russell and his followers in the 1910s to polish descriptive language to a gleaming ideal of mathematical purity. Its shadow also hangs over Eliot's description of the poet's relation to language in the essay on the metaphysical poets already discussed:

> Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning. (*Complete Prose*, 380)

Barfield agreed with Eliot that poets need to respond to the complexity of modern life, but behind Eliot's violent description of forcing and dislocating an unwilling language to suit the needs of a complex time there lies an instrumentalist view of language as a mere tool that is an echo of 'Locke's picture of Adam at work on the synthetic manufacture of language' (*Poetic Diction*, 206). It is also telling and inevitable for so discerning a thinker and poet as Eliot, that he recognizes that language is incorrigibly resistant to coercion, though for Barfield he missed the lesson available in its stubborn refusal to be finally tamed.

The contrary of the prosaic principle, and the other half of 'man as knower', is the 'poetic principle'. Barfield does not so much expand as disavow the heart of Shelley's account. Barfield agrees that the imagination or poetic principle (like Shelley, he uses the terms interchangeably) makes possible our perception of value, universal nature, and existence itself, and he agrees that these are three aspects of the same thing. But Barfield does not agree that the 'poetic principle' is a 'principle of synthesis'. As Barfield puts it, 'synthesis, as well as analysis, is not a poetic, but a discursive function, operating *within* the sphere of the rational principle' (*Poetic Diction*, 190). This is so because synthesis, like analysis, already implies abstraction. A mere synthesis of abstract fixities—once again, Coleridge's 'fancy' is not far in the background—'can only come *after*,

and *by means of*, a certain discrimination of actual phenomena—a seeing them as *separate* sensible objects' (*Poetic Diction*, 191). So, while a need for synthesis will 'direct me to *look out* for a possible real resemblance between apple-blossom, pear-blossom, and roses', the same perceptive act as 'intuited in actual observation, becomes poetic knowledge (*inspiration*), and will then react, as wisdom, on my further experience in observation (*recognition*), so that I shall truly see or "read" the flowers with different eyes' (*Poetic Diction*, 190).

Barfield's 'poetic principle', then, differs from Shelley's because it precedes synthesis and analysis alike. Synthesis and analysis are two aspects of a single rational principle that is contrary to a precedent 'poetic principle':

> The poetic principle was already operative before such discrimination took place, and, when it continues to operate afterwards in inspiration, it operates *in spite of* that discrimination and seeks to undo its work. The poetic conducts *an immediate conceptual synthesis of percepts*. Brought into contact with these by its partial attachment to some individual human brain and body, it meets—through the senses—the *disjecta membra* of a real world, and weaves them again into the one real whole; whence it was called—not perhaps very happily—by Coleridge *esemplastic*. (*Poetic Diction*, 191).[10]

To my knowledge, Eliot never dilated the distinction that he makes in 'The Perfect Critic' between 'concrete' and 'abstract' types of mind, but he uses 'concrete' as the equivalent of the 'poetic' in his critical writings of the 1920s.[11] If the 'concrete' mind is the same as the 'poet's mind' that he evokes in 'The Metaphysical Poets' a year later, it 'is constantly amalgamating disparate experience … [and] always forming new wholes' (*Complete Prose,* 380). It may be similar to Barfield's 'concrete' thinking, which 'conducts an immediate synthesis of percepts'. At any rate, whereas the rational is either 'a synthesis of *ideas* already abstract' or an analysis of synthesized ideas, the poetic 'is always a direct conceptual linking of percept to percept, or image to image' (*Poetic Diction*, 189).

The rational principle consists of 'death-forces' that would pin meanings to the wall of language; the 'very poetic itself' is 'the genesis of meaning … the making of meaning' (*Poetic Diction*, 132). This 'making' is 'not some fantastic "creation out of nothing", but the bringing farther into consciousness of something which already exists in unconscious life' (*Poetic Diction*, 112). This 'unconscious life' is the life of nature, which:

> we find given us, to start with, as the nature of language itself at its birth. It is the principle of living unity. Considered subjectively, it observes the resemblances between things, whereas the first principle marks the

[10] Barfield's unhappiness with Coleridge's coinage may have been influenced by his reading of Logan Pearsall Smith: 'A chance appellation like *romantic*, for instance, or a metaphor like *inspiration*, are much more convenient names than a term like Coleridge's "esemplastic power" for the imagination, which attempts to explain its working'. See: Logan Pearsall Smith, *Words and Idioms*, (London: Constable & Company, 1925), 131.

[11] See: Eliot, *Complete Prose,* 227, 232, 329, 806, 824.

> differences, is interested in knowing what things *are*, whereas the first discerns what they are not. Accordingly, at a later stage in the evolution of consciousness, we find it operative in individual poets, enabling them (τὸ ποιειν) to intuit relationships which their fellows have forgotten—relationships which they must *now* express as metaphor. Reality, once self-evident, and therefore not conceptually experienced, but which can *now* only be reached by an effort of the individual mind—this is what is contained in a true poetic metaphor; and every metaphor is 'true' only in so far as it contains such a reality, or hints at it. (*Poetic Diction*, 87-88)

The 'poetic principle', then, intuits the 'living unity' and is the pre-rational vehicle by means of which that unity gives itself forth in language. It would be difficult to form a greater contrast with the Locke-Müller-France school that gave precedence to the 'rational principle' and that saw the origin and function of language in purely instrumental terms. Indeed, in answering the question of why language becomes more figurative the further back in its history one goes, Müller had been forced to posit a race of 'mighty poets' who stocked its literal meanings with metaphors. Barfield takes the simpler route of proposing that 'these poetic, and *apparently* "metaphorical" values were latent in meaning from the beginning' (*Poetic Diction*, 85). Thus, *pneuma* had originally a single meaning of both 'spirit' and 'wind' and 'afterwards, in the development of language and thought, these single meanings split up into contrasted pairs—the abstract and the concrete, particular and general, objective and subjective' (*Poetic Diction*, 85). The so-called 'primitive' mind is not a blank slate grasping clumsily for proto-scientific understandings of otherwise meaningless experiences; it is instead 'literally resounding with all manner of meaning, with meaning such that, if he could but communicate it to us, we should be listening to poetry' (*Poetic Diction*, 86).

It would be a mistake to think that Barfield simply sets himself in opposition to Eliot. A better representative of such opposition is D.H. Lawrence, who in the introduction to his *New Poems* (1920) tries to move as far from analytic abstraction as possible. Lawrence pauses to appreciate, if that is the word, Eliot's classical perfection, his ideal of maturity, in 'all that is complete and consummate … conveyed in exquisite form: the perfect symmetry, the rhythm which returns upon itself like a dance where the hands link and loosen and link for the supreme moment of the end'.[12] To this sterile perfection Lawrence opposes 'another kind of poetry' that instead celebrates and captures 'life, the ever-present, [which] knows no finality, no finished crystallization … the very white quick of nascent creation' (*Criticism*, 85). What for Eliot is an endless and emotionless preoccupation with the infinite closed sphere of tradition, for Lawrence is 'the stiff neck of habit' and 'shackles and death' (*Criticism*, 88), Lawrence celebrates instead a 'rare new poetry' that focuses on the 'one great mystery of time [that] is *terra incognita* to us: the

[12] D. H. Lawrence, *Selected Literary Criticism* (New York: Viking, 1956), 85.

instant', within which lies 'the most superb mystery we have hardly recognised: the immediate, instant self' (*Criticism*, 89).

The form suited to the rhapsodic individualist mood of this 'rare new poetry' is of course free verse. Lawrence, though, places himself at antipodes from Eliot's *vers libre* by rejecting his buttoned-up classicism as merely 'to break the lovely form of metrical verse, and to dish up the fragments as a new substance, called *vers libre*' (*Criticism*, 88). Just as Eliot has ignored his poetic ancestor Whitman, he has also missed that freedom is a verb, as it were, an 'insurgent naked throb of the instant moment' in which 'the utterance is like a spasm, naked contact with all influences at once. It does not want to get anywhere. It just takes place' (*Criticism*, 88).

There is much in Lawrence for Barfield to celebrate. In an era of abstraction, Lawrence is an apostle of pure sensation, of life in, of and for the moment, and of reunion with the surging processes of life from which we spring. For Barfield, too, the modern self is stranded 'in the network of its own, now abstract, thoughts' and 'having awoken, it is as helpless as any other new-born thing without the life of the mother-Nature from which it sprang' (*Poetic Diction*, 143). This divine mother, the 'living unity' from which we are born and towards which we strive, is not just the nature that we murder to dissect, but 'that experience of truth, or identification of the self with the meaning of Life, which is both poetry and knowledge' (*Poetic Diction*, 143).

Barfield nevertheless was as leery of Lawrence as he was of Eliot. He saw Lawrence as speaking to 'the peculiarity of our age … that it is possessed with a desire to become more conscious of … fundamental and hitherto unconscious impulses. … Men feel that the impulses, less conscious as yet, are more real. Hence the popularity of, for instance, D.H. Lawrence'.[13] It does not surprise Barfield that Lawrence was frustrated in his travels by the effort to find people living unmediated by abstract thinking, because he was 'an intellectual reacting against intellectualism'[14] with an 'unsatisfied desire … for depths, dark, unconscious quiet depths—with less talk of this fussy little intellect, and this fiddling little "personality" we hear so much about.'[15] In short, as Barfield wrote in an essay published in Eliot's *Criterion*, Lawrence valorizes 'sensation without intellect, and indeed [is] rather hostile to intellect.'[16] Most importantly though, and again consistent with Eliot's own position, Lawrence is 'a metaphysician *malgré lui*, and a very bad one' because 'without … an underlying body of ideas, the artist has no medium in which he can *communicate*, except on a purely superficial level, with his fellow-men. Consequently, … his energy is prone to be dissipated in the exhausting effort to *create* such a medium' ('Review of *Deucalion*', 9).

Put otherwise, Lawrence's pure sensation is no less abstract than Eliot's 'ratiocinative' principle. He attempts to live by what Barfield calls the 'absolute

[13] Owen Barfield, 'An Effective Approach to Social Change', *The Christian News-Letter*, Supplement to No. 39 (July 24th, 1940), not paginated.
[14] Owen Barfield, 'Davy on Snow', *Anthroposophical Quarterly*, Spring, 1962, 17-18.
[15] Owen Barfield, 'An Introduction to Anthroposophy', *Anthroposophy*, Easter, 1930, 58-80; 76.
[16] Owen Barfield, 'Psychology and Reason', *The Criterion*, July 1930, 606-617; 616.

poetic principle', regardless that this principle in its absolute purity 'is that which creates poetry but cannot [be] conscious of it' (*Poetic Diction*, 103). Just as Eliot claimed, in speaking of William Blake, that 'what his genius required, and what it sadly lacked, was a framework of accepted and traditional ideas' (*Complete Prose*, 190-191), so too Lawrence tried to will himself into a 'primal' consciousness by uprooting himself from the tradition that birthed him and about which he wrote hundreds of pages of commentary, and unsurprisingly earned frustration for his effort. It is worth reminding ourselves that for Barfield, 'man as knower' requires the presence of the poetic and rational principles alike, even if modern culture gives too much weight to the latter while would-be modern prophets often make plain their misapprehension of the former.

Barfield's 'concrete thinking' creates—in the language of Coleridge—a polarity out of the contradiction exemplified by Eliot and Lawrence. And, echoing both Lawrence and Eliot, Barfield affirms that 'the modern poet is in some sense … in the position of having to fight *against* words' and that '[the] poetic principle is dying out of language' (*Poetic Diction*, 107). The solution, though, is not a total immersion in the 'rational principle' or throwing despised intellect overboard in a rush to synthesized sensation. Instead, while 'the primitive bard was carried forward on … meanings like Arion on the dolphin's back', the modern poet must look 'nowhere but in himself' because 'the same creative activity, once operative in meaning without man's knowledge or control … is now to be found within his own consciousness. And it calls him to become the true creator, the maker of meaning itself' (*Poetic Diction*, 107). This 'making', which as we have seen is in fact a rediscovery, is for modern poets a kind of cyclical process:

> Provided, then, that we do not look too far back into the past … it does indeed appear historically as an endless process of metaphor transforming itself into meaning. Seeking for material in which to incarnate its last inspiration, imagination seizes on a suitable word or phrase, uses it as a metaphor, and so creates a meaning. The progress is from Meaning, through inspiration to imagination, and from imagination, through metaphor, to meaning; inspiration grasping the hitherto unapprehended, and imagination relating it to the already known. (*Poetic Diction*, 141)

This is a creative hermeneutic circle, what Paul Ricoeur, with whom Barfield had mutually recognized affinities, described in the somewhat different context of mimesis as a 'temporal form inherent in experience and the narrative structure [that] is not a lifeless tautology. We should see in it … a "healthy circle"'.[17] In this case, the 'healthy circle' begins with the passage from the 'living unity' that is original, undivided meaning, identical with the 'footsteps of nature'. One passes then through 'real inspiration, the expression of first-hand

[17] Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative, Volume 1,* trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 76.

spiritual experience, [which] breaks through the shell of poetic posturings embodied in the fashionable diction of the moment' (*Poetic Diction*, 162). This is the unselfconscious moment of creativity, analogous to the 'throb' idealized by Lawrence, but found for the poetic artist in the unreflective apprehension of the pulse of living language. Moving around the circle, Barfield implies that imagination involves self-awareness, and at least a glimmer of the 'sense of homelessness' that typifies modern consciousness in its striving to find itself within the expanding infinity that surrounds us. The modern poet, against the backdrop of alienated self-consciousness, returns us via a 'true poetic metaphor' to 'reality, once self-evident, … but which can *now* only be reached by an effort of the individual mind' (*Poetic Diction*, 88).

It is worth comparing this image with the one used by Eliot in his famous review of *Ulysses*:

> In using myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him. … It will simply be a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history. It is a method already adumbrated by Mr. Yeats. (*Complete Prose*, 478).

Read in the light of Barfield's different picture, which is itself informed by Shelley and Coleridge, the 'immense panorama of futility and anarchy' is Shelley's ever-expanding circumference and Coleridge's 'tendency to expand infinitely'; for Barfield, this becomes the 'living unity' into which the artist, 'using myth', might expand. The 'parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity' is for Barfield the 'archaism' that, because of the 'progress of language … from poetic towards prosaic' (*Poetic Diction*, 152) creates 'something like an echo of just those rhythms … by externalizing as fully as is possible in words his own first-hand experience beyond them' (*Poetic Diction*, 158, 160). Eliot assumes that the mythological method is suited to satire alone, that for us there is nothing more to be found in modern life than 'futility and anarchy'; Barfield, certainly, is aware that 'the Meaning of life is continually being dried up … and left for dead in the human mind by the operation of a purely discursive intellectual activity, of which language … is a necessary tool' (*Poetic Diction*, 179). But the desiccation of meaning and the anarchic futility it creates belong to a much larger evolutionary process which is still unfolding, of which we are living parts, and in which the poet actively intervenes through just this healthy creative circle. The 'gradual loss of ancient meaning' is part of a larger 'sequence of loss and recovery' (*Poetic Diction*, 116).

The relatively uninspired reader plays a crucial role in this process. After all, 'no poet … can be the creator of all the meaning in his poem' (*Poetic Diction*, 50), not just because the poet inherits and must work with given meanings but also because 'in order that "poetry", strictly so called, should exist, an appreciating imagination, in which aesthetic experience can light up, is of course as necessary as the creative activity of the poet' (*Poetic Diction*, 105). The

fruit of this reception, which mirrors the healthy circle of creativity, is a cyclical receptive movement from a precedent 'mood of appreciation' through an 'expansion of consciousness' on encountering a true metaphor, and the increase of knowledge as 'the ability to recognize significant resemblances and analogies' that 'considered as a *state*, and apart from the effort by which it is imparted and acquired, I shall call *wisdom*' (*Poetic Diction*, 55). The passage from appreciation through expansion and knowledge to wisdom, and finally back to increased appreciation, mirrors the creative cycle from the 'living unity' of meaning through inspiration and imagination and, via metaphor, back to meaning. Taken together, these two circles are properly gentle forms of Blake's prolific and devouring, of Shelley's two principles at work with the dilation of center and circumference, and of Coleridge's fancy and imagination operative within infinite expansion and the finding of oneself within that expansion.

There is a mystery at the boundary where these cycles intersect. The 'true voice' of poetry for Barfield was in the unheard tension between base line of iambic pentameter and the poet's personal idiom and patterns. Writ large, the same is true of 'meaning' both as it is created and as it is received. So, the modern poet in the act of creation recapitulates the evolution of language from the figurative to the literal, the concrete to the abstract, with 'dazzling rapidity', and 'not only from one day or hour to another is there alternation of mood: his whole consciousness oscillates while his pen is poised in the air, and he deliberates an epithet' (*Poetic Diction*, 110). It is the mission of the modern poet to accelerate this movement such that 'the frequency of these oscillations may have increased to infinity; at which point at last the poet shall be creating out of full self-consciousness' (*Poetic Diction*, 110). This infinite vibration of reception and creation, prosaic and poetic, within the individual modern poet mirrors the fecund infinity of the 'living unity' out of which she works, for 'there really is no end to the secrets hidden behind the meanings of single words' (*Poetic Diction*, 132).

Between these two spinning infinities, the 'felt change of consciousness' that indicates the experience of meaning emerges in the margin that joins them; and it too proves an elusive possessor of its own infinity. With the very question of meaning 'one is brought face to face, on the threshold, with the whole mystery of creation—and even of incarnation'. Meaning resists direct declaration; a meaningful statement in Barfield's sense is paradoxical because it arises within concrete thinking, which is not abstract: 'a concrete definition is an impossibility' (*Poetic Diction*, 187-188). Consequently, meaning is only 'indirectly expressible in metaphor and simile'. It is 'suggestible' and 'every individual must intuit [it] for himself' (*Poetic Diction*, 133). It is an 'endless process' (*Poetic Diction*, 140) that 'lights up' when 'a kind of gap is created' and the 'discursive activity [that] is inseparable from human *self*-consciousness' is 'interrupted' (*Poetic Diction*, 179). One is reminded of what Kierkegaard and the later Eliot said about the paradox of time: that we are only aware of the past and the future, which are not present, and not of the present, which is all that is. Meaning is infinitely abundant yet can be grasped by 'man the knower' only

in the gap between, or through the interaction of, the rational and poetic principles that pass beneath consciousness; like the creator god in many mythologies, it 'hovers, for ever unable to alight' as it broods over 'the perpetual evolution of human consciousness, which is stamping itself upon the transformation of language' (*Poetic Diction*, 181).