

# The “Other” Postmodern Theorist: Owen Barfield’s Concept of the Evolution of Consciousness

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[EDITOR’S NOTE: *Richard Hocks was a colleague of Owen Barfield in the English Department at the University of Missouri, Columbia, when Barfield was a visiting professor there in the sixties. Barfield and Hocks soon got into the habit of attending philosophy lectures together, and Hocks first heard of Polanyi when Barfield invited him to attend a lecture on Kant by a visiting philosopher, Marjorie Grene. Barfield’s conversation about Grene immediately stressed her connection with Michael Polanyi, and Barfield himself spoke admiringly of Polanyi’s work. Hocks’ essay has evolved from an earlier brief article in TAD’s predecessor, “The Polanyi Society Newsletter” (X, 2, Winter, 1983) in which he commented upon the complementarity of Polanyi and Barfield and included a short annotated Barfield bibliography.*]

## **Preface**

A number of years ago in the publication which has evolved into this one, I examined Owen Barfield and Michael Polanyi as “Complementary Theorists.” The following essay attempts to give a more comprehensive overview of Barfield’s conceptual framework than was possible in the earlier brief format. I shall again be concerned, though not equally, with Polanyi and Barfield, whose similarities and compatibility in thought remain tantalizing. Like Polanyi, Barfield’s thought is at once intricate and far-reaching, incorporating a theoretical perspective that crosses and enriches many disciplines. Readers of *Tradition and Discovery* may, like the present writer, find it useful periodically to evaluate Barfield’s doctrine by placing it alongside Polanyi’s major tenets, exploring certain basic parallels as well as appreciating the discriminations between two major thinkers of our era whose mutual admiration was frequently expressed. I am calling Owen Barfield above “the ‘other’ postmodernist” not only to insinuate this similarity with Michael Polanyi but to propose that both of them comprise an alternative line of thought with sufficient intellectual heft to dialogue fruitfully with some of the reigning postmodern critical theory in the academy, especially French and German deconstruction which, for all its preoccupation with language and various encoding mechanisms, for example, does not regard language as the vehicle of a meaning higher than itself: hence Jacques Derrida’s well known term “logocentrism,” or the erroneous belief that language does mean more than itself. Contrastingly, Barfield and Polanyi might well be thought of as two postmodern figures interested in what Barfield calls “the rediscovery of meaning” through the translucent power of language. Finally, in order to introduce as much concision as possible into the complexity of Owen Barfield’s theory, I shall organize my exposition around four key “Barfieldian” concepts all of which are deeply interconnected and, hopefully, will mutually constitute the core of his thought.

## I: The Appearances

Owen Barfield's book *Saving the Appearances, A Study in Idolatry* is still the best overall exposition of his theory of the evolution of consciousness. Yet no one, I believe, has pointed to a certain almost humorous "twist" embedded in his title, which is that it really means saving the phenomena, inasmuch as our word "phenomena" comes to us from the Greek word for appearance, although we now habitually use the word "phenomena" to denote precisely the reverse of what merely "appears" to us.<sup>1</sup> For Barfield the philologist, however, the history of language is the gateway into understanding the history of consciousness, so the fact that the word "phenomena" comes from the word for appearance is a matter of far-reaching implications. Barfield believes we must "save" or rescue the phenomena if we are to rescue ourselves. Rescue from what? From the separateness we attribute to them as part and parcel of our subjectivity in our dualism between subject and object, between what Emerson once called the "me" and the "not me." This belief in dualism frequently goes by the name of Cartesianism, named of course for the philosopher Rene Descartes, who first proposed it in a systematic way. But the issue for Owen Barfield is not really a philosophical armchair debate with Descartes; there are numerous modern thinkers, some, for example, descending from the late work of William James, who dispute Cartesian dualism. Barfield's concern is not just with the idea of dualism and separateness but with the actual condition and experience of it. To save the phenomena, therefore, it is important both to understand and to experience them as something other than, so to speak, a collective lump of otherness. It is necessary that we come to an awareness of the extra-sensory link between ourselves as subjects and the phenomena with which we are surrounded. This link--a missing link, if you will, so long as it remains unacknowledged--is called by Barfield "participation," partly to borrow from the well known anthropological school of Durkheim and Levy-Bruhl, but primarily because it conveys better than another word (such as "construct" or "link") the relationship Barfield wishes to establish. Participation is crucial to saving the phenomena, for an understanding and experience of them can teach us that phenomena are in point of fact appearances--not in any sense of artificiality or illusion, of course, but as that which is made manifest. And what is made manifest, further contends Barfield, is spirit. The phenomena are thus spirit-made-manifest-as-matter (Barfield does not hold to a neo-oriental view that matter is mere illusion). For us to arrive at this realization is potentially to rediscover humanity as spiritual also, both in its nature and in its origin, for it opens the door to the possibility that our relationship with the natural world is and always has been fundamentally "sacramental," despite our predisposition to lapse, so to speak, from the marriage. Otherwise, as Barfield puts it, "the more able man becomes to manipulate the world to his advantage, the less he can perceive any meaning in it."<sup>2</sup> Participation thus includes the discovery that the nature and origin of phenomena, on the one hand, and the nature and origin of mankind, on the other, are profoundly and inextricably bound together. This viewpoint relates to what we usually call "ecology," but at a deeper level than that issue is routinely addressed.

In the case of Barfieldian participation, there is at least one major aid and one major obstacle to its persuasion and acceptance. The major aid is the science of physics and its implications. Those various assumptions voiced by Werner Heisenberg, Niels Bohr, or David Bohm, that the activity of the observer implicates what is observed; or the more familiar assumption that all matter is ultimately a dynamic field of sub-atomic particles; even the routine practice of constructing models--these assumptions begin to press home the implication that, if nothing else, participation already resides in each and every act of human perception, for no one yet claims to actually "see" the sub-atomic particles which physics informs us are the ultimate constituent of reality. What occurs in human perception, Barfield argues, is what he calls "figuration"; and what is perceived by us all is a "collective representation" (unless, of course, the reader *can* see the particles and/or waves!). Let me note, however, that participation in human perception can only take

us so far, for it remains largely unconscious and does not yet reveal the phenomena in a vastly different light. But it is at least a beginning, an important one.

If the implication of physics is a major aid, then the major obstacle to the persuasion and acceptance of participation is the “idolatry” of Owen Barfield’s subtitle--i.e. positivism. For Barfield, positivism as an obstacle lies not so much in its “ism” as in its habitual way of experiencing the world. Yet even ideologically, positivism, to be sure, can mean many things; for Barfield’s purposes it usually means materialism, the view that matter is all there “really is,” or rather that there is no immaterial agency at work in the very face and appearance of matter, including ourselves. And if a mighty fleet can be said to have a flagship, then positivism--idolatry--has been dominated above all by the doctrines of Darwinian and neo-Darwinian evolution. What is very important to mention at this juncture is that, for Barfield, Darwinism--not evolution per se but Darwinism--is the view which enforces the specious belief in phenomena as separate, as “other,” and, of course, as matter through and through. Darwinism is in that respect the forefront of positivism; and to Barfield, the historian of consciousness, the fact that those two views had their formal birth at the same time--in the middle of the last century--is certainly no accident. Positivism in general and Darwinism in particular are thus the principal obstacles to a renewed sense of the world based on participation and therefore to saving the phenomena by understanding them in their true appearances. Whether it be a special moment of epiphany, as in an art form such as poetry or music which recreates the world anew, or else the more familiar world in response to our perception, the appearances, contends Barfield, are the activity of an immaterial agency made manifest as phenomena.

For Polanyi, I suspect the Barfieldian “appearances” are often comparable to what the chemist/philosopher calls “a physiognomy,” whether in nature or human nature. While many readers might object, however, that Polanyi’s obvious (and important) debt to Gestalt psychology is not the same as Barfield’s “appearances” conceived of as spirit-made-manifest-as-matter, I do think Polanyi frequently overlaps Barfield on this issue, primarily because his distinctive exposition of the Gestalt experience, if you will, is so deeply tethered to his profound concept of “indwelling”--the term itself evocative of Spirit in Augustinian theology. This description from *Personal Knowledge* is an example of music’s “physiognomy”: “By dwelling in a harmonious sequence of sounds, we acknowledge their joint meaning as a tune: a meaning they have in themselves, existentially.”<sup>33</sup>

What is hardly disputable is that Polanyi and Barfield share the same critique of Barfield’s “idolatry”--i.e. positivism in general, Darwinian epistemology in particular--and that both see this “inversion” (to use Polanyian terminology) as a hindrance to rediscovering meaning and thus diagnosing our condition of alienation borne of excessive scientism or observationalism. The alternative epistemology to such Barfieldian “idolatry” is, of course, “participation,” the concept most remarkably consanguine with Polanyi’s theory of indwelling and of tacit knowledge, a parallel I shall return to presently.

## II: Participation

I have proposed above that, for Owen Barfield, human participation is crucial in any endeavor to save the phenomena, but in Barfield’s spectrum of thought there are levels and degrees of participation, and there are also categories of it that correspond to epochs of time or periods of history. First, with regard to its levels or degrees: participation as the activity present in human perception, as “figuration,” turns out to be the same power named by Coleridge in his poetics as “primary imagination,” the “repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the

infinite I AM.”<sup>4</sup> Coleridge’s formulation claims a spiritual source for the human imagination present in perception; indeed the vast network that comprises those relationships in Coleridge is the subject of Barfield’s monumental study, *What Coleridge Thought* (1971). That study epitomizes Barfield’s lifelong interest in the ontology of the poetic imagination proper, what Coleridge went on to define as “secondary imagination.” This, Coleridge tells us, is “an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary [imagination] in the *kind* of its agency, and differing only in *degree*, and in the *mode* of its operation.”<sup>5</sup> For our purposes “secondary imagination” is in Barfieldian or Coleridgean terms a higher level of participation than ordinary human perception, inasmuch as the poet or artist consciously expresses the phenomena through language. To put this another way, poetic utterance really “speaks” the participation that human perception fails to reveal easily to us until and unless we are forced to think seriously and deeply about it with the aid, say, of physics and its implication of the presence of human “figuration.” The poetic imagination thereby rescues or “saves” the phenomena from that lump of otherness referred to earlier. It is largely due to Coleridge in particular and the Romantic Movement in general that Barfield believes there were at least some healthy “symptoms of iconoclasm” to positivistic thinking even as it began to settle into idolatry so solidly by the 19th century.

Now despite many shimmering discussions of the vital nature of poetry and language, such as, for example, Emerson’s famous essay “The Poet,” Owen Barfield is anything but naive when it comes to expecting most readers or hearers to agree with him that language has the same kind of extra-sensory link with the represented phenomena that human perception has with the *un*represented particle life within phenomena; and that what poetry accomplishes in the one case is similar to what careful consideration of advanced physics does in the other case. Even so, “the relation,” he writes, “between collective representations and language is of the most intimate nature . . . Those who insist that words and things are in two mutually exclusive categories of reality are confusing the phenomena with the particles. They are trying to think about the former [the phenomena] as if they were the latter [the particles]. Whereas by definition, it is only the unrepresented which is independent of collective human consciousness and therefore of human language.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, if consciousness is correlative to phenomena in participation, it is even more likely that language is likewise correlative to our collective representations. Poetry and the artistic imagination that utters and mediates the world through language and other forms of artistic expression point to a level of participation “identical in the *kind* of its agency,” as Coleridge put it, to primary imagination or normal human perception.

There is, however, still a third level of participation over and beyond that of poetic or artistic utterance, and that is the systematic or trained use of imagination on behalf of the perception of qualities in nature. This level, called by Barfield “final participation,” involves enhancing our figuration to the point of rendering the unrepresented as phenomenal or apparitional--saving the appearances in the fullest, most self-conscious sense. Such “final participation” takes Barfield beyond Coleridge proper and is one of the most difficult doctrines in his entire thought, one that cannot be much elaborated here and, indeed, lies primarily in the future, for it is virtually unfound as yet in western culture except in certain rare instances. Even so, it is a capability Goethe apparently exhibited in his scientific investigations of the morphology of plant life. More importantly, it is the capacity that Rudolph Steiner, Barfield’s principal philosophical mentor, incorporated into his spiritual science.<sup>7</sup> What may be most helpful to consider at this stage, I believe, are the stratification and levels of participation we have considered thus far: that of normal human perception rightly understood but not generally experienced, that of poetic or artistic utterance, and, albeit briefly and preliminarily, that of final participation--the systematic imagination, the trained observation of and indwelling in, so to speak, nature’s “inside.” Now these same three levels of participation correspond in an important way to Barfield’s three principal stages in the evolution of consciousness, which is, when you think about it, the consideration of participation under the

framework of linear time and history. First, “original participation,” like human perception now, was largely unselfconscious, although the experience of it would necessarily be different from our present experience of perception (we live now, not then, in the wake of the “Cartesian experience”). Second, participation through poetic utterance corresponds to Barfield’s second stage, for it involves the individual’s self-conscious attempt to “reattach” to nature and to phenomena those extra-sensory qualities no longer intrinsically experienced; and it should not surprise anyone to discover that the growth of modern science in the 17th century would be the twin, or more properly the alter ego, to this second stage in the evolution of consciousness eventually brought to fruition and epitomized by the early 19th-century Romantic Movement in literature, a movement that produced Coleridge, among others. Lastly, final participation has not yet been achieved, although it may be foreshadowed in certain exceptional individuals. If the reader can think of these three levels of participation and the three stages of the evolution of consciousness as homologous, one might try momentarily borrowing from 19th-century biology the terms “ontogenetic” and “phylogenetic” development: hence the three levels of participation in an individual (the ontogenetic) could be said to “recapitulate” the three major stages in the evolution of human consciousness (the phylogenetic). At which point the same reader might well retort: “Wait a minute! That ontogenetic/phylogenetic recapitulating thesis is old, quasi-outmoded evolutionary jargon; this Barfield is supposed to be anti-Darwinian?” Indeed, he is. But he is *not* anti-evolution.

When addressing the issue of scientific discovery through tacit inference, Michael Polanyi makes the Coleridgean/Barfieldian point that we “*must turn to the example of perception*” wherein “the capacity of scientists to perceive in nature the presence of lasting shapes differs from ordinary perception only by the fact that it can integrate shapes that ordinary perception cannot readily handle.”<sup>8</sup> This analogy with Coleridge’s theory stressing the “difference in degree” of perception between primary and secondary imagination results from both thinkers’ similar emphasis on the integration of particulars to meaningful wholes--what Coleridge denominated the imagination’s “esemplastic power” (i.e. molding into oneness), or its “unity in multitude.” Such conceptual apposition between Polanyi and Coleridge/Barfield, whereby the transition from perception to discovery--scientific or creative--is continuous, depends profoundly on their shared view of participation. Polanyi’s recurrent theme that our “seeing” “indwells” the object and changes its nature; or that when we attend *from* a word or object *to* its meaning we interiorize as opposed to our looking *at* a word or thing so as to exteriorize or alienate it--this perspective is the analogue to Barfield’s whole ontology of participation and (differing only in degree) poetics. Polanyi’s analysis of the “from . . . to” act of knowing even parallels Barfield’s distinction between our accessing a “history of consciousness” rather than merely looking *at* a “history of ideas.” The keynote for both thinkers, then, is the mind’s participatory activity. Although Barfield begins with poetry and Polanyi with scientific discovery, their epistemology and language theory overlap. “*A set of sounds,*” writes Polanyi, “is converted into the *name* of the object by an act of tacit knowing which integrates the sounds to the object to which we are attending. . . . When converted into a word they no longer sound as before; they have become as it were transparent: we attend *from* them (or through them) to the object to which they are integrated.”<sup>9</sup> To which Barfield, following Coleridge, might add that the vital ray of relation between the ordinary word and its object is then recapitulated at a higher level through poetic utterance, not unlike a valid scientific theorem in Polanyi’s scheme.

### III: Evolution, the False and the True

The fierce debate between evolution and creationism often seems a conflict between science and academia, on one side, and fundamentalist religion, on the other. For by evolution is generally meant Darwinism, or rather a neo-Darwinism buttressed by the science of genetics. Although Owen Barfield’s thought, strictly speaking, is no part

of this debate, his work sheds considerable light on it. His evolutionary perspective may suggest to casual readers a figure like, say, Teilhard de Chardin or perhaps Karl Jung, but one reason such comparisons would be in error is that Barfield, unlike either, challenges directly and forcefully the neo-Darwinian analysis of prehistory. His contention is rather that of the evolution and history of consciousness, an approach he generally contrasts to our more conventional history of ideas, especially when treating human thought, say, from the Graeco-Roman age to the present. And indeed his richest analyses of texts and culture fall within that time frame. Furthermore, any reader of Barfield soon discovers that his deep engagement with philology, the history of language, is the nourishing root of the method by which he engages the past at the level of the history of consciousness. How, then, does this necessarily relate to the broader question of Darwinian evolution? After all, it is not common for someone to be engaged with a history of the Western mind and then impinge on the different topic and vastly different time frame of biological evolution; indeed, should a philologist even want to enter such turbulent waters?

The answer is that Barfield's precoccupation with the history of consciousness is different from even the most saturated analyses of the past, such as Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*. Barfield maintains that, in any thoughtful consideration of evolution, it is both more reasonable and more illuminating to hold that mind, or consciousness, precedes matter rather than the reverse--though not *individualized* mind or *self*-consciousness. Not only does the origin of language point toward this supposition but also the content of the great myths, indeed even the very archetypes that a thinker like Jung explores so deeply yet without ever considering that they might inhabit the world "outside" the human head--or a vast collection of human heads. In other words, evolution for Barfield begins with mind as anterior to matter, as a given "field" out of which, as it were, matter compresses. Barfield's thesis herein does not merely challenge the Darwinian argument; in a sense it turns that argument on its head: for not only does mind precede and bring matter into being, and a form of intentionality replace chance-ridden natural selection, but the very same physical evidence used in support of the received position is never directly challenged or discredited, but interpreted differently.

Furthermore, in Barfield's view human self-consciousness evolves in turn from world consciousness by the same *kind* of compression or focusing modality that characterizes the coming into being of matter itself. As he puts it in a wonderful image, mankind "has had to wrestle his subjectivity out of the world of his experience by polarizing that world gradually into a duality."<sup>10</sup> The word "gradually" is most important here in reminding us that Barfield really does mean evolution, but it also suggests why he always illuminates so well the older texts that he interprets: for that gradual "wrestling" process reveals itself especially in the thought, art, and literature of the West from the Graeco-Roman world to the close of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the scientific revolution in the 17th century. His contention that self-consciousness has emerged from a broader world consciousness has, to quote a favorite expression by one of my colleagues, "all the force of unnoticed significance newly made obvious,"<sup>11</sup> especially when placed alongside some of the convoluted theories about the origin of language--such as "animism" or "the metaphorical period." The authority of Barfield's discussion about the period from the Graeco-Roman world to our own--his illumination of Aristotle, Aquinas, Galileo, the Romantics, and many others--derives from his premise about the centripetal evolution of self-consciousness from world consciousness. To put this another way, his history-of-consciousness approach draws not merely on the ideas of a given period or author from that period, but is really a history of a given period's "figuration." In fact, one of the truly seismic implications of Barfield's view is that the phenomena--i.e., the appearances--undergo change in response to the evolution of consciousness itself. And what this means is that participation evolves as well.

A listener can of course reject Barfield's evolutionary argument out of hand, assume it "unscientific," and the like; it is not a view which, stated by itself, is likely to compel immediate assent. Nevertheless it does (at the very least) make his discussions of specific historical, philosophical, and literary topics downright luminous. From *Poetic Diction*, 1928, through *Saving the Appearances*, 1957, to *What Coleridge Thought*, 1971, numerous readers have experienced an illumination comparable to that expressed by C.S. Lewis when he dedicated *The Allegory of Love* to Barfield as the "wisest and best of my unofficial teachers."

Two additional points should be made. First, if Owen Barfield's view of evolution seems not to be modern but peculiarly "traditional," theological, or, say, "mystical" (as opposed to scientific), one might well reconsider the implications of quantum mechanics and the like that were raised earlier. Second, if Barfield's *own* view of evolution is carefully thought out, one of our most important discoveries--I mean about the question of its validity--is that *The Origin of Species*, published in 1859, occurred at a period in recent history when self-consciousness had so fully achieved its ascendancy, its hegemony, that it could no longer even feel any extra-sensory link with phenomena in participation: hence one could not even conceive of a concept of prehistory wherein matter *wasn't* assumed to be totally separate from mind; matter, according to Darwin and Lydell and other Victorians, simply must have preceded mind, since it obviously did (and does!) precede *self*-consciousness. Whenever we think the other person is wrong about such important matters, it is particularly crucial to cast light, not just on that person's error, or even why the person is wrong; it is especially important to explain how that person inevitably came to the wrong conclusion in the first place. Perhaps more than any other thinker, Barfield enables his reader to go "inside" the thinking of his opponents and get us to understand, on the grounds of his argument, just how the other person came to think the other way around. Evolution, in any case, is not merely about phylogenetic history; evolution also has its own history.

It is probably accurate to describe Polanyi, like Barfield, as both an evolutionist and an opponent of Neo-Darwinism, although the grounds of his explicit critique of Darwin are admittedly very different from Barfield's.<sup>12</sup> Yet for all the difference in their respective philosophical agendas, including their views of evolution, Barfield and Polanyi really do end up together in opposition to Darwin on similar epistemological and ontological grounds. If Barfield, as we have seen, insists that mind precedes matter, Polanyi's view of reality as structured by hierarchical boundary conditions offers a comparable generic challenge to the Darwinian mind set, when he concludes that "the operations of a higher level cannot be accounted for by the laws governing its particulars forming the next lower level. You cannot derive a vocabulary from phonetics; you cannot derive grammar from a vocabulary; a correct use of grammar does not account for good style; and a good style does not provide the content of a piece of prose."<sup>13</sup>

## IV: Polarity

A true understanding of the principle of polarity in Owen Barfield is perhaps the ultimate prerequisite to a genuine understanding of all the major facets of his thought, including the evolution of consciousness. It is generally not known that Coleridge was the first person to use the word "polarity" to mean something other than magnetism, and Barfield's 1971 study of Coleridge is essentially the study of polarity and its ramifications throughout Coleridge's thought: for example, the well known conception by Coleridge of the literary imagination as "the reconciliation of opposites" really derives from his non-literary work in natural philosophy and his contention there of polarity as the exponential law governing individuation, a conception found later in Karl Jung as well as among Coleridge's own contemporaries in Germany. But Barfield himself has greatly extended Coleridgean polarity in his own thought. One

of the better places to encounter it is in this passage from his book *Speaker's Meaning*. "A polarity of contraries," he writes, "is not quite the same as the *coincidentia oppositorum*, which has been stressed by some philosophers, or as the 'paradox' which (whether for the purposes of irony or for other reasons) is beloved by some contemporary writers and critics. A paradox is the violent union of two opposites that simply contradict each other, so that reason assures us we can have one *or* the other but not both at the same time. Whereas polar contraries (as is illustrated by the use of the term in electricity) exist by virtue of each other *as well as* at each other's expense. For that very reason the concept of polarity cannot be subsumed under the logical principle of identity; in fact, it is not really a logical concept at all, but one which requires an act of imagination to grasp it. . . . Unlike the logical principles of identity and contradiction, it is not only a form of thought, but also the form of life. It could perhaps be called the principle of seminal identity. It is also the formal principle which underlies meaning itself and the expansion of meaning."<sup>14</sup>

Obviously, Barfield's conception here is altogether different from what we usually mean by polarity, as when we speak of society's becoming polarized, for instance; but less obviously it is just as different from Cartesian dualism, which is perhaps more appropriately called dichotomy, certainly not unity or "seminal identity" through opposition. In *Speaker's Meaning*, Barfield is concerned with the polar transformation that recurs between the expressive and communicative meaning in language. Such transformation is revealed through Barfield's attentive study of philology, especially the history of language. A "speaker's meaning," that is to say, reveals polarity with "lexical meaning" when language is studied over a long period of time. Such polarity in language is in fact one of the keys to the evolution of consciousness, for the semantic approach Barfield invokes enables one to look into the past, not just at it. A word like "furniture," for example, which the *OED* tells us once meant, or included, "faculty & furniture of mind" has contracted its meaning centripetally over the course of time; whereas, on the other hand, words like "gravity" or "focus" have expanded their meanings centrifugally over time. Such continual polarity occurs, according to Barfield, because "when we use a word, we re-enact, or adopt, or reanimate . . . the thought of previous users of the same word or some part at least of that thought. It may be a very small part indeed. But we must be doing just that thing to some extent; for otherwise we should not be uttering a word at all, but simply making a noise! Of course the same thing is true of the previous speakers themselves, and of other speakers before them."<sup>15</sup> Barfield has pointed out again and again in a dozen books and numerous essays that, when we look back into the history of any so-called abstract or immaterial word, we come to a period when it also had a concrete or outer meaning as well, like "gravity" or "focus"--meaning "heavy" or "weighty" and "fire-burning hearth," respectively. There are even words still in the process of completing that polar transformation, such as "noble" or "gentle," which obviously no longer connote only "class" or "blood"--in fact almost do not mean them! But this is also the case with outer or material language, like "furniture"; the process by which these have *lost* their inner meaning, writes Barfield, "is clearly the obverse, or correlative, of the very process by which so many [more] other words have lost their outer meaning."<sup>16</sup> One notes that he does not say "reverse" but "obverse," or "correlative"--that is because he is thinking polarity, not just dichotomy. Barfield is especially fond of illustrating both processes, the centrifugal and the centripetal, by the Greek word *pneuma*, which in St. John's Gospel is repeated several times within a very few verses and correctly translated, first, as "spirit," then "wind," and then again "spirit." What we have in that example is a sort of captured moment just before the splitting apart of a word into what eventually would be its outer and inner meanings, a process which in time would be expressed by two different words altogether, "wind" and "spirit." Barfield sometimes cites a contemporary example of this same process in our own use of the word "heart" to refer at once to the physical organ and to the seat of affections. Should "heart" evolve like *pneuma*, there could eventually come a time when, say, a word like "cardium" might refer exclusively to the physical organ, and "heart" to the inner meaning. But for us now to say that wind was once "a metaphor" for spirit would be quite as inappropriate as for future generations to look back and assume that "heart" was in our day "merely a metaphor" for the cardium.



This entire issue is what makes a poem like, for example, Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" so instructive, for in that poem Shelley consciously *reconnects* through poetic utterance the meaning of spirit and wind which were originally one. The poet in such instances re-utters imaginatively what was once an utterance outside the confines of any individual creative mind like that of a single poet. It is not accidental, then, that whereas the ancient world thinks of the poet as "inspired," the modern world thinks of the same poet as "imaginative"; the first is to be "possessed by" a genius or daemon without; the second (as Coleridgean poetics would propose) is rather to be "in possession of" the daemon within. Hence the relation, historically speaking, between "inspiration" and "imagination" is that of a true polarity or "seminal identity."

This is but some of the philological or semantic context of polarity in Barfield's analysis. The fact is, polarity properly understood and grasped by the imagination is really a conception that ramifies throughout all of his thought. The main issues about polarity are that it always involves interpenetration as well as juxtaposition, that it requires an act of imagination to grasp it (precisely since it cannot be subsumed under the logical principle of identity and contradiction), and that it is, in Barfield's words, "not only a form of thought but also the form of life."<sup>17</sup> We have seen already Polanyi's views about language sufficient to indicate their affinity with the tenor of Barfield's argument in *Speaker's Meaning*. Barfieldian polarity, inasmuch as he proposes it as a living immaterial agency, may not be quite the same as Polanyi's concept of "complementarity," yet they do have more than a little in common. "We can see," writes Polanyi, "two complementary efforts aiming at the elucidation of a comprehensive unity. One proceeds from a recognition of a whole towards an identification of its particulars; the other, from the recognition of a group of presumed particulars towards the grasping of their relation in the whole."<sup>18</sup> This conceptual model overlaps Barfield in part because it evokes, once again, Coleridge's concept of "unity in multitude" which he derives from the principle of polarity. "I have called these two efforts complementary," Polanyi continues, "since they contribute jointly to the same final achievement, yet it is also true that each counteracts the other to some extent at every consecutive step." In short, "an alternation of analysis and integration leads progressively to an even deeper understanding of a comprehensive unity."<sup>19</sup> Polanyi's exposition in these and similar passages sufficiently parallels, I believe, Barfield's analysis of polarity earlier in regard to the lexical/expressive as well as expanding/contracting relationship within the living history of language.

To restate more generally, then, the Barfield-Polanyi consanguinity: Polanyi's complex epistemology, including conceptions like "self-giving integration" (as distinct from "self-centered integration"), although primarily a discrimination between cognition in art as opposed to science, is in effect one of many analogues to Barfield's major and ruling argument about participation and polarity, whether as human perception, poetic imagination, or even the shifting of consciousness in its evolution over the length of Western history. In the distant past of "original participation," the human mind was far more "subsidiary" than "focal." Historically speaking, the beginning of modern science in the 17th century corresponds to a shifting emphasis through the development of self-consciousness and a corresponding de-emphasis in participation illustrated, for instance, in the earlier Medieval theory of the humors or the cosmological assumptions dramatized, say, by C.S. Lewis in *The Discarded Image*--what Thomas Kuhn might call a preceding "paradigm." Poetry and imaginative art afterwards would come to articulate in a self-conscious way the participational relationship no longer experienced as part of normal human perception. To put much of this in another way, poetry is to the epistemological act in Barfield what science, if properly understood, is to the epistemological act in Polanyi.

As with knowing, so too, though less obviously, with being. Barfield's metaphysical views, radiating outward from his arguments regarding poetry and language history are favorable, I believe, to Polanyi's explication of reality as

stratified structures or “boundary conditions.” Part of their shared view herein no doubt stems from each man’s profound sense of hierarchy traceable to a common source in Augustine, although also in Barfield’s case to such loved texts as the poetry of Milton, Dante, and the Romantics, the philosophy of Plato, the scientific thought in Coleridge, and especially the spiritual science of Rudolph Steiner. The two especially meet, moreover, in their energetic *opposition* to what Barfield calls “idolatry,” i.e. positivism, which holds that one can account for the higher level within a stratified system of reality by the lower. Barfield in particular critiques Darwinism in this context, and both he and Polanyi espouse a non-Darwinian concept of evolution. The fact that Polanyi does not as a philosopher of science propose something like Barfield’s neo-Coleridgean theory of Logos does not alter the “Barfieldian implication” otherwise of Polanyi’s analysis of being. Apart from the parallels in their respective views on imagination and art, then, Polanyi and Barfield complement each other in their fundamental epistemological and ontological perspectives, and in their mutual preoccupation with and commitment to what Barfield calls “the rediscovery of meaning” without resorting to the uneasy “two-truth” solution of science and humanities, a “solution” which seems mainly to have deepened the malaise and made people hunger for something else.<sup>20</sup>

Let me now end this essay where I began, but with what I hope is a heightened sense of where we have been in these pages. The appearances, as in Barfield’s *Saving The Appearances*, are ultimately united through polarity with phenomena--recapitulating the very history of that word--so that to rescue the one is to rescue the other by making luminous once more their face and thereby our relationship to them (analogously, Richard Gelwick, commenting on the Gestalt-like nature of factual statements in Polanyi’s thought asserts that when “this tacit structure is ignored and values are regarded as inferior to facts, we also lessen our humanity”<sup>21</sup>). Furthermore, a participating relationship between subject and object, between percipient and phenomena, is ultimately for Barfield a polar one; and there is no time in the evolution of Western consciousness when human perception has not been *in fact* a participating, polar agency. But there certainly have been periods when the ordinary person’s awareness of this participation has been less, or even minimal. In the middle of the 19th century, for example, such sense of participation was so minimal that out of that experience came the twin doctrines of Darwinism and positivism. Even in our own time, our experience of participation is often minimal; however, we now have the capacity to reconsider it in the light of post-Cartesian philosophy, post-Newtonian physics, as well as post-critical thinking. To really understand polarity at all is to understand polar-predominance, for equilibrium is by definition hardly ever the case. In Barfieldian original participation, the predominating pole was outside the human subject in the world itself. The evolution of consciousness in the West away from original participation has meant also the gradual reversal in predominance from the pole without to the pole within, toward self-consciousness. That centripetal polar-predominance probably reached its peak in the middle of the last century, and *The Origin of Species* along with the beginnings of positivism are in a sense its appropriate touchstones or markers. Admittedly it remains to be seen whether ecology, the new physics, Polanyi’s post-critical epistemology, or a truly comprehensive theorist like Barfield himself are rather early symptoms of a gradual re-reversal in polar-predominance from a somewhat imprisoning subjectivity outward toward the world and thus in the direction of something like “final participation.” Short of that, it is surely a perspective and a body of thought which, without its exhibiting a scintilla of trendiness, deserves a more frequent hearing in this era of postmodern deconstruction with its denial of the sacramental “transparency” of language affirmed by Polanyi and expostulated so extensively in Barfield.

## NOTES

1. The notable exception to this usage is, of course, the school of phenomenology in philosophy--an important exception that bears on Barfield's thought, suggesting certain overlapping strands between him and phenomenology.
2. Owen Barfield, *The Rediscovery of Meaning and other Essays* (Middletown: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1977), p.11.
3. Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 344.
4. See Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*, Chapter 13.
5. Ibid
6. *Saving The Appearances: A Study in Idolatry* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1965), p. 82.
7. An excellent analysis of Barfield's relation to Rudolph Steiner can be found in Robert J. Reilly, *Romantic Religion* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia, 1971), pp. 13-97.
8. Michael Polanyi, *Knowing and Being* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1969), p. 138.
9. Ibid, p.145.
10. *The Rediscovery of Meaning*, p. 16-17.
11. See William Holtz, "Thermodynamics and the Comic and Tragic Modes," *Western Humanities Review*, 25 (Summer, 1971), p.203.
12. For Polanyi's views on Darwin and evolution see *Personal Knowledge*, pp. 382-390; for an excellent analysis of Polanyian thought in this domain see Marjorie Grene, *The Knower and the Known* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1974), pp.185-201, and passim.
13. *Knowing and Being*, pp. 154-55.
14. Owen Barfield, *Speaker's Meaning* (Middletown: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1967), pp. 38-39.
15. Ibid, pp.23-24.
16. Ibid, p. 56.
17. Ibid, p.39.
18. *Knowing and Being*, p. 125.

19. Ibid.

20. These two “restatement” paragraphs are extracted almost verbatim from my earlier short article on Polanyi and Barfield (see “Editor’s Note”). I believe the explosion of postmodernist theory is itself a part of that wider “hunger for something else” other than the “two truths” of science and humanities.

21. Richard Gelwick, *The Way of Discovery: An Introduction to the Thought of Michael Polanyi* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), p. 146.

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