

III. Language

Need: To enliven language, and life

Language for most of us is a means of expression and of communication. We learned in grade school about parts of speech (nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs) but then we tended to forget language. We were too busy using it.

Not so for Barfield. Barfield saw in language the history of human consciousness, and also its promising future. Early in his adult life he began to study the forms and meanings of words and used them to "interpret the workings of men's minds". Here's what he wrote in one of his early studies: "It has only just begun to dawn on us that in our own language alone... the past history of humanity is spread out in an imperishable map, just as the history of the mineral earth lies embedded in the layers of its outer crust. But there is this difference between the record of the rocks and the secrets which are hidden in language: whereas the former can only give us a knowledge of outward, dead things... language has preserved for us the inner, living history of man's soul. It reveals the evolution of consciousness" (*History in English Words*).

He goes on to say, "In the common words we use every day the souls of past races, the thoughts and feelings of individual men stand around us not dead but frozen into their attitudes like the courtiers in the garden of Sleeping Beauty". Barfield spent the better part of his researching efforts seeking – and eventually finding – the 'kiss' which would bring those courtiers to life.

We will look more closely at what that 'kiss' consisted of for Barfield, but let's stop here for a moment and do a little experiment. When you heard me refer to Sleeping Beauty and the frozen courtiers, what did you feel? Was there a change in your feelings or thoughts? If so, what changed? How would you describe that change?

Barfield was inspired to begin his journey as a studier of words when he read a poem and "experienced a felt change of consciousness". It was altogether a pleasant feeling but more than that it changed the way he experienced the world. He felt more 'alive', and the world around him seemed more 'alive' – like it had been kissed, and awakened from a frozen sleep.

We don't know what the particular poem was that affected Barfield this way (very possibly it was one by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, his favorite poet). We do know that early in his life, as a young student studying the classics, he came across a Latin phrase noting the death of Cato, the famous Roman senator. It was commonly translated "Cato died at age 80", but Barfield discovered the literal translation and he was transfixed. "Cato at age 80", it said, "walked out of life". (Did you just experience another "felt change"?)

Words then are not just the squiggles of ink on paper but pregnant with meaning, and they can be so arranged that their meaning is 'poetic', and the experience of them – in literature but also in life – can be what Barfield called 'Poetic Diction'.

Poetry always had a special place in Barfield's pantheon of values. No doubt he would have lamented its having lost much of its value in our current day. People no longer write poems as they once did, or memorize them to satisfy a course requirement. Poets are no longer respected, looked up to, and our society is the poorer for it. "Poetry", someone once said, "is the canary in the coal mine of consciousness". When it dies, it is a sure sign that society is infected with a toxic, possibly fatal, disease.

In any case, Barfield plunged headlong into a study of the history of language, a history "in" (not "of") words. What he found amazed and excited him. He found that the farther back one goes in history the more complex language was, not the more simple as was commonly believed; also the more 'alive', more 'poetic'.* He also found a unity of thought – and of consciousness – than was previously believed.

An example of the 'alive-ness' of ancient languages can be found in early Greek literature, and in the thinking behind it. "The pervasive quality of Greek thinking, and of Greek consciousness as a whole", Barfield writes, "is that it was in a certain sense alive"... the Greek tended to be at home in the coming-into-being of things". Take the word 'hair', for instance; and specifically 'long hair'. We would say that someone 'has long hair'. The Greeks had a single verb, which the closest English translation would be 'to become long as to hair'. Greek language was alive... their consciousness was alive... their world was alive, always 'coming into being'.

* A great part of the Hebrew scriptures turns out to be poetry.

An example of the unity of ancient languages can be found in the Christian gospels. The language of those gospels was also Greek (though in 'common' form) and when the gospel author wanted a word for 'wind' he used 'pneuma'. But when he wanted a word for 'spirit', he used the same word ('pneuma'). And he also used the same word for 'breath'. One word for three distinct, separate things, we would say. Distinct, yes, but not separate. The evidence suggests that what was distinct for the ancients was not divided and separate for them, or from them. There existed instead an interpenetration of meanings (wind-spirit-breath) all in one unity, one word. The Christian Trinity offers a similar three-in-one Unity.

That seems contradictory to us. A word cannot mean two different things – much less three – and still be the same word. It's got to be either one or the other. In a world of dead language, yes, but the ancients lived in a living world with a living language. What we call the Law of Contradiction didn't exist for them. Theirs was the Law of Participation. Their words participated each other... their meanings participated... their consciousness participated... their world participated. Ours is an 'either/or' world; theirs was 'both/and'.

The full story of how the world changed from 'theirs' to 'ours' is long and involved. Indeed, it is long and e-volved. Barfield has written entire books on the subject. (See Bibliography.) For our purposes I feel it can be summed up in these words from one of Barfield's most respected exponents, G. B. Tennyson: "[Barfield] discerned in the study of words, a development, an evolution of thought, from an earlier unity to a later differentiation. That earlier unity, he recognized, represented also a different perception on the part of earlier human beings, who perceived the world as a greater unity than moderns do. This meant therefore that human consciousness had evolved as had language, indeed the two evolved together, and that the evolution of language was the demonstration of the evolution of consciousness" (*A Barfield Reader*, p xxvi).

So what are we to make of our current situation, we moderns, standing as we do in the garden of the 'Sleep Beauty' of a Promising Future, with a language as dormant as frozen courtiers? Is there a 'kiss' we can bestow that will awaken those courtiers and make our language alive, and in the process enliven us and our world?

Barfield, of course, believes that there is. Beginning with language itself, Barfield submits that language is 'frozen' when it is interpreted literally. "Literalness is the

besetting sin of our age", he claims. Did you, when you heard the words 'frozen courtiers', imagine real/literal men standing in a physical garden in a kind of cryogenic state? I hope not. Most likely you interpreted those words in a 'figurative' or metaphorical way, so that they referred not to a particular physical state but to a state that affected you personally, possibly 'spiritually', that could live within you in a meaningful way.

Metaphor, for Barfield, is the 'kiss' that brings 'frozen' language to life.

But language, even in its un-frozen, metaphorical state, is limited in its effects. It cannot of itself bring about the "felt change" in our lives, and in our world, that we seek. That can only be done by a change of consciousness. We must not only un-freeze our words but we must un-freeze ourselves! From the inside out. To accomplish this, Barfield contends, necessitates a systematic use of the Imagination.

As with the word Participation, Barfield takes another ordinary word – in this case 'imagination' – and changes, deepens, its meaning. Instead of its common meaning (creating fictions with our minds), he re-interprets it to mean that faculty – or more accurately that 'activity' – of our consciousness whereby "the material can become an image of the immaterial". We know, from physics if nowhere else, that the phenomenal world is basically immaterial, and with Imagination it can be experienced as such.

This is a hard concept to understand, Barfield's 'Imagination'. It's hard because we have a non-Imaginative consciousness to try and understand it. But try this: look around the room. Eventually let your gaze rest upon an object. Name that object ('chair' or 'table', etc). Then say to yourself: "That ('chair', 'table') is an image". Pause. Then say it again... and again... and again. Stop if you don't think it's true. But if you do think it's true, continue to repeat it to yourself – like a mantra. You might add a complementary phrase ("That is not an object.....apart from my consciousness"), repeating the two phrases together – maybe in concert with your breathing. Repeat it often enough, honestly, and you may eventually come to believe it. And everything changes. The material CAN become an image of the immaterial, and it CAN be experienced as such. It can become un-frozen... because we ourselves can become un-frozen. And ourselves, and our world, along with our language – can become truly alive.

You may be thinking that such a grand result could not possibly come from such a simple exercise as this. That may seem so... until one remembers that the world was once

changed not too many years ago by a single person (René Descartes) who uttered a simple phrase ('cogito ergo sum') and split the world into the false dualism of "either/or". Barfield has offered an alternative view, an alternative 'way'. Those "who are willing to make a move towards seeing the world in that way", he tells us, will ultimately end up "seeing that kind of world". The choice is ours.