

**“Perhaps the Historian of Her Own Consciousness”
Part II of “Recalculating”**

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My purpose in this session is to attempt to conclude what I started yesterday afternoon in the “Prose Authors” session. There I attempted to bring to bear on a memoir of my own hints and fragments of Owen Barfield’s notion of the evolution of human consciousness, through association and juxtaposition. Today my presentation is more scholarly, in that instead of focusing on my own story, I want to point out how Owen Barfield’s notion of “the evolution of consciousness” opens up the genre of creative nonfiction in at least two ways.

The first has to do with creative nonfiction in light of the history of literature. That is, it is possible to see the rise and growth of creative nonfiction as an almost inevitable evolutionary node in the development of literature from mythopoetic oral literature—a highly “participatory” genre—through histories, letters and novels, each of these a more and more “separate” genre. Barfield declared that “the evolution of consciousness must be seen as the progressive metamorphosis of a universal or generalized consciousness, which embraced both man and nature, into the individualized and alienated self-consciousness we have today; and further that there are indications that this contractions seeks to be followed by an expansion from the separate new centers thus created” (Barfield “Introduction” to *Rediscovery of Meaning* 5) Thus if we look broadly at later developments in literary genres, we can see creative nonfiction as the expansion “from the new separate centers.”

The second way that Barfield opens up the possibilities in creative nonfiction is this. In *Speaker’s Meaning*, Barfield says that “what we have before us, when we look at artistic or poetic activity historically, is an actual transition from one kind of event to another kind. It is a transition from *the being taken hold of by something*, some force or being

[genius], or some element of not-self, without any personal effort on the part of the poet, to an active taking hold of something by the poet—a producing, an animating, or reanimating of something within himself, which only his personal effort can make available to him” (84) In other words, now we are at a point where the artist is consciously co-creating the path of our evolution by his or her choices. In *Unancestral Voice* Barfield says that “Evolution is the process by which a past form, or a past condition, is transformed into a future one...(61) How if the picture which man formed, the memory he embodied, of his own past deeds, were henceforth to *be*, in some way, the transforming agent? ... If you started from the fact that evolution was the transformation of a past into a present, what followed? In what sense was human consciousness already, not merely the *result*, but a transformation of the remote past which interested the biologists?] .. (68)

If the creative nonfictionist not only records the development of her own consciousness by linking, as Sven Birkerts puts it, “the *then*” and “the *now*” of that consciousness, and as Lee Gutkind puts it, the outer (public) world and the inner (private) world, that very linking ignites a *transformation* within not only her own consciousness, but within the consciousness of her reader. This transformation is possible because of *memory*.

To repeat in paraphrase, then. In *Unancestral Voice*, in a succinct and profound discussion of evolution as transformation or initiation, Barfield has the Meggid tell Burgeon that evolution is the process that begins with the death of one version of an individual consciousness which is then reborn into a new exterior form, but with the essence, the “inside,” of the consciousness remaining. Throughout *Speaker’s Meaning*, and also in the 1967 essay “The Imagination and Inspiration,” Barfield goes to some trouble to establish the reality of two worlds—an “outside” world, the material world our culture has chosen to focus on, and an “inside” one, which Barfield contends is the source and nourishment of that outer world. I maintain that in creative nonfiction the “inside” of the writer reaches to the “outside” world consciously. The evolution the Meggid speaks of is precisely the work of creative nonfiction.

We might present an extremely compact history of literature by taking as our starting point *myth*. In *Saving the Appearances* Barfield says that “All the evidence from etymology and elsewhere goes to show that the further back we penetrate into the past of human consciousness, the more mythical in their nature do the representations become” (42). There—in myth—all is participatory. Humans, gods, plants, minerals (see Booth, Hancock, Yates, and Lewis.) All partake of the same *spiritus*, the same consciousness; there is no separation; there is no questioning the influence that the stars, the herbs, sound, number may have on the human psyche. It is taken for granted.

So we first have mythopoetic oral literature, in which not only is the content of the text the participating sameness of human with god and animal and vegetable and mineral, but also the voice is the instrument (so the bard participates in the telling in person) and the sound is the mnemonic device (so the language itself participates in the transmission). We could recruit a number of very fine thinkers, linguists (Bringinghurst) and historians (Yates) and others, to support us in this way of looking at the beginnings of literature.

After we don't know how many thousands of years of image-making and oral myth-telling, the written sign appears. Now in the *Phaedrus* Plato worries about this writing *techne*, this man-made work of writing, since it separates the speaker from his audience and also from his memory. It is Aristotle who incorporates the art of memory into his rhetoric—an art to allow the orator to remember the evidence with which he must persuade his now-more-separate audience to think again as he does.

It is thought that the first use of the written sign was to record lists having to do with time: observations regarding changes in the stars and moon, the tides, the seasons, women's menstrual flow; flocks and crops and rates of exchange. If you think about it you will note that these are about precisely issues of evolution as the Meggid defines it—that is, of external change and internal consistency. From its inception, writing is remembering. It records change in the outward forms of things whose inner form is consistent. That is, writing controls, by naming, evolutionary transformation.

I suppose there are a number of ways to categorize the kinds of writing that grew into being as oral myth-telling gave way to the counting and recounting made possible by writing. To follow the development of literature through the ages is to witness the evolution of variously separated aspects of human consciousness, as Barfield would be one of the first to agree—epic histories, delineating narratives of generational death and rebirth; letters, recapitulating personal cycles of joy and sorrow, loss and gain; journalistic and academic histories, recounting patterns of war and economic vicissitude; polemic, religious, and philosophical tracts; political treatises. We watch our forebears explore degrees of separateness from nature and from each other in all of these. Eventually comes fiction. The first novels are variously identified from as early as the eleventh-century *Tale of Genji* or as early as the Greek epics, but in our tradition we might begin with Chaucer in the thirteenth century or Cervantes in the sixteenth. In any event, fiction was overtly a lie “and therefore hardly justifiable at all” (“Novel”).

Separation is always about unpacking opposites (this is Barfield’s “polarity”); and now fiction and fact begin to be differentiated, separated, non-participant in each other. And yet there are subtle interweavings, specifically narrative. I leave it to someone else to define the role of narrative in the evolution of human consciousness—it seems to me to be a fruitful exploration, the expression of evolution, or change over time, in language—Barfield’s whole project in *History in English Words*.

It is customary to give to the sixteenth-century Frenchman Montaigne (1533-1592) the honor of being the first creative nonfictionist. He seems to have been the first to pour into his “attempts,” his “essays,” the Renaissance consciousness of separation sufficient unto doubt as a *virtue* to be entertained and cultivated instead of a vice to be avoided. Doubt seems to me to be a far jog down the consciousness-evolutionary trail of a sense of separation. We have to have thought of ourselves as separate from the “outside” for some time before we admit to ourselves that we do not know what is real and what is not. Doubt, lies, and fiction-making evolve together, it seems to me. Another fruitful avenue for exploration would be to ask whether this co-evolution is *accounted* for, or *compensated* for, by memory?

Here I believe it is expedient to speak about the intricate relationship between memory, participation, and the kind of methodological (critical, skeptical) thinking that characterizes the nonfictionist. The following is from Frances Yates, the author of *The Art of Memory* (1966). Yates was well thought of by Barfield and the other Inklings in part because as a scholar and historian of thought she deemed it necessary to imagine oneself into the minds, the consciousness, of the writers of times different than our own. She says this (it's a long quote, taken from several places in her *magnum opus*):

In the ages before printing a trained memory was vitally important...the manipulation of images in memory must always to some extent involve the psyche as a whole... (xi) Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas [regarded] the use in memory of the places and images of 'Tullius' as a moral and religious duty[...] when the invention of printing seemed to have made the great Gothic artificial memories of the Middle Ages no longer necessary...there [was a resurgence in] interest in the art of memory in the strange forms in which we find it in the Renaissance systems of Camillo(1480-1544), Bruno (1548-1600), and Fludd? (1574-1637)...(xii) Did [Giordano Bruno] intend that there would be formed in the memory some kind of alchemy of the imagination, a philosopher's stone in the psyche through which every possible arrangement and combination of objects in the lower world—plants, animals, stones—would be perceived and remembered? And that, in the forming and reforming of the inventor's images in accordance with the forming and re-forming of the astral images on the central wheel, the whole history of man would be remembered from above, as it were, all his discoveries, thoughts, philosophies, productions? (224) Such a memory would be the memory of a divine man, of a Magus with divine powers through his imagination harnessed to the workings of the cosmic powers. And such an attempt would rest on the Hermetic assumption that man's *mens* is divine, related in its origin to the star-governors of the world, able both to reflect and to control the universe. (224) Magic assumes laws and forces running through the universe which the operator can use, once he knows the way to capture them....in [Bruno's] memory systems we see the effort to operate the magico-mechanical

laws, not externally, but within, by reproducing in the psyche the magical mechanisms...(224). The search for method [in thinking—for methodical exploration to find patterns] by ways infinitely complex and intricate, occult or rational...is a major characteristic of [the Renaissance]. And the instigator, the originator, the common root of all this effort after method, so fraught with consequences for the future, is memory. Whoever wishes to probe the origins and growth of methodological thinking should study the history of the art of memory, in its medieval transformation, in its occult transformation, memory as Lullism, memory as Ramism. And it may appear when this history is fully written, that the occult transformation of memory was an important stage in the whole process of the search for method. (241)

Please note that Bruno (1548-1600), who was burned at the stake in 1600, is a near-exact contemporary of Michel Montaigne (1533-1592). Although there is no record of their having met, traveled in the same circles, or even having heard of each other, I am convinced that their contemporaneity and co-locality (both having lived in France, Italy, and England during their lifetimes) suggest that they partook of the same consciousness. In other words, the first creative nonfictionist's sensibility was not unrelated to the semi-magical Renaissance desire to re-create, to reify, to re-validate and re-establish the relationship between thought—the inner world—and material reality—the “outside.”

Now, four hundred years later in the first decade of the 21st century, Sven Birkerts suggests that in creative nonfiction two consciousnesses are brought together again—a transformation does happen. In *The Art of Time in Memoir* (25-26), he says “The memoirist writes, above all else, to redeem experience” by offering “the sensuous apprehension of once-vivid [that is, once *lived*] circumstances and states of mind...always linked together in the memoirist's mind...grounded in a metaphysical astonishment at the fact of existence...because the re-creation of the kinds of sensations and accompanying states of consciousness requires it.” Creative nonfiction of this type requires the folding together of two consciousnesses, the consciousness of the *then* and the consciousness of the *now*, to create a new thing.

In the current *Writer's Chronicle*, Lee Gutkind, probably the man most deserving in the 21st-century of the moniker “father of creative nonfiction,” says that “effective creative nonfiction comes from those writers who can achieve a mix of both public and personal...find a way to link...these, to walk in the middle, and make their personal story part of a larger, more universally informative story of the world” (8). In other words, from the beginning creative nonfiction has been what Barfield might have called a “threshold” genre, a genre whose very purpose is to consciously view the “outside” world from a position that acknowledges and includes the “inside.” In this way the creative nonfictionist both participates in and creates for the reader the “felt change of consciousness” Barfield designated as the quality of true poetry or true literature in *Poetic Diction* (52).

At the beginning of this presentation I quoted Barfield’s definition of evolution as the dying of one external form into another with the prolongation of the “inner” essence of that form. For some time now we have been facing “the death of the novel,” and “the death of poetry,” and let’s face it, the death of the book and the death of print media without the prolongation of the meanings that have built up in the print memory of those media over hundreds of years. Meaninglessness—the forgetting of meaning—the utter separation between inner and outer—this is the trendy thing to teach & preach, in academia and in religion. What comes out of these deaths, these dyings-away of meaning, these forgettings?

Well, we do have a gigantic rise in memoir, in creative nonfiction—not merely communally agreed-upon history and not merely personal story. We have seen that in creative nonfiction there is always a transformation of consciousness—neither merely the factual record of an individual or communal consciousness, nor emotionally-charged metaphor for events historical or current. In creative nonfiction the threshold is the locus from which memory influences the present. The creative nonfictionist is not *merely* remembering, but remembering *in order* to acknowledge the threshold, the polarity, the dying away of one kind of consciousness *into* another, not leaving the inner truth of either behind.

Let me give you three out of a possible hundreds of examples:

From E.B. White's "The Ring of Time," "'She is at the enviable moment in life [I thought] when she believes she can go once around the ring, make one complete circuit, and at the end be exactly the same age as at the start.' Everything in her movements, her expression, told you that for her the ring of time was perfectly formed, changeless, predictable, without beginning or end, like the ring in which she was traveling at this moment with the horse that wallowed under her. And then I slipped back into my trance, and time was circular again—time, pausing quietly with the rest of us, so as not to disturb the balance of a performer" (in Lopate 541)

Compare the above to Lopate's commentary in his introduction about the *process* of the transformation being the locus of the narrative arc in creative nonfiction—and isn't that true in any narrative form, anyway? So the thing about creative nonfiction that I want to point out is the personal, individuated or individual aspect of it.

The final paragraph of Annie Dillard's magnificent "Total Eclipse": "One turns at least even from glory itself with a sigh of relief. From the depths of mystery, and even from the heights of splendor, we bounce back and hurry for the latitudes of home." (in D'Agata 109)

Is the transformation in the best creative nonfiction the transformation of the writer or of the reader? England's "Easter Weekend" transformed me, moved me through shock and judgment and disbelief to tears of compassion, exactly as he so moves through the streets of New York City. Now, he calls this "a personal fiction." He never admitted to his family whether the trickery and loss of money ever really happened. He wrote as if it had. This is part of the transformative power of the genre—Burroway says "the touchstone is the absence of the intent to deceive" (247). Not, you know, that the novel is out to deceive—but it is not out to tell the writer's truth. England tells his truth—he is a maker of mistakes, a person who loses treasure, who is gullible and then wants to hide his follies, but he seeks redemption, and in the seeking, finds it.

In the twenty-first century, the creative nonfictionist is a worker in transformation.

Barfield says, “When the two sides of the threshold are neither prudently distinguished in the mind nor truly united in the will, the result is either the confusion of Babel or the *O Altitudo!* of an impotent silence. When the two opposite sides of it are run together in the understanding with the insulating membrane between them rudely torn and shattered, they explode in the resulting short circuit into a chaotic pus of the meaningless or the absurd. It is otherwise when the two are held separate, yet united, in the tension which is polarity. And this is what happens when the idea, which is neither objective nor subjective, is intuited or realized by the philosophic imagination. Then it is that the threshold becomes like Aladdin’s ring, yielding new meanings for old and giving birth to a future that has originated in present creativity instead of being a helpless copy of the outwardly observed forms of the past. (Barfield, “Imagination and Inspiration” in *Rediscovery*, p. 144-5.)

Thus we see that Owen Barfield’s philosophy of the evolution of consciousness suggests that creative nonfiction is an inevitable moment in the history of literature. As writers of the twenty-first century seek to expand consciousness from their position of extreme separateness, there is nothing more likely than that they should hold in tension the “inner” world of the self and the “outer” world of the public sphere; the “inner” world of memory and the “outer” world of the present. I have presented a tiny set of examples, but the burgeoning (!) genre yields multitudes of just such moments of present creativity. I invite you to investigate them with Barfield in mind, hold each in memory, and walk forward into transformation.

Maybe in letters the rebel stories begin. Contesting stories. Adversarial stories. What does C.S. Lewis say about this in *The Discarded Image*? Yates points out that the memory art is there to organize the known. The notion that humans can make a new known does not carry much weight until, as Barfield lays it out, there becomes a new relationship between the human mind and the created thing. : “...what we have before us, when we look at artistic or poetic activity historically, is an actual transition from one kind of event to another kind. It is a transition from *the being taken hold of by something*, some force or being [genius], or some element of not-self, without any personal effort on the part of the poet, to *an active taking hold of something by the poet*—a producing, an animating, or reanimating of something within himself, which only his personal effort can make available to him. (Barfield *Speaker’s* 84)

Maybe

Per Yates’s study of the art of memory, I believe it can be said that from the beginning this art was a stay *against* separation—an awareness of separation and the discipline, from “inside,” of re-finding a place among all that has been cast “outside.” The art of memory, according to Yates, *is* the attempt to recover participation by superimposing images over places in the mind. It’s an “inside” job. But when the story is “outside,” “separate,” made up--that is, fiction—the reader “participates” not through memory but through imagination.

If precisely *that* [were to be seen as] the ‘fertilization’ which of which the Meggid had spoken at that very first encounter? And if anything which was *not* that could be only Luciferic induration, interrupted by Ahrimanic substitutions and replacements? (68)...

and “genius” in *Speaker’s Meaning* (ref 84) to suggest that

In yesterday’s session I quoted from Frances Yates, who shows in the most scholarly way how all the way down to the Renaissance, magic has always been about the manipulation of form by attention to spiritus (see *Bruno 77?*). The mage, the magician, manipulates the spiritus in things.

Yates also shows the role of memory in the development of human consciousness, and we'll come back to that later.

For now what I mean to suggest is that