

**POETIC DICTION: A STUDY IN MEANING  
(WESLEYAN PAPERBACK) BY OWEN  
BARFIELD**

**POETIC  
DICTION**

*A Study in Meaning*

*by*

**OWEN  
BARFIELD**

*Foreword by Howard Nemerov*

*Afterword by the author*

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## Review

"This extraordinary study stands virtually alone in focusing on the mysterious area in poetry between word and meaning. Only the most sensitive and learned guides could lead us through this terra incognita. Barfield is such a guide ... The book has already become a classic."-- G. B. Tennyson

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Poetic Diction, first published in 1928, begins by asking why we call a given grouping of words “poetry” and why these arouse “aesthetic imagination” and produce pleasure in a receptive reader. Returning always to this personal experience of poetry, Owen Barfield at the same time seeks objective standards of criticism and a theory of poetic diction in broader philosophical considerations on the relation of world and thought. His profound musings explore concerns fundamental to the understanding and appreciation of poetry, including the nature of metaphor, poetic effect, the difference between verse and prose, and the essence of meaning.

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Most helpful customer reviews

15 of 15 people found the following review helpful.

Wonderful, and not at all outdated!

By KyrC

One of the reviewers here called Barfield 'a product of his time' and suggested that now he's useful only for practical use, not for contemporary scientists and theorists. I have to disagree, and that's why I'm writing this

review.

1) Barfield's views on co-evolution of language and consciousness may not be widely accepted today, but surely they're not 'outdated'. His is simply an alternative theory of language history, and 'alternative' doesn't mean 'wrong'. It isn't 'naive' either: he only notes some rules at work in different languages (such as the tendency to greater abstraction), and applies them to poetry. Nowhere does he regard the metahistory of language as linear, and nowhere does he speak of 'primitive' times, or of evolution towards greater complexity in language, etc.

2) Barfield's theory of metaphor is very stimulating and not at all discredited today. Maybe the former reviewer read too much Donald Davidson who regards Barfield's theory invalid, but for example Paul Ricoeur often cites Barfield approvingly. So it's all a matter of scientific paradigm one works in.

I could go on forever, but it'd be better if you didn't trust anyone and simply read some Barfield. Don't read him with 'a priori' knowledge of his being outdated - simply read and evaluate his every argument for yourself to see if it's valid. Theories come and go, but thoughtful books remain.

67 of 69 people found the following review helpful.

Perennial and Profound

By Daniel J. Smitherman

By his own admission, Owen Barfield's writings can't be organized into "early" and "late" periods. He claimed that from the very first publications to the last, he was explicitly or implicitly working out his understanding of the evolution of human consciousness. His second published book, *Poetic Diction*, concerns the study of language as the record of the changing human experience of the world.

In *Poetic Diction*, Barfield argued that:

1. One defining effect of poetry is to "arouse aesthetic imagination"
2. A significant result of the interaction with the language of the poem is that the reader's awareness of the world is permanently expanded
3. The expansion of the reader's awareness correlates to the poet's own awareness of the world as articulated in the poem

Barfield supposed, further, that what may be prosaic to the author may still have a "poetic" effect on the reader, i.e., expanding the reader's awareness of the world. One consequence of these facts, Barfield argued, is that by reading, the reader perceives the world as the author perceives - or perceived - it. And if the text being read is a classical Latin text, or a Sanskrit text, for example, then the reader may experience very startling glimpses of the world as a result.

What he went on to argue was that, if we grant that this effect of poetic diction on our awareness of the world is a real effect, then we cannot escape the conclusion that the world as the authors of the Latin and Sanskrit texts was a very different world than our own. Further, he argued that one could trace those differences in the changes that languages have undergone since human languages have been recorded. Finally, by studying these changes, said Barfield, one sees that human consciousness in its first expressions in language was almost wholly perceptual and figurative.

Barfield then argued that the "poetic effect" of such ancient texts was that they make available to the reader an experience of the world that correlates to their concrete and figurative language, and that world is one that couldn't have been produced analytically and self-consciously - for instance, by superstition or some early attempts at scientific theorizing. Just as our language today expresses in myriad ways what we take to be real, so the ancient languages too.

Thus Barfield's conclusions about \*poetry\* are nothing at all like what contemporary academic literary theory concludes, because Barfield's conclusions are equivalent to a theory of knowledge - while contemporary literary theory denies implicitly that a theory of knowledge is even possible.

As literary theory, then, Poetic Diction is only marginally relevant, if even that, because literary theorists no longer concern themselves with knowledge. As a theory of knowledge, and as a study of the significance of language and the evolution of human consciousness, Poetic Diction remains a seminal work, the challenges of which have yet to be realized in but a few works even today.

30 of 32 people found the following review helpful.

Forgotten Classic..70 years ahead of its Time!

By A Customer

This book...along with a very few others (like Marshall McLuhan's UNDERSTANDING MEDIA)...deserves its reputation as an underground classic treasured by all those who take a serious interest in Language Studies. Barfield's insights into the deep structure of metaphors as the real engine of a given language's history are only now being studied in laboratories dedicated to mapping language functions in the human brain. It has been kept in print for 50 years (well beyond the lifespan of similar books on philosophy and linguistics of its time) for one reason...it has been passed on from teachers to students as a ritual gift that has the power to shatter a mind and transform its understanding of its own workings. It will still be read when the next millenium ends

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