

# Owen Barfield Rocks



I confess that I didn't know a whole lot about Owen Barfield (1898-1997) before reading his small, but dense, book *Saving the Appearances: A Study of Idolatry*. The culture critic and psychologist, James Hillman, called Barfield "one of the most neglected important thinkers of the 20th Century". For ten years he was a dedicated poet and then became a lawyer until retirement at the age of sixty. (Guess a guys gotta eat!). All the while he was writing, in one way or another, about the evolution of consciousness. Barfield became an anthroposophist after attending a lecture by Rudolph Steiner in 1924, whose work he studied throughout his life. Barfield was a lifer in the group of men called the *Inklings*, which included C.S. Lewis and J.R.Tolkien, both of whom (but especially Lewis) were profoundly influenced by Barfield. Lewis called Barfield that "best and wisest of my unofficial teachers" and was a lifelong friend.

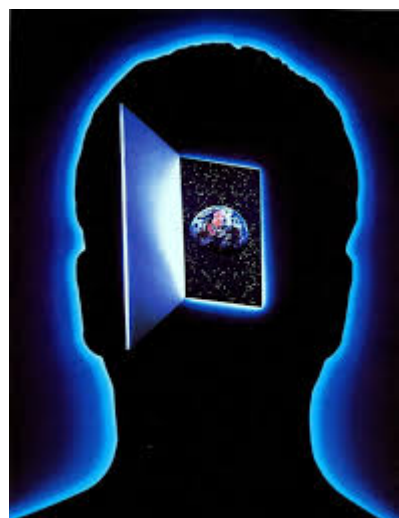
So, I tucked into *Saving Appearances*, and soon realized that holy sh\*\*, this is big. It was a feeling, long before I could understand why or even understand what he was talking about for that matter. I finished the book, and then promptly re-read it. It's not an easy read, or at least it wasn't for me. The language belongs to another era, and it is cut to the bone. I suspect that this post will turn into two or three.

We don't find out what he means by "appearances" or indeed what "saving" them is all about until well into the book. Let's start at the beginning. Barfield takes seriously the study of quantum physics, in particular the notion that there is a substrate of reality or the quantum field, normally unavailable to the senses, but which nevertheless is the

ground of everything we see around us. The phenomenal world participates in and is participated by this substrate– and critically, this realm is influenced by our own consciousness.

Einstein called this domain of quantum physics “spooky” because it doesn’t obey the “laws of nature” as Newton articulated them. It delivers what the observer wants to measure. In physicist, David Bohm’s metaphor, we are involved in a “participatory universe”. Take note of the metaphor “participation”, because it is critical to Barfield’s work.

What drives Barfield a little batty is that although science has discovered this realm empirically, most of science and therefore the modern world carries on as if the universe is non-participatory—as, if that is, there is nothing behind the “appearances” (that is, the physical realm that is available to our senses and our instruments of observation), and as if we don’t know that to some degree reality is a construction of our consciousness. For all practical purposes, we carry on as though the rainbow or the tree we experience is not, in part, a construct that is a product of our own consciousness being brought to bear on these phenomena. But, if quantum physics is true, we see reality not as it is, but as we are. It’s not that the tree and the rainbow aren’t “real”. But they are not simply unchanging objects, that have a radically independent existence from us. (Despite knowing about quantum physics, scientific research carries on as though the phenomena being researched are not influenced by the consciousness of the researcher). Barfield calls physical reality “representations” and our agreements about what constitutes reality are “collective representations”. But note, if they *are* representations, it implies that something else is being represented by the phenomena. He simply calls all that is not readily available to the senses, the “unrepresented”. We will see that he uses



the unrepresented domain of quantum physics as an analogy for the Mystery that religion calls G\_d. The point here is that when there is believed to be nothing behind the “appearances”, when there is no unrepresented reality which the thing participates in (represents), and is participated by, there is no coherent meaning to life. And this, in a nutshell, is the reductionistic malaise of modernity according to Barfield.

The “collective representations” (or reality) of Plato and Aristotle and of the medieval age are not the same as our collective representations today. The collective representations of tribal peoples are different again from the Greeks. They are different because consciousness evolves. And because we are immersed in a participative universe, different worldviews bring forth different realities. (Claire Graves’



research, which issued in *Spiral Dynamics* is based upon this fundamental insight). Consciousness evolves according to what it needs or chooses to pay attention to. Barfield illustrates the point by imaging a person of the medieval ages being transported into our day and age. If this person was invited to look through a “stereoscope” (which turns ordinary photographs into 3D images), he

would likely say, “look how it **stands out!**” The Middle Ages had the technological wherewithal to make a stereoscope, but they simply didn’t need it.

“Before the scientific revolution the world was more like a garment men wore about them than a stage on which they moved. In such a world the convention of perspective was unnecessary...It was as if the observers themselves were in the picture. Compared with us, they felt themselves and the objects around them and the words that expressed these

objects, immersed together in something like a clear lake of,—what shall we say—of **meaning.**”

Which is to say, and here we get to the nub of Barfield’s argument, the evolution consciousness has been *away from* an “original participation” towards what we experience today as “non-participation”. What is being called for is a “final participation”. But we’ll get to this in a subsequent post. Our early human ancestors enjoyed an unconscious original participation. The life force they saw animating a mountain over there was the the same life force animating them. I suspect that this is what sociologist, Jean Gebser, refers to as the “ever-present origin”. Self-conscious awareness or individuation—the coming to awareness of oneself as a distinct individual, that is “standing out” from the rest of the universe, is a mixed blessing. On the one hand it is essential for true freedom, to be an actor in the world and not simply acted upon. On the other hand, this loss of original participation can deteriorate into a serious loss of enchantment—this unitive consciousness that enjoys naive and direct knowledge that the heavens and Earth are alive, and that both, along with humankind, participate in a dance of “inter-being” (Thich Nhat Hanh) and inter-becoming. This disenchantment describes modernist materialism. Not only do we stand out from the rest of the universe, but we also have made an assumption that we alone are living centers of meaning and purpose in an otherwise inert, vast, and meaningless universe. Today there is nothing behind the appearances.

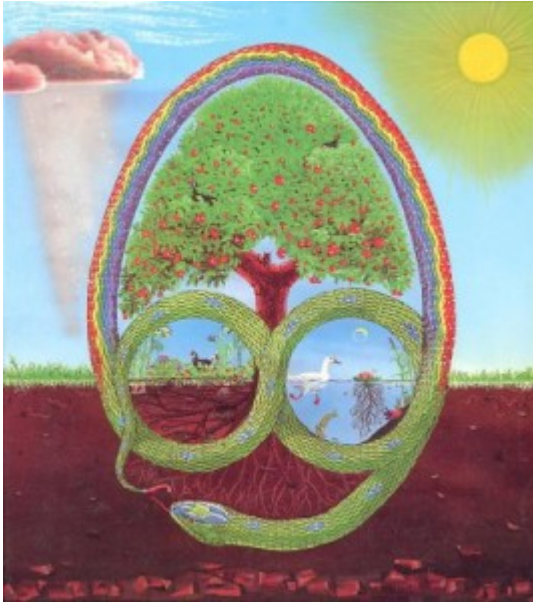


The title of the book, *Saving the Appearances*, was first used in the 6th century by Simplicius in his commentary on Aristotle. It has nothing to do with a society hostess at a

dinner party where something has gone terribly wrong in the kitchen, Barfield points out. It was used in relation to geometrical hypotheses to account for the orbits of the planets, the earth and the sun. It didn't matter so much if they were true, simply that they worked to "save the appearance" of how the planets, Earth, and sun orbited. When Copernicus came up with his heliocentric theory, he wasn't the first. Some guy in the third century offered this as one hypothesis. What was unique with Copernicus is that he presented his hypothesis as though it was *actually* true. And with that begins the tectonic shift of worldview that was the scientific revolution. His life was at risk from the church authorities precisely because he was no longer playing the prevailing game of "saving the appearances".

Ironically, Barfield believes that science is still trying to "save appearances" despite its own iconoclastic commitment to "truth". Darwin's theory of evolution emerged at a time when the prevailing assumption was radical non-participation. The physical realm was constituted by objects—objects that represented nothing else, and could be studied therefore objectively by the scientifically inclined who had zero sense that their own consciousness participated these "objects". (This was before the advent of sub-particle physics). What they studied therefore was the "evolution of idols". Idols are objects that don't represent anything other than themselves, but which are (strangely) imbued with ultimate meaning. Science, says Barfield, is unreasonably invested in "saving the appearance" of a strictly material universe, which is independent of both our consciousness, and neither participates nor is participated by any larger Reality. A scientist like Rupert Sheldrake has tried valiantly to expose the idolatry of scientific materialism with his theory of morphogenesis. (Subtle, energetic forms give rise to matter, not vice versa). The vitriolic reaction of the scientific community to his most recent book, *Science Set Free*, is an example of how science is still trying to "save the

appearances”.



Barfield is unhappy with the way modernist theorists account for what they call “animism”. They assume, he claims, that earlier humans enjoyed the same consciousness as we do, but that they made a categorical error when they “peopled the natural world with spirits”. This presumes, in the first place, that there were no spirits. But more importantly, it overlooks the very likely possibility that early humans

enjoyed that state of consciousness which, as we’ve noted, Barfield calls original participation. In other words, they knew something that our non-participative modernist consciousness has lost: the world is alive and animated with Spirit, and that same Spirit animates both humans and other natural forms. This is an example of modern scientists attempting to “save the appearances”—that is, engage in idolatrous thinking—holding fast to an ideology of materialism. (Barfield is no Luddite, however. He acknowledges the ways that a technological consciousness or what he calls “mechanomorphics” has improved the human condition.)

My next post will pick up on Barfield’s understanding of idols and idolatry, the Jewish aversion to idolatry, and what this all has to do with Christianity. Barfield was himself a Christian and has a fascinating take on incarnation, and what he means by that state of consciousness and way of being that he calls “final participation”. We will see how much depends upon this evolutionary movement from original participation to non-participation of modernity to final participation—and what on Earth Jesus has to do with it.

