

THE WAY OF OWEN BARFIELD

I. Introduction

A. Owen Barfield lived in the 20th Century in England. He was a friend of C. S. Lewis and a member of the Oxford circle of thinkers and writers known as the Inklings ("those who dabbled in ink", as one member, J.R.R. Tolkien, explained). One of the things Barfield "dabbled" in was a different way of looking at the world and at life. He likened this "way" to a magician who passes his hand across an object so that it no longer appears as it did but takes on a new, different appearance. He submits that the human mind – or more precisely human consciousness – can do what the magician's hand does, and that we can be the agents who perform the magical transformation of appearances – into a new way of looking at our world and our lives.

Before we get to just what Barfield's new "way" is – what is transformed into what, and how – let's do an experiment together. Hopefully this experiment will help you to experience what your consciousness can do – magically. Find something to read... something that's fairly simple and easy to understand... it can be something you've never read before. With that before you now, take a sentence from that reading and look at the individual words... one at a time... slowly. Try not to read them but just look at them. Look at each word... again... more slowly. Now pick out one word. Look at it carefully. Look at the individual letters of the word. Now look at the print that makes those letters. Say to yourself, "These are ink lines on paper". Say it again ("These are ink lines on paper"). Now, where did the letters go? They are now nothing but ink lines on paper, are they not? Pull back now and look at the words in the same way – just ink on paper. Look at the sentence. Where did the words go? Where did the sentence go? There's nothing there to read, just ink lines. Now ask yourself, "How do little squiggles of ink become words?" And, more importantly, "How do words come to have meanings?" The answer seems obvious: WE... make the squiggles into words. WE... give words their meanings. Our minds do. Minds, yes, but it really goes deeper than

that. It's something that gives rise to our minds - our consciousness! It's miraculous, though, isn't it? Magic, when you think about it.

(Discussion)

Let's continue on with Barfield himself. He once wrote: "Look at a rainbow. While it lasts, it is or appears to be, a great arc of many colours occupying a position out there in space.... And now, before it fades, recollect all you have ever been told about the rainbow and its causes, and ask yourself the question, Is it really there?"

You know from memory that if.... you walked to the place where the rainbow ends, or seems to end, it would certainly not be 'there'. In a word, reflection will assure you that the rainbow is the outcome of the sun, the raindrops and your own vision.

When I ask of an intangible appearance or representation, Is it really there? I usually mean, Is it there independently of my vision? Would it still be there, for instance, if I shut my eyes? if I moved towards or away from it? If this is what you also mean by 'really there', you will be tempted to add that the raindrops and the sun are really there but the rainbow is not.

Barfield continues: "Now look at a tree. It is very different from a rainbow. If you approach it, it will still be 'there'. Moreover, in this case, you can do more than look at it. You can hear the noise its leaves make in the wind. You can perhaps smell it. You can certainly touch it. Your senses combine to assure you that it is composed of solid matter. Accord to the tree the same treatment you accorded to the rainbow. Recollect all you have been told about matter and its ultimate structure and ask yourself if the tree is 'really there'.

I am far from affirming dogmatically (Barfield says) that the atoms, electrons, nuclei, etc., of which wood, and all matter, is said to be composed, are particular and identifiable objects like drops of rain. But if the 'particles' (as I will here call them for convenience) are there, and are all that is there, then, since the 'particles' are no more like the thing I call a tree than the raindrops are like the thing I

call a rainbow, it follows I think that, just as the rainbow is the outcome of the raindrops and my vision, so a tree is the outcome of the 'particles' and my vision and my other sense perceptions. Whatever the particles themselves may be thought to be, the tree as such is a representation."

Barfield presents these ideas in a book he wrote called *Saving the Appearances: A Study in Idolatry*. The "appearances" in the title are the representations he talks about, i.e., the phenomenal world we experience every day. The "idolatry" is the false belief that those appearances exist independently of our perceptions of them.

(Discussion)

Let me conclude this Introduction with this suggestion: Whether or not at this point you believe what Barfield sets forth – and I can easily understand why it may be extremely difficult for you to believe it – I am going to ask you to try and hold it as a working hypothesis, a template if you will, as we go through the rest of this course. Test the hypothesis as we go but also keep trying to at least understand what Barfield is saying. As an aid, remember those squiggles of ink (if remembering the rainbow and tree doesn't help).

The main thing to remember now is that Barfield's ideas are not ideas "about" anything. He is not asking us to think "about" a different perspective. He is asking us to change our "way" of thinking – and consequently our way of knowing. He submits that consciousness is the agent of that change. It is the magical hand that passes across and transforms.

One more thing about consciousness: We tend to think of consciousness as a part of our inner life, maybe our inner mental life, probably located somewhere inside our heads. Barfield is asking us not to locate it anywhere. He is simply giving a name ('consciousness') to whatever it is that configures 'particles' into 'things'... that turns the pre-phenomenal into the phenomenal world, the everyday world we know and live in. In short, "Consciousness," Barfield says, "is not just something stuck on to the rest of the world. It is the inside of the whole world."