

A Fable
by
Owen Barfield

5 February 1980

A Fable
by A. Owen Barfield

Edited by J. H. Taylor & L. A. Taylor

Transcribed from materials at the Bodleian Library

Barfield Press
Oxford, England

Copyright © 2023 Owen Barfield Literary Estate
All rights reserved.

Note

This short, whimsical allegory is written out in Owen Barfield's hand on ruled paper and dated the 5th of February 1980 (5.2.80) in the same ink as the composition—about three months into Barfield's 81st year. The playfulness of the text is similar to works such as *The Unicorn* and the light-hearted shorter poems. Yet under the jesting tone the allegorical suggestion is easily found. The 'fabulous' treasure belongs to both the human and the divine as a link of eternal love and mercy. For the three-fold philosopher, poet, and faun does not answer with the dismissive voice of a disappointed mentor—and the true reply is best only hinted at and felt in each heart.

A Fable

Once upon a time there was a lean young pig who, after the manner of pigs, liked to root around turning things over and exploring: such is the nature of a curious and not unintelligent beast. In fact, this pig was not badly endowed as pigs go, having a good origin, a moderately pink and white complexion, and a not too highly pitched squeal.

One day this lean young pig encountered a wise person –whether he was in fact a philosopher, or a poet, or perhaps even a faun is not clear: There was something in his appearance to indicate perhaps he might have been all these together –or perhaps he just moved from one state into the other, having a threefold being!

Anyhow he and the pig struck up an acquaintance which started by together generally throwing things over, but whether they were looking for the same things it is hard to say. You see, it was all a long time ago and details become blurred. The pig actually rather thrived on this relationship. But then, believe it or not, the philosopher –or was it the faun?— began to dote on this little creature and laid before her (for it was a her) all manner of gifts belonging to the poet. And the pig examined them and admired them but had little idea –in spite of a slight evolutionary ‘upgrading’ that may even then have been taking place— of their value.

That is the first part of the story.

Now a gap appears in this old tale, indicating a separation, when the pig went off on some kind of trek, and the wise man, bereft of his erstwhile companion, probably mourned a bit, but then, being sensible and philosophical, carried on doing whatever he’d been doing before – Perhaps wondering what kind of folly had overtaken him!

The faun was probably the most upset.

As for the gifts, the pig had gathered them up and put them in a bag and buried them. And the years rolled by.

Now we've all heard of evolution. 'Devolution' is sometimes spoken of also – after all George Orwell discovered, long before 1984, that people turn into pigs more easily than is generally supposed, and that there is not such a huge discrepancy after all – unless, . . . unless some element of soul and striving is residual! Maybe that explains what follows.

After many years this pig, no longer such a suckling, was generally showing signs of transformation – evolution; still turning things over and having vague dreams that the normal things that interest pigs were not what she was looking for. And one day she turned up something that was familiar – the bag!

And inside were –yes, you will have guessed it! Pearls! And the pig, perhaps no longer really answering to that name, recognized them for what they were. And after spending a fair amount of time contemplating this treasure she set off up the hillside to see if the wise man was to be found, realizing in a gradually intensifying way how much she had missed the company of that three-in-one person.

Now there is more than one way of ending this tale!

The Philosopher was still alive – though he was definitely not the one reputed to live in a tub! – he was still alive and he recognized his past companion.

She said, “The Pearls are really yours – when you gave them to me I did not recognize their value.”

He said, “A gift once given is given, besides these being by their nature ‘fabulous’ pearls, it is possible for them to belong to us both.”

And the question is whether he also said, “My dear little pig companion of the past, that folly that entered this three-in-one breast so many years ago – is so far past as to be of no interest to me now. Truly if you had not gone off on that trek I might have been able to make something of you, what you may have turned into since is your affair.”

Or did he say something else?

And when he'd said it, did she tell him that she loved him – all three of him?