

Owen Barfield (1898-1997)

Like Jaynes, Barfield thinks that language innovation transforms the minds that use it. In particular, he thinks that language has caused an unfortunate change in the way our minds relate to reality. As Grandma used to say, “You have made your bed and now you must lay in it.” As a country boy, I related to reality as a direct participant. I was in and part of the whole thing.

To Barfield there is the 'real' and there are our representations of it—copies and renditions in language words and systems (mathematics and logic). To these representations I suggest we add art, music and other constructs that stand for and/or symbolize objects that physically exist. Although my experience of the critter is different than yours, my word for a 'duck' is the same as your word for it. Your painting of the beast symbolizes the essential duck, too. Barfield maintains that symbols for the contents of reality have diluted or replaced our actual being a part of, participating in reality. He co-opts the religious-Biblical term 'idolatry' to label this disengagement.

Originally, we participated. Now we are disengaged. Barfield thinks that humanity will eventually find a new way to relate to and participate in the big picture once again—not as we originally did but in some new way. Like like to quote a saying by one of my favourite Canadian humorists, “We are all in this together.”

Whatever this is, we are all in it together. As a hillbilly that was suddenly transported or immigrated into or city life, I share this feeling of unwanted detachment. Prior to my translation into this artificial city reality, I participated in rural reality all the time as any country boy could. There were plenty of enticing representations around even in the hills. If you knew what to look for, you could spot them easily. Groups of hillbillies gravitated to groups that identified themselves by special collections of words and associated activities. Due to the character of my parents and other family mentors I was insulated from these groupings until I entered primary school. I was inoculated with familial immunities.

For a time city life overwhelmed my immune system until I built up additional representational antibodies. University life added even more language sophistication and exposed me to yet more seductive symbols. But I survived. Thanks to my early family influences, I remain relatively unaffected by these various representations.

[Net Link - Wikipedia](#)

Source: Barfield, Owen (1988). *Saving the Appearances*. Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, Connecticut.