

From P. Willis, R. Smith & E. Collins *Being, Seeking, Telling: Expressive Approaches to Qualitative Adult Education Research*. Post Pressed Publications. 2000

Some Gebserian and Keganesque Reflections on Academic Writing

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The following reflections are stimulated by a question which forces itself on me whenever I am engaged in either supervising or examining a thesis: *What constitutes good writing in a postmodern academic culture?* I'm afraid that my answer to the question is made on a case by case basis, and in more intuitive than reasoned. *This piece of writing is brilliant. That piece of writing is crap.* Unless we give rather more credibility to intuitive decisions than is generally the case in academia, this sort of answer is not going to satisfy anybody, including me.

In trying to get a handle on the question and on the discriminations it invites, I am turning here to the thought of Jean Gebser (1905 - 1973). Gebser's work as a cultural philosopher is not well known in the English speaking academic world. Indeed, his key work, the massive *The Ever Present Origin*, did not appear in English till 1985, and much of his writing remains untranslated. Nevertheless, his extensive documentation and complex thinking provides a framework for theorising the emergence of a new kind of consciousness, some of whose characteristics we currently signify as "postmodern".

In the following reflections I have also leaned on the work of Robert Kegan, a neo-Piagetian, whose understanding of the demands made on our consciousness by the world as it presently appears is hinted at in the title of his recent book: *In Over Our Heads*.

Structures of Consciousness

Jean Gebser documented the evolution of consciousness through four "mutations". He described a primitive "archaic" structure of consciousness, its mutation into a "magic" structure c. 750,000 BC, then to a "mythical" structure c. 20,000 BC and a "mental" structure c. 1000 BC. He argued that there was abundant evidence of the emergence of a new structure in the 20th century, a structure which he labelled "integral".

Gebser was adamant that his theory of the evolution of consciousness was not premised on an assumption of development or progress. He did not wish to imply that the structures are historical developments leading to integral consciousness as the highest human achievement. The earlier, simpler structures are not inferior to the later, more complex ones. Reality is unfolding process, and archaic, magic, mythical, mental and integral consciousness are fundamentally different but equally valid ways of experiencing it. All the structures have both efficient and deficient forms. From

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Gebser's perspective, the rational consciousness which has dominated European culture for the past four hundred years is not a higher form of consciousness which has emerged from the mental structure through an inevitable evolutionary progression, but is something of an evolutionary dead end..

Gebser distinguishes the structures by a number of discrete criteria. Archaic consciousness is zero-dimensional, magic one-dimensional, mythical two-dimensional, mental three-dimensional, integral four-dimensional. Archaic consciousness is undifferentiated, magic pre-perspectival, mythical unperspectival, mental perspectival, integral aperspectival. Experience of space and time ranges from the pre-spatial, pre-temporal experience of archaic humans to the abstract temporal and spatial experience of the mental structure and the space-free and time-free experience of the integral. Likewise, he distinguishes the pre-rational, concrete, pre-causal thought of magic consciousness from the irrational, imaginal, polar thought of mythical consciousness, the rational, dualistic, causal thought of mental consciousness and the arational, acausal thought of the integral structure. Our archaic consciousness is undifferentiated; our magic consciousness identifies with nature; mythical consciousness identifies with the clan or tribe; mental consciousness sees the emergence of ego; integral consciousness is ego-free.

While he sets the structures out in evolutionary sequence (because rational consciousness experiences time as linear and quantified) Gebser sees them as intertwined and ever present; it is the dynamic interaction between them which constitutes culture. We may be inclined to equate consciousness with the kind of thinking which we experience through the rational structure, yet we constantly shift between this structure and the less complex structures on which it is built. Freud and Jung pointed out to us that even when we are acting "rationally", our magical and mythical consciousness is hard at work. The complexity of human behaviour comes out of the interplay of these several "layers" or "levels" of consciousness in whatever we do. From the point of view of rational-scientific culture, magical and mythical thinking are primitive and inferior forms of thinking which have limited value in the contemporary world. However, we can argue that it is our capacity for mythical, and even magical, thinking that enables us to find meaning in our lives and gives us a grounding in the concrete world, both human and nonhuman.

For some four hundred years European high culture has been content to define humanity within the *rational* (deficient *mental*) structure. Through this structure we perceive ourselves essentially as individuals. We have a sense of history as a sequence of events starting at a beginning and moving towards an end. We quantify both space and time. We find ourselves standing apart from an objectified world and acting upon it. We dichotomize our experience of the world in all sorts of ways: subject/object self/other, true/false, matter/spirit, mind/body, good/bad, male/female, progression/regression. Our way of perceiving the world is shaped by an awareness of three-dimensional space, through the metaphors of hierarchy, perspective, quantity, scale and progress. Whereas

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the mental consciousness of classical Athens or renaissance Florence combined conceptual thinking with a rich imaginative life, the rational-scientific age has seen the reduction of the universe from living organism to a collection of objects, the body from the temple of the soul to a piece of matter. It has seen the privileging of the intellect over other human capacities, the identification of intellect and spirit with the male and the relegation of the devalued physical-emotional (magical) and imaginative-intuitive (mythical) to the female. And it is this dualistic and hierarchical thinking which has made possible both the extraordinary achievements of science and technology and the imminent catastrophe towards which science and technology have led us. Gebser saw the deficiency of the rational consciousness of the past four centuries in our devaluation and suppression of the earlier structures. The re-valuing and re-owning of our archaic, magic and mythical experience is a necessary step towards their integration in the emerging integral structure. He argued that in the collapse of rationality in the twentieth century - and we may see evidence for this both in current eruptions of magic-mythical consciousness and in the perspectives of the deconstructive postmodernists - there are signs of the emergence of a new way of "prehending" the world.

Mental-rational consciousness is anthropocentric and egocentric. Man¹ has stepped out of his entanglement in the nonhuman world and learned to relate to it as an object *out there* to be explored and controlled. He escaped from engulfment by the taken-for-grantedness of tribe and myth and gloried in his consequent isolation. His sense of self separated subject-mind from object-body. He assumed that his capacity to observe, measure and categorize would in due course give him understanding and control of it. Academic writing, which in the European intellectual tradition finds its origins in the efficient mental culture of Democritus, Plato and Thucydides, is now largely a manifestation of the deficient rational culture. The question for me is not whether academic writing can represent the world as experienced somatically (archaic structure), emotionally (magic structure) and imaginally (mythical structure), as well as conceptually. It seems to me that the re-owning of magic and myth (efficient and deficient) in the broader culture is already being reflected in academic writing, as is the attempt to transcend the subject/object dichotomy. I wish rather to pursue the notion of how an integral consciousness as Gebser understands - that is as something more than an aggregation of the less complex structures- might be expressed in academic writing.

Gebser observed that not only were we witnessing the dissolution of the mental/rational structure of consciousness, and not only were the magical and mythical modes of perceiving the world being once again being accepted as legitimate by the intellectual culture of the mid twentieth century, but that the magical and mythical structures of consciousness were being integrated with mental/rational consciousness to produce a totally new way of perceiving and thinking. It is central to Gebser's understanding that the integral structure of consciousness, which is latent in all of us, is not merely the simultaneous and collaborative functioning of the four previous structures. It is an entirely new structure which enables us to apprehend not just the parts but the whole, a whole which is *spiritual*.

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The grand and painful path of consciousness emergence, or, more appropriately, the unfolding and intensification of consciousness, manifests itself as an increasingly intense luminescence of the spiritual in man.²

Towards Integrality

Our latent capacity to perceive the aperspectival³, acategorical *whole* depends on the integration of archaic presentiment, magic attunement, mythical image, and mental-rational concept in an act of prehension which is not just a synthesis (which would be an exercise of mental-rational consciousness) but a *synairesis*.⁴

Three elements stand out in Gebser's analysis of the integral structure.

The first is time-freedom. Archaic and magical humanity seem to have no sense of time at all. For mythical humanity, time is rhythmical, constantly returning to its beginning. For mental-rational humanity, time is continuous, sequential, and mechanically quantifiable. Integral consciousness is time-free. The re-integration of pre-rational, magic, timelessness and irrational, mythical, temporicity with mental, measured time "makes possible the leap into arational time-freedom."⁵ "Time-freedom" is not timelessness. What Gebser observed was a new way of experiencing time, not as quantity but as intensity and quality.

The integral structure of consciousness also has a new sense of space. Archaic and magical humanity lack all spatial consciousness, because it lacks a defined sense of a self as observer. Mythical humanity has emerged from this enmeshment in nature, aware of an external world, but self-consciousness is still too weak to experience objective space. It is only through our mental consciousness that human beings are able to locate events in objective space. Central to this experience is perspective (which demands a point from which the world is viewed and an individual to view it) and measurement (by which we attempt to control it). In the emergent, four-dimensional, integral consciousness, it becomes possible to view the world "aperspectivally", without locating the viewer in a particular position in space. Through the integral structure we are no longer constrained to see only the parts, but have access to the whole.

A third element in Gebser's analysis is the ego. Archaic and magical consciousness are ego-less. Mythical consciousness holds only a vague sense of self as distinct from the clan. Mental-rational consciousness is dominated by ego. Integral consciousness is, in Gebser's language, "ego-free".

Gebser suggests, logically enough, that our rational conscious has no more capacity to understand how integral consciousness experiences reality than mythical consciousness has the capacity to imagine how rational consciousness conceptualises it. In his own writing he frustrates our need to follow a sequential argument, giving us in *The Ever Present Origin* an accumulation of detailed evidence and an accumulation of detailed argument, where the significance of the details only becomes apparent in our grasp of the whole. To put it slightly differently, Gebser appears to be writing in full awareness of

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the hermeneutic cycle in which the whole derives its meaning from the sum of its parts yet each part derives its meaning from its context in the whole.

We are increasingly presented with academic writing, including academic writing which claims to belong to the genre “thesis”, which attempts to transcend the constraints of linear time, linear space and linear logic. We may find these constraints satisfactorily transcended in the best of postmodern fiction, yet may resist the notion that it is appropriate even to attempt a similar move in academic writing. I suggest that such a move is entirely appropriate. Conventional academic writing remains grounded in the deficient rational consciousness of the modern era. Postmodern consciousness - whatever we want to call it - demands something different, because the world is no longer experienced as rational consciousness has constructed it. Anthropocentrism, egocentrism, hierarchy, measurability and continuity are no longer perceived as essential components of the universe.

Orders of Thinking

Gebser’s theory is a theory of culture, not a theory of individual psychology. We can, however, find a parallel in developmental psychology. Piaget began the work of mapping cognitive development in the individual. Others have since attempted to carry this mapping through to adulthood and beyond. Most notably, Robert Kegan’s recent *In Over Our Heads* not only traces the stages of cognitive development to adult maturity, but makes a link between individual cognitive development and cultural evolution. If we stand Kegan’s five orders of thinking beside Gebser’s five structures of consciousness we find that each illuminates the other in a way which may prove very productive for our reflections on academic writing in a postmodern society.

In Kegan’s model cognitive development proceeds through a series of increasingly subtle subject-object differentiations. In infancy (first order thinking), subject and object are not differentiated. In early childhood (second order thinking) the immediate perception moves from being the subject of experiencing to the object of experiencing. The child identifies with her experience. In late childhood/early adolescence (third order thinking) cross-categorical meaning-making becomes the subject which acts on the objects of experiencing. The adolescent identifies with the contents of his mind. The older adolescent (fourth order thinking) can disidentify from her thoughts (My thoughts are something I have, not something I am) and becomes capable of reflecting critically on the contents of her mind, which now become the object of her experiencing. The mature adult (fifth order thinking) can make a further subject-object differentiation, disidentifying from the system of thinking which frames fourth order consciousness and relativising its truths.

Acknowledging that Kegan’s model deals only with cognitive development we can see Gebser’s archaic and magic structures in first and second order thinking. Third order thinking is grounded in the mythical structure. A great deal of what we habitually refer to as Neville: Gebserian and Keganesque Reflections.

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to as “thinking” is a rationalisation of myth. Our beliefs and reflections are collective, not individual, enmeshed as they are in the taken-for-grantedness of our tribal narratives. We can reason abstractly within a cohesive set of assumptions but fail to disidentify from our reasoning, which is framed entirely by a consensus view of reality which is identified with “truth” within our culture or sub-culture. Fourth order thinking is grounded in the mental structure. We engage in it when we leave the security of consensus reality and critically reflect as individuals on the validity of our ideas. We may think of fifth order thinking as a manifestation of the integral structure. In Kegan’s description we find reiteration of essential characteristics of an aperspectival, ego-free, integral consciousness:

“Refusing to see oneself or the other as a single system or form, regarding the premise of completeness as a tempting pretense, constructing the process of interacting as prior to the existence of the form or system, facing protracted conflict as a likely sign of one’s own assumptions of wholeness, distinctness, completeness, or priority - all of these ways of constructing reality require that the epistemological construction of system, form or theory be relativised, moved from subject in one’s knowing to object in one’s knowing.”⁶

While Kegan’s model is developmental, not cultural and evolutionary, he suggests that the phenomenon he is writing about is not a purely individual one. He surmises, for instance, that the fourth order thinking demanded by the modern life is more common now than it was some generations ago. He suggests further that survival in a postmodern world demands fifth order consciousness, but that most of us show little facility for it.

Writing the Diaphainon⁷

We do find some evidence of fifth order thinking in current academic writing. But we also find evidence of third and fourth order thinking: third order where the writer is enmeshed, uncritically and perhaps unconsciously, in one grand narrative or another; fourth order where the writer is intent on applying her critical skills to uncovering the truth without any sense that the truth uncovered will be an artifact of the perspective which enables its uncovering. Where we do find evidence of fifth order thinking, it may well be, in Gebser’s terms, “deficient”.⁸ Radically deconstructive writing would seem to fit Gebser’s notion of a deficient integral consciousness in that, while it is aperspectival, arational and ego-free it leads us not to the transparency of the whole but to obscurantism and nihilism.

We might expect academic writing emanating from an integral consciousness to be aperspectival, arational and ego free. We would also expect it to incorporate the archaic instinct, magic emotion, mythical imagination and mental abstraction in which it is grounded and which it acknowledges as valid ways of experiencing and representing the world. The integral structure does not displace the other modes of experiencing.

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[A] truly integral perception cannot dispense with the foundation of the mental structure any more than the mental structure can dispense with the mythical, and the mythical with the magic, that is, if we are to be “whole” or integral human beings. We must, in other words, achieve the integral structure without forfeiting the efficient forms of the earlier structures.⁹

Accordingly we might expect to find the empathic, pre-causal, analogic forms of thought characteristic of the magic structure alongside the contemplative, irrational polar thought of the mythical structure and the reflective, categorising, rational, directed thought of the mental structure. We might expect awareness and acknowledgment of the narrative within which the study is imagined and the perspective from which it is viewed. What we get, more often than not, is either pure narrative presented as “the way things are”, the dogmatic and uncritical rationalisation of a “postmodern” position based on the taken-for-granted assumptions of a particular narrative, or the directionless meanderings of a narrator who is unable to take a perspective, let alone transcend it.

Rationality, in the context of the integral is not fragmenting or reductive but contributes to our making sense of the space-free, time-free whole. The embeddedness in shared narrative which characterises mythical consciousness still provides us with the meanings which give importance and significance to our lives, but they are relativised within the integral structure. Gebser is adamant that the emerging structure does not represent a *higher* consciousness but rather an *intensification* of consciousness. And that it is not a mere aggregation of the earlier structures.

Integral consciousness, according to Gebser’s observations and speculations, experiences “the transparency of the whole”. Writing which reflects this experience will be aperspectival, time-free, ego-free, non-dualistic and arational.

The capacity and inclination for independent reflection and directed thought has been cherished by the science-dominated culture of the modern European era. However, this capacity is acknowledged only in the context of a single reality which is ultimately discoverable by thinking persons. The rational structure of consciousness is, in Gebser’s language, “perspectival”; the egosubject must take a vantage point from which to see the universe and accordingly sees it from one direction only. It has no possibility of observing the whole. However, integral consciousness is aperspectival. It is space-free. It does not locate itself (physically or metaphorically) on a particular spot and see the world from there. It sees the world from no spot in particular and from all possible spots at once. This may be beyond most of us most of the time, and it is certainly a challenge for the writer. However, there are signs of the emergence of at least a multi-perspectival vision., which abandons the perspectival pursuit of a single “truth” for the acknowledgement of multiple incomplete truths. In Gebser’s notion of integrality and Kegan’s notion of fifth order consciousness, reality is manifested not only in the aggregation of complimentary and incomplete “truths”, but also in the contradictions and tensions between them. Where mental/rational consciousness fragments reality, the efficient integral consciousness “prehends the whole”.

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An integral consciousness is time-free. Academic writing grounded in such a consciousness will not be locked into a particular spot in history, a particular mark on a time line. In an integral approach to research the past and the future are simultaneously experienced with the present. Time can now be stretched or compressed, and it has become possible to talk of the quality and intensity of time as well as its extent. We are not locked into our traditional ways of categorizing people and events, which are a product of both mythical consciousness (through shared narratives) and rational consciousness (through history). Among the products of myth and history in the academy are essentialist views of race, gender, class and cultural difference, including an essentialist view of the university. Where the rational university privileges conformity, stability and the pursuit of an attainable and universal “truth”, the integral university values the multiplicity, creativity and spontaneity which come with time-freedom.¹⁰ It is not just a matter of tolerating differences from a position of superiority. Integrality demands that difference itself be valued. Difference is an essential component of *the whole*.

The dominance of ego as the controlling centre of the personality belongs specifically to the mental-rational structure. As the twentieth century turns over we no longer sense ourselves to be constrained by the limitations of the heroic ego. Not only do we seem to be abandoning the notion that the ego is the center of the personality, but it is becoming increasingly difficult to place human beings at the centre of the universe, or even to maintain that they are at the centre of the planet. Egocentrism and anthropocentrism are being simultaneously attacked by selfish genes and Gaia consciousness. It is becoming incumbent on us to relativize ourselves, to imagine ourselves not only as choosing and acting individuals in our own right but also both as an environment for smaller organisms and as cells of the larger organism. The boundaries of our selves are not as impermeable as they used to be, and this is increasingly reflected in our writing.

One of the key features of integral consciousness as Gebser imagines it is transcendence of the dualism which is at the core of rational thinking. Twentieth century science has led inexorably to the conclusion that the rules of rational, dualistic thinking which have been so useful for us in the past may not be universally applicable. Academic writing conventionally maintains its rigour by paying close attention to duality. Truth and falsehood are distinguished by application of a range of dualistic discriminations: fact/fiction, subject/object, present/absent, content/process, one/many. This is how we define rational thinking. Gebser warns us against assuming that the only alternative to rational thinking is irrationality. Integral consciousness is not irrational but arational.¹¹ In the “emergent paradigm” we find increasing willingness to acknowledge paradox, complementarity and ambivalence.

Gebser developed his notions of what integral consciousness might be like without being witness to the developments in communications and information technology which are
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peculiar to the present time. The shift in our modes of thought which Gebser was documenting in the forties has been reinforced by an information and communication technology which operates outside our conventional notions of space and time. It seems to be becoming possible through information technology to transcend not only time and space but even the limitations of dualistic thought. The increasing use of hypertext in academic writing appears inevitable. The existence of such a technology may move us closer to an arational representation of “the transparency of the whole” or it may take us further into a deconstructive fragmentation of information. The use of such technology changes the way we think. With or without it we have to learn to think differently from the way we have thought for the last four hundred years, a way of thinking which has led us to the current planetary emergency.

Attempts to engage in post-conventional thinking in academic writing can lead us into the eclectic excesses of interdisciplinary studies, characterised by Camille Paglia (with some justification) as “a wasteland where wolves roam”. It can lead to tragic cases of “paradigm slippage” or bottomless reflections of reflexivity. Or we can write out of the irrationality and polarity of mythical consciousness in the illusion that we are doing something new. Eventually we may get the hang of it and write transparently of *what is*.

Gebser’s truths, Kegan’s truths and our truths are all incomplete. And this paper is unfinished.

¹ The use of the masculine is appropriate here, given the self-consciously masculinist thrust of mental-rational consciousness historically. The gradual breakdown of masculinist assumptions during the twentieth century may be symptomatic of the breakdown of the mental-rational structure.

² Gebser, p.542. I have followed Feuerstein’s translation here. Gebser carefully distinguishes between *the spir, itual* and *spirit*. The latter is dualistically opposed to matter in the mental-rational consciousness. The spiritual, for Gebser, signifies the whole, which is the diaphanon “prior” to space and time. See Feuerstein, p. 161.

³ Gebser distinguishes the perspectivity which has characterised the consciousness of the scientific age from the aperspectivity of integral consciousness.

“Our concern is with integrality and ultimately with the whole; the word ‘aperspectival’ conveys our attempt to deal with wholeness. It is a definition which differentiates a perception of reality that is neither perspectively restricted to only one sector not merely unperspectively evocative of a vague sense of reality.” Gebser, *ibid* p. 3.

⁴ Gebser uses this word to denote an integration achieved through integral-arational consciousness, which parallels the synthesis achieved through mental-rational consciousness or mythical symbolisation.

⁵ *Ibid* p. 289.

⁶ Kegan, 1995, p.321.

⁷ Gebser translates *diaphanon* as “that which shines through” or “that which is transparent”.

⁸ These are clearly value-laden terms, and there is not space here to elaborate how Gebser uses them in relation to the various structures of consciousness. Briefly, he distinguishes efficient (magic)

spell-casting from deficient witchcraft; efficient (mythical) envisioned myth from deficient spoken myth; efficient (mental) discursive, directive thought from deficient rigidity and hair-splitting; and efficient (integral) open, spiritual “verition” from deficient “atomising dissolution”.

⁹ *Ibid* p. 299

¹⁰ For a discussion of the implications of time freedom for our experience of difference see John W. Murphy, J.W. and Jung Min Choi. “Jean Gebser, the commonweal and the politics of difference” in Kramer, p.201 - 216.

¹¹ Irrationality is a characteristic of the mythical structure, arationality of the integral.

“It is of fundamental importance that we clearly distinguish between ‘irrational’ and ‘arational’, for this distinction lies at the very heart of our deliberations. ...There is a fundamental distinction between the attempt to go beyond the merely measurable, knowing and respecting it while striving to be free from it, and rejecting and disregarding the measurable by regressing to the immoderate and unfathomable chaos of the ambivalent and even fragmented polyvalence of psychic and natural interrelation.”
Gebser, *ibid* p. 147.

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