

**Art and the Evolution of Consciousness:  
A Look at the Work of Owen Barfield,  
Jean Gebser, and Gottfried Richter**

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**ABSTRACT**

This essay examines the concept of consciousness in three major twentieth century writers, Owen Barfield (1977, 1988), Jean Gebser (1984), and Gottfried Richter (1982). Fundamental to all three of these is the idea that human consciousness, and especially perception, evolves with the passage of historical time, and that this evolution is reflected in the production of art. In each thinker, consciousness of the self is seen primarily as a function of orientation in space and time. The evolution of this orientation is concretely expressed in many areas of cultural development, especially the arts (Gebser, 1985).

**Owen Barfield's Evolution of Consciousness**

Owen Barfield described his idea of consciousness in his book *Saving the Appearances: A Lesson in Idolatry* (1988). In his book Barfield coined many new terms, the most relevant being *figuration*, *idolatry*, and *participation*.

**Figuration**

Barfield (1988) used the term figuration to describe how we perceive the world. Specifically, it refers to the way we relate perceptions to recognizable objects. For example, when we see an object in a dimly lit room, we relate that perception to a likely object. We may ask ourselves, "Is this my boot or my cat?" before recognizing it as the former. Barfield is concerned to show that our concepts are always a determining factor in our apprehension of reality. He argues that there are no "pure sense data," that everything is partially determined by our prior conceptual knowledge. The meeting of percept and concept is what Barfield calls a "representation." Our perception of reality is partially determined by our active participation in it; we are involved in the "shaping" of reality whether we are conscious of it or not. In fact, the process of figuration happens so quickly that we are completely unaware of it having happened.

One of Barfield's main concerns is to show that human consciousness cannot be separated from the phenomena we perceive. We cannot meaningfully speak of things existing independently of human awareness. In *The Rediscovery of Meaning* (1977), Barfield stated that "the physicist, neurologist, the cerebral anatomist would all agree that the objects we perceive are at least mainly effects or constructs of a subject [person] or community of subjects [people]"(p161).

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### **Original Participation**

According to Barfield (1988), “participation is the extra sensory relation between man and the phenomena” (p.40). The essence of original participation is that there exists in nature, and all phenomena, an animating force behind everything, that is at the same time the animating and perceiving force of the human being. Archaic man did not see the material world as merely substance, but as of the same nature as himself, deriving from the same supersensible source. The material world was undistinguishable from the immaterial world within, and both were involuntarily perceived and related to through more than just the senses (Barfield, 1988).

Although Barfield referred to original participation as a primitive, or pre-contemporary, there still exist pockets of humanity that live in this participatory consciousness, in particular in indigenous or tribal populations. However, with the evolution of consciousness original participation has largely been eliminated; the word original is used to make clear that there can be no return to this type of consciousness (Barfield, 1988).

### **Idolatry**

Barfield (1988) defined an idol as a representation or image that is not experienced as such. This means that when we lose any sense of participation, we come to see objects as existing independently of our conscious activity. With the concept of figuration Barfield (1988) demonstrated that our apprehension of the world does not depend solely on the senses, but is largely dependent on our conceptualizing. In this sense our perception of the world is based on our internal experience of an external image, and what we perceive as the “objective world” is not independent of our awareness. When we come to view objects as existing outside of consciousness we are engaged in what Barfield (1988) called idolatry.

Our ability to separate ourselves from phenomena and perceive it independently has afforded great advances in technology and science. Likewise, our capacity to objectify ourselves has led to breakthroughs in medicine and psychology. However, with these advances has come the belief that our objectifications exist without the active participation of human consciousness. The world and our thinking have become divorced from each other and devoid of inner meaning. Our commitment to the materialistic worldview has given rise to a thinking that is mostly a passive observation of a supposedly independent fixed reality.

### **Final Participation**

Final participation is the last stage in Barfield’s evolution of consciousness. It differs from original participation in that it does not occur involuntarily. Final participation comes about through effort where original participation was automatic; it comes about as a result of conscious activity. In original participation, there is no sense of human individuality or any meaningful distinction between the material and immaterial. Only with the evolution of consciousness does the human being become capable of distinguishing him/herself from the phenomenal world. It is the loss of original participation that awakens the human to self-conscious awareness of the objective world.

With final participation the interior and exterior are again united. However this does not occur at the expense of self-awareness. Through his/her own effort the human being can again find its place within the cosmos; the cosmos being a representation of himself (Barfield, 1988). The cosmos exists both

through external perception and inner apprehension. Human consciousness affects the world as well. This has been demonstrated by Heisenberg, who showed that the perception of light as either a wave or a particle depended on the observer. Such a realization amounts to an escape from idolatry towards final participation; it clearly demonstrates the role played by the human in the play of consciousness. Unfortunately, final participation is still largely confined to the physics lab. Barfield (1988) felt it would only be a widespread phenomenon in the distant future.

### **Jean Gebser and *The Ever Present Origin***

Jean Gebser described his theory of consciousness in his masterpiece *The Ever Present Origin*, 1985. He was one of the greatest contributors to the study of the evolution of consciousness, and he believed that its changes could be seen throughout history in art (Combs, 2014). Gebser (1985) saw consciousness as a wakeful presence that was not identical with intelligence, and he outlined five mutations, or structures, of this consciousness. According to Georg Feuerstein (1987), Gebser did not see consciousness as solely a witnessing function, but as an active and directive force, implying that consciousness is not only evolving in response to a relationship with phenomena, but that it is independently an initiator of the mutations. The representation of this new relationship with the world, and way of understanding, is illustrated in Gebser's five structures of consciousness: *archaic, magical, mythical, mental, and integral* (Combs, 2014).

#### **Archaic Structure**

Gebser (1985) used the word archaic to describe the structure he said was originally identical to origin. There is no perspective, no sense of otherness, and the distinction between object and subject does not exist; there is no differentiation between self and nature, or between self and universe (Morhoff, 2008). This initial structure, as Gebser (1985) stated, is only a structure in a sense for us to conceptualize it; there is nothing defining or separating parts of it from each other. He saw it as a "structure emanating from that perfect identity existing 'before' (or behind) all oneness or unity which it initially represented" (p. 43). In relation to our contemporary associations with consciousness it could be called 'pre-consciousness' (Morhoff, 2008). The apprehension of individual self is at this stage dormant, and all that exists is complete unity, "a time of complete non-differentiation of man and universe" (Gebser, 1985, p. 43).

#### **Magical Structure**

This structure marks a beginning in the growth of self-consciousness. However, there is still a strong association of self with nature. Identity is in terms of collective, or tribe, and space and time are present in each moment (Combs, 2014). To describe the sense of space and identity Gebser (1985) used the point. He said the point is on the one hand the representation of the birth of a centering in man, which later leads to ego, and on the other an expression of the spacelessness and timelessness of the one dimensional world.

There is no interior experience, only an outer awareness and man's consciousness is at once separate and part of his environment. It does not lie within him but is of the world (Gebser, 1985). From this standpoint man assimilates this consciousness as a confrontation, and he learns to be aware of, and a part of the forces of nature. Within this structure man's desire to have nature, as opposed to being part of it, has germinated, and this need develops man's conscious will (Gebser, 1985).

#### **Mythical Structure**

With this structure imagination becomes a distinctive component. Feuerstein (1987) said language became the way to enter into a relationship with reality. He stated it was a way to communicate and construct it, and through language or symbolization of reality, the human being becomes, in a sense, creator of his world. Humanity begins to relate all that is known of the world in stories, or myths.

Gebser (1985) wrote that these myths were stories representing the internal experience of man, and his ability to speak of them was his new power. He showed how the numerous stories of man being lost at sea and finding himself on shore was representative of man's individual ego finding himself within, or apart from, the collective. Homer's *Odyssey*, Noah, and Gilgamesh are a few examples that illustrate man finding himself after a flood or being lost at sea. There is a strong affinity for time within these stories, and the orientation of this consciousness was one of looking back (Feuerstein, 1987).

### **Mental Structure**

Man's entrance into the mental structure is characterized by a tremendous leap in consciousness. Gebser (1985) used the myth of the birth of Athena to illustrate this shift. Athena, goddess of wisdom, and intellect, tore out of the head of Zeus and brought forth the wakefulness and vision of man. Gradually the gods become replaced with man's apprehension of his own thinking. While the mythical structure could be said to be related with speech and storytelling, the mental structure is defined by vision and space.

It was not that depth and space did not exist previously, but the birth of perspective brought something new to the human experience (Combs, 2014). Through the awareness of location in relation to objects a heightened sense of depth and spatiality became a new component of consciousness, and this new capacity allowed the world to be viewed in terms objectivity. The realization of being an internal creature in an external environment finalized the separation from nature, and man's ability to think in terms of perspective allowed him to rationalize and reason.

Unlike the previous structures, this consciousness mutation has a heightened sense of individuality and a capability of directing and discursive thought (Feuerstein, 1987). However, the ability of man to rationalize has come with the cost of his disregard of, and need to cut apart, the world. Perspective gives dominion over space, but an ever increasing need for dominion has created a separateness of man from the whole.

### **Integral Structure**

This is the developing structure of Gebser's five mutations. He said each of these mutations does not come about by choice, or without great upheavals in thought, biology, or environment. We currently exist in the mental structure which is dominated by the paradigm of a separation of consciousness and matter; what is commonly referred to as the Newtonian Cartesian model consciousness. Breaking free of this and into a new dimension of reality requires more than just an expansion of consciousness, or an acceptance of new ideas. As Gebser (1985) stated, the expansion of consciousness is still just a quantitative and spatial conception, and an illusion. It is related to the material concept of consciousness, or consciousness as the accumulation of ideas. What is needed is the growth of consciousness, which is an intensification of it.

This structure is a four dimensional reality, its achievement is not an intellectual capacity, but rather results from the integration of all other structures. Gebser (1985) said integration comes about from the

concretion, or condensation of the early structures, where all the positive and negative attributes have been resolved, rather than a mental apprehension of them. The role of perspective in the mental structure is contrasted that of the *aperspectival* in the Integral. This term refers to a transcendence of perspective. In comparison with the chronological orientation of time of the mental structure, this structure is free of temporal and spatial limitations; it is an egoless and a holistic view of reality (Roje, 1994).

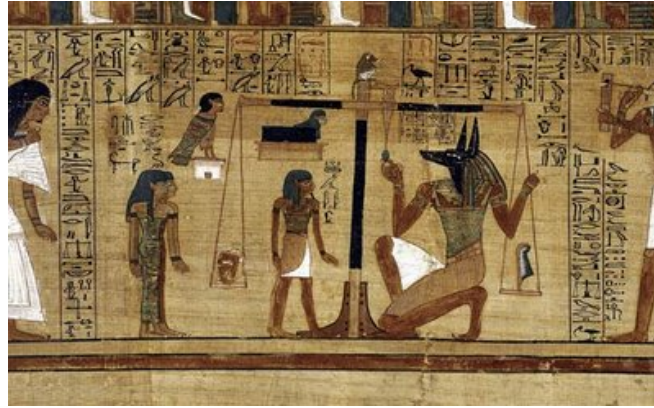
### **Barfield, Gebser, and Gottfried Richter**

The work of Barfield and Gebser is similar enough that we could say that they share the same basic assumption - that human awareness is in a constant state of adaption to itself and its environment. While the terms they use to describe this change are different, it would not be incorrect to say that they are basically describing the same process. Both men describe consciousness as evolving from a non-differentiated unity to one that is individuated and separate. Their respective models culminate in what Barfield's calls *Final Participation* and what Gebser terms the *Integral Structure*. Significantly, these continued stages are new, original, and indeterminate structures of consciousness.

The evolution of consciousness has been illustrated through the lens of Western art history by Gottfried Richter. His book, *Art and Human Consciousness* (1982), shows the transformation of man's consciousness through the ages. Like Barfield and Gebser he elucidated a theory of consciousness that began from a state of non-differentiated unity that progressed through individuation and into a new integral structure.

I chose Richter's work to illustrate what Gebser (1985) called the *concretion of the spiritual*. This concretion is not a condensing but rather a "coalescence of the spiritual with our consciousness" (Gebser, 1985 p. 542). For Gebser (1985) this was a shining through, or what he calls a diaphaneity of consciousness. It is all encompassing - a transparency of space, time, matter, light, life and death (Gebser, 1985). This is comparable to Barfield's *final participation* where a new relationship with the 'Word' is formed, and imagination is the Body of Christ (Barfield, 1988),

Using the monolithic structures of the pyramids, temples, and tombs Richter (1982) showed how the Egyptian consciousness was affected from the outside in. He used the example of the long narrow passage way of the pyramids that wind slowly toward a goal, where all else is blocked, to bring a person from the outside to the depths of the interior. The art was one dimensional; no distinction was made between the human being and his/her environment. Depth was implied by size as everything was put on the same plane. Furthermore, because their participatory consciousness experienced nature as divine, Egyptian art represented animals as deities.



Example of Egyptian art (Jackson, 2009)

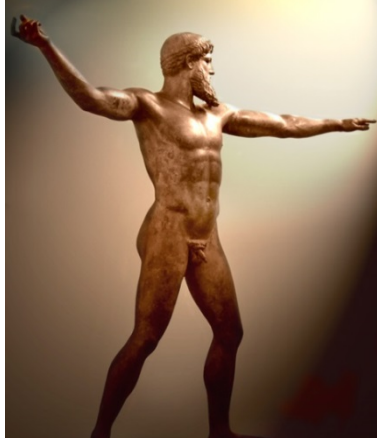
Egyptian consciousness partakes of both the magical and mythical structures. Gebser (1984) described the magic structure of consciousness as being experienced from the “outside in.” The mythical structure is evident in the preoccupation with life and death. It should also be noted that both Gebser and Barfield did not distinguish exact periods for the changes in consciousness. Gebser did not give an exact chronology to the evolution of consciousness but was more concerned with describing its stages in terms of mutation so as to show that they do not arise developmentally, but as a requirement of consciousness (Brown, 2013). Gebser’s structures overlap each other and show that within each structure the others are also present. Furthermore, there may exist populations whose consciousness is characterized by a previous structure while, at the same time, another is on the cusp of an emergent structure; likewise, Barfield maintained that remnants of original participation can still be found in the contemporary world.

Egyptian consciousness felt itself to be influenced from an exterior spiritual source, and it was only toward the end that of era that the “gods went inside.” With the emergence of Greek culture humanity began to awaken to its own inner life. Richter (1982) used the myth of Medusa to illustrate the price paid for turning from the gods. He described Medusa as the embodiment of the ancient, dreamlike, consciousness, which still resides outside of reason and the world of daytime consciousness. In turning from the gods the Greeks also found autonomy.

Richter (1982) described the Greeks in terms of rebellion. It began with Prometheus’ theft of fire from the gods. This primordial crime gave humanity its own light, independent of divinity (Richter, 1982). At that time, many of the gods were representative of nocturnal, primordial, and irrational. Richter wrote:

And now man must come to know that he can no longer endure that dark world of primal forces. So terrifying has it become for him that whoever so much as glances at it is turned to stone. That is the Medusa. (Richter, 1982, p.75)

In the Medusa story Perseus uses a mirror to defeat the monster. The mirror represents his intellect; it reflects the terrifying world that must be overcome. When she is overcome the Pegasus, the winged horse of phantasy springs out of her showing that it is the artist that overcomes and conquers the dark night (Richter, 1982).



Bronze statue possibly Zeus, most likely Poseidon.  
Circa 460 BC. (Early Classical., n.d)

This turning from the gods marks the beginning of the mental structure. However, the influence of the mythical is still strong and many stories of gods come from this era. Nevertheless, autonomy is on the ascension, and humanity begins to develop its powers of intellect and reason. This is evident in Greek sculpture which was created with mathematical precision and exact dimensions (Combs, 2014).

Richter (1982) stated that through artistic achievement awareness increased, and in Greece man became an artist laying the foundation for his freedom. He spoke to the statues and sculptures of that time being representative of this awareness. Richter (1982) noted that unlike the statues of Egypt, Greek art had a sense of rest and independence in the forms. Egyptian statues were massive and anatomically correct, but the body was stiff and supported.

The era of Greece gave us Plato, Socrates, Aristotle, and host of other great thinkers and philosophies. During this era the split of participatory knowledge gave way to idolatry. Barfield (1988) illustrated this in his discussion of Plato and Aristotle. Where Plato insisted on a reality of pure form of thought, Aristotle maintained that the form had no other existence other than the material. With this difference we see the move to idolatry. Thinking begins to be an abstraction; thought and consciousness begin to be less real than material.

Both Barfield and Richter saw Christ as the pivot upon which human individuation depends. With the advent of Christianity comes a new inner awareness (Richter, 1982). This is evident in a comparison of Christian and Egyptian sacred architecture. Richter (1982) described Christian basilicas in terms of hyperspace; one did not so much go “into” them as was “within” them. Unlike the Egyptian architecture that thrust the exterior upon a person traversing a dark narrow passage, the basilicas allowed one to experience interior space as a free autonomous agent (Richter, 1982).

With the advent of medieval and Romanesque we see a regression into the mythical and magical structures (Combs, 2014). However, an individuating principle was still at work; it produced many variations of collective self-awareness (Richter, 1982). This was evident in the rise of monastic communities and the institution of knighthood (Richter, 1982). With these communities we see the beginning of the cultivation of individual spiritual virtues. The new conception of virtue was not participatory in the Platonic sense. That is, it was less a function of contemplation and more a matter of a

spiritual inwardness. Romanesque was more beautiful, it revealed a sense of being worked from the inside out (Richter, 1982).

The quest to comprehend the incomprehensible brought man to an experience of knowledge and rationality; it however had brought him farther away from a direct experience of God (Richter, 1982). The lines and abstractions of the Gothic period illustrated this for Richter. The internal space of the cathedral was driven up in a straight individuating force; man had lost his internal experience of the divine and was seeking it through a mental experience of the world (Richter, 1982). It is within this time period that the pinnacle of the mental structure is reached and where Barfield said participatory knowledge was finally extinguished.

Man's developing internal landscape had allowed him to become an autonomous creature in his external environment. With this awareness the human being walked into to the world of spatiality and perspective by being able to view the world from a location of self. This new dimension of reality brought a sense of objectivity to the world. The ability to view the world in terms of perspective, and represent it in terms of a three dimensional actuality, allowed humanity to step out of the picture and establish a rational view of reality (Roje, 1994).

With the advent of the renaissance the images now had a sense of endless space, and a quality of intense depth. Paintings of individuals were commonly arranged with a figure in the foreground with a never ending background. The art of Da Vinci is a perfect example of this spatial awareness. Many of his paintings had figures in the center with a beautiful intricate background that flowed away to the distance. The artists of this time worked their sense of spatiality with the inclusion of small details that could be discovered as the eye traversed the perspective (Richter, 1982).



**Interior of an Imaginary Church by Bartholmeus Van Bassen (González-Irún, 2009)**



**The Mona Lisa by Leonardo Da Vinci (The Mona Lisa, 2011)**

The deepening realization of perspective and spatiality brought depth to art work, more enlivened images of figures, and intensified man's self-awareness. Richter (1982) went through the later stages of art from the Renaissance, Baroque, Romantic, and up to the contemporary highlighting the intensification of this



consciousness. Like Barfield and Gebser, Richter wanted to show the evolution of man's consciousness as one coming from the exterior to the interior. He was very specific in showing man's awareness in terms of a Christian experience, and for him it was the experience of God coming in that created an interior space that could be explored. This space opened up a new dynamic relationship with the world, and this was communicated art. Richter used a quote from Cezanne to express this.

The nature we see and the nature we feel, the one out there and the one in here (he strikes his forehead), both must permeate each other in order to live; half human, half divine; the life of art, get this, the life of God! (p. 236)

This sense of creativity where there is a creative function within the artist and within the work is what Barfield (1988) was describing in *final participation*. The perspective is no longer from a viewing standpoint, but within the art itself. Here, Richter (1982) wanted to emphasize the responsibility of the artist. In Greece it was the artist that he said was going to conquer the dark primal forces. Now in the contemporary age man has surpassed his need to have protection from spiritual aid in his journey into the unknown (Richter, 1982). The artist has developed and increased his ability to traverse the world of the consciousness, and it is up to him to discern why and for what purpose he is bringing his art into being.

To Richter the very transformation of the human, and its relationship with are directly related with the value of our art, and we are to understand modern art in terms of mankind being on a threshold. Like Gebser, Richter (1982) pointed to the transcendence of perspective as being illustrative of this emerging consciousness. Where previously perspective aided man by giving him a standpoint outside of the world and facing it, the ego now has entered the world of inner space, and the terms far and near take on different meaning (Richter, 1982).

Both Gebser and Richter stress that our relationship to time changes with the emergence of a new structure of consciousness. Gebser's (1985) integral structure posits a non-chronological model of temporality; both he and Richter illustrated this new time perspective through an examination of modern art. Richter (1982) said this new awareness (what Gebser termed *aperspectival*) has allowed for perspectives to come forth that were previously unavailable. For example, the use of both profile and full face by artists like Picasso, makes available the qualities of past, present, and future at once.



Girl Before a Mirror by Pablo Picasso  
(Andriu, 2014)

Human awareness is no longer merely observational, but is becoming increasingly participatory. This is most evident in modern art which does not so much seek to depict reality but disclose what it is like to stand within it. Now objects reveal the inner world of the artist; themes and images are no longer merely representational. In the mixing of subject and object we do not lose the individual but rather integrate his/her perspective within the whole.

Barfield, Gebser, and Richter all detail a model of consciousness that began in a state of non-differentiated unity, individuated, and is now moving towards integration. Evidence of their theories is made tangible in the history of art; with their help of their theories we can look at the art of our time to become aware of our place in the evolution of our consciousness

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