

Dennis Clagett

Gebser lesen

Perhaps you are wondering what credentials I can claim to speak about Gebser to a roomfull of Gebser *aficianados*. Let me answer directly: no credentials whatsoever, other than a certain sensitivity to the resonance of Gebser's language and an enduring gratitude for the challenges it presents.

So in lieu of expertise I'd like to spend the next few minutes trying to convey something of the uncertainty that has always accompanied my reading of Gebser. In particular, I wish to focus on two existentially obscure phenomena that would nevertheless seem to point to the heart of Gebser's enterprise as a philosopher. And in doing so I mean less to impart any hard and fast conclusions than to generate a current of interest that might flow back one day charged with deeper insights. Or to put it in terms of the theme of this centennial conference: to sow the seeds of chaos in the hope of harvesting order.

The first of these two phenomena concerns what might be termed the Gebser double bind. Intellectuals, and especially a certain type of academic, may be drawn to Gebser's work by what they sense as its healing transcendence. At the same time such persons are impressed or reassured by the apparent rigour and solidity of his intellectual scaffolding. The Gebserian project promises to reconcile conflicting standards. However a tension arises in the actual reading of Gebser because the intellectual longs precisely for that element in the work which is not contained by rationality, but relies in his attempts to attain it on the rational scheme he thinks he finds there. For a reader attracted by the promise of a spiritual breakthrough, the tension that results can be destabilizing to say the least.

The second point at issue might be stated in the form of a question: Does Jean Gebser delineate a spiritual method, a discipline of spirit meant to

produce, realize, connect with or otherwise embody the integral consciousness his writing celebrates. At first glance the connection between these two subjects may seem a nebulous one. On the one hand a phenomenon of apparently epistemological interest or import: how to extract the pearl of transcendence from an oyster with impeccable rational credentials. On the other a practical and somehow spiritually urgent query: does the great visionary of the *Ursprung und Gegenwart* offer us at least a clue as to how we might incarnate this vision as our life?

Originally it was my intention to simply articulate the first of these two issues. I was moved by personal curiosity to pose the question more or less publicly of whether the Gebser double bind is something inherent in the experience of reading Gebser or is just another febrile neurosis from my chaotic depths of mind. However the more I mused about this phenomenon of the particular tension that Gebser's work creates in the anxious intellectual, and the more I considered what, if anything, of value I had to say about it, the more I found myself turning to another element of inquiry, one that has preoccupied me for many years: the question of whether Gebser gives precise instructions – a specific framework of discipline – for attaining the primordial trust which he has identified as a fundamental characteristic of the integral consciousness.

The link between these issues lies, I believe, in the fact that what Gebser is doing is what the best of our poets do: namely using language to evoke, delineate, make resonate something which cannot be expressed, defined or contained in language. But at the same time, precisely through his particular use of language, Gebser is pointing to a certain existential attitude, to what he himself has called „eine innere Haltung“ – an attitude or posture prerequisite for embodying or gaining access to a healing intensity of mind. And this attitude itself has much to do with language, with its limits and powers, and with the essential liberty at the core of language which is beyond the human being and which goes to the heart of the intellectual's dilemma when reading Gebser.

In some ways the tension which Gebser creates by clothing the anarchic, chaotic challenge of integration within a seemingly rational system is not unlike the psychic conundrum produced by the practitioner's grappling with the koan in Zen practice – a tension meant to break down barriers which needn't exist or which in fact do not exist but seem to nevertheless. Paradoxically, in providing the signposts of his philosophical system, his well-ordered, impeccably researched historical and epistemological framework, he is erecting a wall between the reader and the transcendent core of his teaching. How to deconstruct that wall while drawing on the insights from which it is constructed becomes our koan. And as in the best of the old zen stories, it is we ourselves, or rather the stance that we adopt toward the world, which provides the solution.

To return to the sphere of poetry for a minute: in order to „understand“ or appreciate poetry, in order to enter into it or to let it enter into you, an attitude or posture of letting go is necessary, of being willing to relinquish a certain intellectual control. In short, a willingness neither to govern nor to master nor to dominate the realm of meaning. Not even necessarily to know exactly what is being said. And this is particularly so with modern poetry, which answers a need or emerges out of a necessity to find a new way of seeing or experiencing the world, one which cannot rely – at least for the moment – on certainty. In turn, poetry and intercourse with the poetic are a form of exploration, a practice, an answered challenge, making us develop an aesthetic and spiritual posture that we need not only in order to „understand“ poetry, but also to live nobly and well in an increasingly uncertain universe.

In this sense, language and its challenges are also ethical in character, because language requires the best of us if we are to use it properly and to its full advantage. It requires us to adopt a certain posture beyond the limited contours of excessive self-concern. To move with language to order the chaos of our anxious little lives, we must adopt a posture which can only be described as transparent.

In developing such a posture, and in drawing on the creative tension that Gebser generates in his oeuvre, it may be helpful to take Gebser's consciousness structures as a poetic image rather than a philosophical system. As precise as this structural framework is as a description of how consciousness orders itself out of the original chaos of self and pre-self awareness, its power lies in the language Gebser uses to evoke this understanding in the reader. Gebser's structures are a surf to ride, an echo to listen for, most of all an invitation extended to adopt a physical, psychic and spiritual posture of primordial trust, one that takes shape when we receive with the whole of ourselves rather than imprint ourselves on what we receive.

This after all is the poet of the highly memorable, aphoristic lines:

*Wir gehen immer verloren,
wenn uns das Denken befällt,
und werden wiedergeboren,
wenn wir uns ahnend der Welt*

*anvertrauen, und treiben
wie die Wolken im hellen Wind,
denn alle Grenzen, die bleiben,
sind ferner als Himmel sind.*

Now I am certainly not suggesting that Gebser was anti-intellectual or that he failed to value thinking as a defining capacity of man. But I do believe there was purpose – however ludic or mischievous it may seem to be – in his use of discursive power to point to something ultimately ineffable: a way of holding oneself in the world neither limited by nor devoid of thinking.

Does he provide a roadmap or a grid to guide our way? I think we will look in vain for such instructions in the evocative prose of Gebser's groundbreaking Hauptwerk, but in another sense, the entire oeuvre is about nothing else but that. By not being explicit about a pre-defined form of practice, he offers a problematic that itself affords a deeper degree of instruction, and in the process says something practical and valuable about how we are to

live. In that sense the difficulting of reading Gebser – the difficulty of seizing the fruit he dangles enticingly before our eyes – requires an intensity and soberness of attention – what he has described poetically as „gestaltend in den Worten warten“ – that is itself the fundament and engine of our deepest practice.

Rather than asking us to believe a particular thing, to adopt a specific system or intellectual methodology, Gebser is urging us to meet reality with the whole of our being and to trust –through our physical, mental and emotional posture – that meaning and order lie at the heart of chaos. It would be a mistake to go looking for this posture in the written word. In that sense, reading Gebser must be reading ourselves, but ourselves as enticing, inscrutable poetry. Otherwise, best to leave Jean Gebser on the shelf.