

In memoriam Jean Gebser

by Jean Keckeis

While completing his studies in Berlin during his mid-twenties - a time of precarious circumstances, as the inflation had abolished the family reserves - Jean Gebser wrote a poem entitled „Many Things are About to be Born,“ which begins: „We always lose our way / when overtaken by thinking . . . ,“ a thought which surely reflects a premonition of his later intellectual and spiritual journey.

Born in Posen in 1905, Gebser received his schooling in Königsberg and later in the renowned preparatory school in Rossleben on the Unstrut. He has left us a fine account of how he learned there to „swim free“; ever since a jump from the diving board „into uncertainty,“ he was in possession of something that he did not fully realize until decades after. „It was then,“ he wrote later, „that I lost my fear in the face of uncertainty. A sense of confidence began to mature within me which later determined my entire bearing and attitude toward life, a confidence in the sources of our strength of being, a confidence in their immediate accessibility. This is an inner security that is fully effective only when we are able to do whatever we do not for our own sake“

Following his first-hand experience of the Brown Shirts in Munich in 1931, Gebser left Germany of his own free will and went, penniless, to Spain. There the difficult decision to forego his mother tongue was rewarded by the „enriching knowledge of the Latin way of thinking, acting, and living.“ He became sufficiently familiar with Spanish culture to hold for a time a position in the Republican Ministry of Culture and even to write poetry in the language of his friend Federico Garcia Lorca (*Poesias de la Tarde*, 1936). Twelve hours before his Madrid apartment was bombed in the Autumn of 1936 he again set out on the path of uncertainty.

By this time he had already formed the conception of his magnum opus. The *Ever-Present Origin*, a conception which matured during three years of privation in Paris during his association with the circle around Picasso and Malraux. The necessary repose for completion of the work Gebser found in Switzerland; where he arrived near the end of August, 1939, two hours before the frontier was closed. He became a Swiss citizen in 1951. Unfortunately, Gebser was unable to assume duties associated with his chair for the Study of Comparative Civilizations at the University of Salzburg; a progressively worsening case of asthma forced him to remain ever closer to his home in Berne and to avoid exertion. The flights of spirit of which he was then still capable are perhaps better known outside Switzerland; and unlike the Swiss, with their predilection for specialized knowledge as such, Gebser went on to transform a prodigious and multifaceted knowledge, gleaned with rare sensitivity from ancient to avant-garde sources, into *Bildung*, wisdom and *sophrosyne*. A glance at the *Festschrift* to commemorate his sixtieth birthday, *Transparent World (Transparente Welt)*, Berne: Huber, 1965) provides evidence of the universal emanation of his creativity, which is further attested to by his extensive list of publications.

Jean Gebser did not live to see the completion of a project close to his heart (he died on May 4, 1973 in Berne): the publication of his Ever-Present Origin in an inexpensive paperbound edition (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuchverlag, 1973, three volumes). This edition was to make the work more accessible to students and other young people who have shown their concern with a new consciousness and a new orientation toward the world.

The path which led Gebser to his new and universal perception of the world is, briefly, as follows. In the wake of materialism and social change, man had been described in the early years of our century as the „dead end“ of nature. Freud had redefined culture as illness - a result of drive sublimation; Klages had called the spirit (and he was surely speaking of the hypertrophied intellect) the „adversary of the soul,“ propounding a return to a life like that of the Pelasgi, the aboriginal inhabitants of Greece; and Spengler had declared the „Demise of the West“ during the years following World War I. The consequences of such pessimism continued to proliferate long after its foundations had been superseded.

It was with these foundations - the natural sciences - that Gebser began. As early as Planck it was known that matter was not at all what materialists had believed it to be, and since 1943 Gebser has repeatedly emphasized that the so-called crisis of Western culture was in fact an essential restructuration. (It was in 1943 that his Transformation of the Occident was first published [Zürich/New York: Oprecht; also Dutch, French, Italian, and Swedish editions], an estimation of the results of research in the natural sciences during the first half of the century.) Gebser has noted two results that are of particular significance: first, the abandonment of materialistic determinism, of a one-sided mechanistic-causal mode of thought; and second, a manifest „urgency of attempts to discover a universal way of observing things, and to overcome the inner division of contemporary man who, as a result of his one-sided, rational orientation, thinks only in dualisms.“ Against this background of recent discoveries and conclusions in the natural sciences Gebser discerned the outlines of a potential human universality. He also sensed the necessity to go beyond the confines of this first treatise so as to include the humanities (such as political economics and sociology) as well as the arts in a discussion along similar lines. This was the point of departure for The Ever-Present Origin.

Here a word might be in order about Gebser's „method.“ No later than during his sojourn in Spain he must have acquired the „Mediterranean way of thought“ (as Ortega y Gasset might have called it) for which existence - the external, the concrete - is more important than the inward, the abstract, the mere awareness of being. What Gebser presents in The Ever-Present Origin was incubated, not in the study, but in the warmth of living contact with representatives of all disciplines. His examination of the present restructuration of reality and of the establishment of a new consciousness structure led him to discover earlier restructurations in mankind's consciousness development. Accordingly, the first part of the book (first published in 1949), based on research and insights of ethnology, psychology, and philology, uncovers the „Foundations of the Aperspectival World“ in which we now find ourselves (although there is an unwillingness in certain quarters to accept this as a fact). We have evidence that human consciousness has undergone three previous mutations: from the archaic or primordial basic structure the magic, the mythical, and the mental

(or rational) structures have emerged. The term „consciousness structures“ is to be understood as nothing other than the visibly emerging perception of reality throughout the various ages and civilizations.

This does not imply, however, that the later consciousness structures obliterate the earlier - we retain in ourselves irrevocable magic and mythical elements, origin and the present -; nor is it to suggest that a given later consciousness structure is of greater „value“ than the earlier, although man has demonstrated at all times the understandable weakness of overestimating and exclusively utilizing the most recent potentialities that manifest themselves in him. This is perhaps most clearly exemplified by the hubris still evident in many quarters that overemphasizes the ratio and attempts to subordinate all else to man's calculating reason and will.

During the interim between the publication of the first and second parts of The Ever-Present Origin - the second is an exploration of the „Manifestations of the Aperspectival World“ - an important symposium was held at which prominent representatives of the various arts and sciences themselves presented the evidence of the contemporary restructuration which Gebser has demonstrated. Eighteen specialists presented two cycles of lectures at the Academy of Commerce in St.Gallen, Switzerland (1950-51), on the subject of the „New Perception of the World“ which were later published in the two volumes of Die neue Weltanschauung (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1952-53). A surprising unanimity of basic conception emerged from these lectures: an openness toward questions dealing with transcendence; a scepticism about a self-satisfied rationalism; and a courageous humility vis-à-vis insights into man's limitations of knowledge and perception - all of these being duly noted in the press accounts. It is such interpretation and sustenance of the life-affirming energies of our epoch that form the substance of the second part of The Ever-Present Origin.

The birth-pangs of the aperspectival, integral perception of the world began in the first decade of our century. The major and unique theme of our juncture, according to Gebser, is the irruption of time into our consciousness. It is a matter of our recognizing time as a quality and an intensity rather than as an analytical system of measurable relationships, its perverted and materialized form in the perspectival age. In the new modality of perceiving the world, time appears to be its fundamental constituent; time, being immeasurable and not amenable to rational thought, emerges ever more clearly as a liberation from previous time-forms. It becomes time-freedom. „Just as the conquest of space was accompanied by a disclosure or 'opening up' as it were of surface, of the unperspectival world, so too is today's emergent perception of time accompanied by an opening of space.“ Today, as the arational-integral begins to supplant the mental-rational, the exhaustion of values at the completion of each consciousness structure becomes evident in the exhaustion and quantification of thought, of our mental capacity, as exemplified by the robot-like thinking of our machines. Nevertheless, the „aperspectival“ does not imply the exclusion of the perspectival, rather that its claim of exclusivity must be abandoned in favor of something more encompassing. Gebser has evinced the salient aspects of this new consciousness structure from numerous phenomena in the humanities, the natural and social sciences, and the arts.

In one of his most recent books, *The Invisible Origin* (*Der unsichtbare Ursprung*, Olten: Walter, 1970), Gebser has again made evident something hardly describable: „evolution as the realization of a pre-established pattern.“ Time and again, physicists, philosophers, psychologists, futurologists, artists, and poets have tried to express in words their intuitions of this ever-present origin. In the spring of 1960, the New Helvetic Society (Berne), with the cooperation of Studio Berne, presented a series of broadcasts with the general title: „Paths to a New Reality“ (later published as *Wege zur neuen Wirklichkeit*, Berne: Hallwag, 1960). Besides Gebser, the participants included the physicist Houtermans, the biologist Portmann, the historian Herbert Lüthy, and historian of law Hans Marti. Toward the close of the series, Gebser came to speak specifically about ideologies as typical outgrowths of a purpose-oriented, perspectivistic era, and demonstrated how these ideologies linger about in the world as lost causes, outdone only by the search for new or „counter“ ideologies. Particularly anachronistic are the effects of Christian sects posturing like ideologies.

The following year Gebser published another group of essays which had evolved from lectures of his own entitled „Standing the Test, or Verifications of the New Consciousness“ (*In der Bewährung*, Berne: Francke, 1962). His next book, „Asia Smiles Differently“ (*Asien lächelt anders*, Frankfurt and Berlin: Ullstein, 1968), based on his extensive travels in India, China, and Japan, shows yet another notable aspect of his integral „world perception.“ The book first appeared in paperback in 1962 under the title „Asian Primer“ and was intended as a brief *vade mecum* for Westerners to aid in their understanding of the Asian mentality. (The augmented edition of 1968 followed yet another of Gebser's visits to India.) Both versions of the book document the considerable differences between Western and Eastern ways of thinking. The Asian, for instance, does not experience opposites as dualities or antinomies, as we do in the West, but as complementarities. And in Asia one can still encounter manifestations of what we in the Western world frequently reject as pre- or irrational malfunctions: the magic experience and mythical feeling of the world.

Gebser's later work further explored and elaborated significant aspects of *The Ever-Present Origin*. He defined polarity, for example, as „the living constellation of mutual complementation, correspondences, and interdependence,“ which he articulated to counter the deadening effects of dualisms. How many misunderstandings come about because we turn interdependencies into antagonisms! He also addressed the subject of „Primordial Anxiety and Primordial Trust,“ the subject of his last lecture in October, 1972 at a physicians' congress in Bad Boll (Württemberg). It is a reply from the profundity of wisdom to the three questions: Where do I come from? Who am I? and Where am I going? These and other essays are now collected in the eight volume edition of his works currently in publication in Switzerland (Schaffhausen: Novalis, 1975-1981).

From a poetic fragment written just three weeks before his death are the verses:

Entirely clear and serene
is the heaven within
and farther, in many ways,
the ascent to origin.

Were they a poetic anticipation of an experience of which he spoke in his last lecture: „Death, too, is birth“? Around 500 B. C., at the time of mutation from the mythical to the rational consciousness structure, Heraclitus had expressed it in the words: „The path of ascent and descent is one and the same.“ (1973)