

## 12/21 — Seeing Through the World: An Invitation to Begin the Healing Work

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Well, the oasis of grace miraculously opened, and now it's time to roll up our collective sleeves and get on with the healing work! I know that my own first assignment has something to do with helping to expose—and hopefully defuse—some of the reactivity and sanctimoniousness that boils just below the surface in my immediate peer group, the spiritual liberal intelligentsia.

Sometimes a book simply falls off the bookshelf when the time is right. In this case, it wasn't the bookshelf, but my nightstand, where for the past year this modest, aqua-covered text had been slowly inching its way down in my pile of unread books. To whomever the now-unremembered giver may have been, THANK YOU!!! It has definitely proved to be the right book for the task now at hand.

The book is called *Seeing Through the World* by Jeremy Johnson and is a brilliant introduction to the teaching of Jean Gebser, a name you may not even have heard of. As I devoured the book in a single weekend (fortunately, it's short), I could feel my world once again gently rocking on its foundations, always a good sign that a book has really hit home. I knew instantly I had a tiger by the tail.

I shared my enthusiasm during our small Wisdom gathering at Claymont in late October, and about half that group are now also up to their eyeballs in Johnson, with similar shifting of their mental tectonic plates. I could see that Gebser—through the brilliant eyes of Jeremy Johnson—was handing me exactly the tools to see where I'd been pinned for so long now, both personally and culturally.

Jean Gebser (1905-1973) was a German-Swiss philosopher, mystic, and early scholar of the origin of consciousness. If his name rings a bell, it is probably because of his seminal influence on Ken Wilber, whose highly popular evolutionary models of consciousness have set the cognitive baseline for so much of our contemporary spiritual understanding. What I had not realized until reading Johnson, is that what Wilber has given us is actually a MERCATOR PROJECTION of Gebser: a two-dimensional version of a three-dimensional teaching. In this flattening, significant distortion has entered, and this undetected distortion has itself contributed significantly to some of the anguish and polarization we now find ourselves caught in.

I bit the bullet this past weekend and ordered Gebser's original text, *The Ever-Present Origin*. (In English, not the original German; at least that much I let myself off the hook.) Still, I know the ways of these twentieth century European cultural philosophers, and I quake at the task before me when the book finally arrives; I hope my mind is still up for this! Jeremy Johnson's overview has given me some solid handholds, and from what I can deduce so far through my recent explorations of imaginal causality, I have already been traversing some of the same ground as Gebser. I'll report back on that in due course.

Meanwhile, what I intend to work with in this next series of blogs will follow something of this trajectory. I think:

1. First of all, I want to make a pass through three foundational pieces of the Gebser model:

1. Structures of consciousness (as opposed to STAGES of consciousness);
2. The intrinsically divisive/splintering proclivities of the late (deteriorating) mental structures of consciousness;
3. Integral understood not as non-dual but as APERSPECTIVAL seeing: the capacity to draw on and simultaneously integrate all former structures of consciousness (not just points of view).

2. Then I will attempt to sidle back and explore what light each of these tenets have to shed upon the place we're now culturally pinned and how these subtle Gordian knots might be disentangled.

If you're up for joining this exploration, I encourage you to buy Jeremy Johnson's book and explore it firsthand. It's easily available online. We'll see where this initial pass goes. I may later try to develop this as a more formal online course. But for now, I think we need some of these tools on deck, even in a preliminary stage of development, to begin to really tackle that portion of the national healing that falls on our own particular shoulders.

### STAGES VERSUS STRUCTURES: EXPLORING JEAN GEBSER, LESSON 1

If you've cut your teeth on the Ken Wilber roadmaps, the Gebser terrain will at first look reassuringly familiar. The familiar levels of consciousness are all right there, even designated by their familiar names: the archaic, magic, mythic, mental, and integral. Nor is this surprising, since Wilber explicitly acknowledges Gebser as the primary source of his model.

There is one crucial difference, however. In Wilber, these are stages of consciousness. In Gebser, they are STRUCTURES of consciousness.

Perhaps the significance of this nuance escapes you. (It certainly escaped me initially.) But on this nuance, actually, all else turns.

Stages EVOLVE. They are like steps on a ladder, building sequentially one upon the other in a journey that leads onward and upward.

Structures UNFOLD. They are like sections of a jigsaw puzzle or rooms in an art museum, gradually filling in to reveal the big picture (which already implicitly exists.)

This means that stages are essentially developmental. The earlier stage is folded into the next, in the process losing much of its distinctive character. The earlier stage lays the groundwork for what emerges next.

The inverse way of stating this is that the earlier stage represents a more immature expression of what is to follow.

It is not so in the world of unfolding. As you wander through an art museum, each room retains its essential character and wholeness; it weaves its own magic and adds its own distinctive flare to the mix. There are the medieval iconographers, the ornate baroque sculptures, surrealists, impressionists, cubists, each one of them retaining their own identity—"unconfused, immutable, undivided" (in the words of the Council of Chalcedon, describing the two natures of Christ). While these artistic eras did emerge at specific points in historical time, they do not replace one another or cancel out each other's unique identity. Rather, they complement and deepen one another, like interwoven threads in an unfolding tapestry. And at certain times a certain room will speak to you more than the others.

The cubists may be further along on the evolutionary timeline, but today it is the medieval icons that are calling to you.

Even at best it's not easy to grasp the difference between developing and unfolding. The difficulty is further compounded, however, by the pronounced psychological bent of the models we're more used to (Wilber's, and following in his footsteps, Thomas Keating), which draw an explicit correlation between structures of consciousness and stages of childhood development. Thus, the "magic" structure corresponds to the consciousness of a toddler, "mythic" to a child, and "mental" to an emerging young adult. Viewed through this lens, the implication becomes well-nigh inescapable that these earlier stages are also "lower"—i.e., immature, more primitive—expressions of full adult consciousness. They are developmental phases to be passed through— "transcended and included," perhaps— but certainly not lingered in. As Jeremy Johnson comments, Wilber's roadmap, brilliant though it may be "still retains a perspectival linearity that reduces the previous structures (the magic and mythic especially) to a state of mere infantilism... [His] developmental solution necessitates a strictly linear view of consciousness emergence, saving the transpersonal for the higher stages while still reducing the so-called "lower" stages to a childlike fantasy rather than a true and now lost mode of participation."(79)

"As it stands," Johnson adds, "this perspectival synthesis is incompatible with Gebser's thinking."

And you can imagine where things might be headed when this undetected linear bias starts to get projected out on whole groups of people deemed to be at a "lower" evolutionary level.

To enter the world of Gebser, the first and most important shift required is to recognize that we are indeed talking about structures of consciousness, not stages. Forget "onward and upward." Each of these five structures is indeed an authentic mode of participation in the world," and if they are not, perhaps, fully equal partners, they are at least fully entitled partners. Each is as qualitatively real as the other, and each adds its particular strengths and giftednesses to the whole. They are not so much steps on a ladder as planets in orbit around the sun, which is their central point of reference, the seat of their original and continuously in-breaking arising. Gebser calls this sun "The Ever-Present Origin." I will have much more to say about it in subsequent posts.

The muting or repression of any of these structures leads to an impoverishment of the whole; this is true both individually and across the broad sweep of cultural history. While these structures may emerge into manifestation at certain points along a historical timeline, they are not created by that timeline nor determined by events preceding them in the sequence. Their point of reference is the Origin, which is outside of linear time altogether and intersects with the linear timeline by a completely different set of ordering principles. They are, one might say, timeless fractals of the whole, each bearing the living water of that original fontal outpouring in their own unique pail. They are ever-present and ever-available "at the depths," even those that have not yet emerged into full conscious articulation on the linear timeline.

The "final" structure, then — the true Integral in Gebser's worldmap—may in fact be not so much a new structure itself as a capacity to hold all the other structures simultaneously, in what Teilhard de Chardin once famously called "a paroxysm of harmonized complexity." It is not so much a new window on the world as the capacity to see from a deeper dimension which transcends both linear and dialectical thinking and can deeply, feeling fully encompass both

jagged particularity and the unitive oneness flowing through it, holding all things in relationship to their source.

This new dimension will be the subject of my next posting. But for the moment, take a deep breath. Can you feel a little more spaciousness opening up in the picture, a little more forgiveness?

## **UNPERSPECTIVAL, PERSPECTIVAL, APERSPECTIVAL: GEBSER, LESSON 2**

Gebser's cultural home base was the world of art. He was a personal friend of Pablo Picasso's, and examples culled from art history dot the landscape of his "The Ever-Present Origin, illustrating almost every significant point he makes. So it's not surprising that his master interpretive lens, perspective, should itself derive from the domain of art.

Yes, perspective. Just like you learned in elementary school art. When you first began drawing pictures, probably as a preschooler, Mommy and Daddy and your big sister were always bigger, no matter where they appeared in your picture, because that's what they WERE! Then someone taught you about foreground and background, and you learned how to make things at the back of the picture smaller to show that they were farther away. You learned to turn your house at a slight angle on the page so that you could show two sides of it at once. You may or may not have consciously realized that you were learning how to proportion the various bits and pieces in relation to a hypothetical point on the horizon. But your drawings got more orderly, and they began to convey a sense of depth.

That's exactly what we're talking about here. Perspective. But now applied as an organizing principle for the field of consciousness.

According to Gebser, the five structures of consciousness we met up with in my last post—archaic, magic, mythic, mental, and integral—can be grouped into three larger categories (three worlds, as he calls them): unperspectival, perspectival, and aperspectival. While the nomenclature may at first feel intimidating, it's actually quite easy to master if you keep your elementary school art days in mind. Unperspectival is how you drew before you learned about foreground and background, when everything was all just jumbled onto the drawing sheet. Perspectival is the drawing sheet once you've learned to arrange it in relationship to that hypothetical point on the horizon. And aperspectival is what ensues once you've learned to convey several perspectives simultaneously, as in some of Picasso's surrealist artwork where he simultaneously shows you the front side and back side of a person (Heads up: in Gebser the prefix "a" always conveys the meaning of "free from." Thus an aperspectival view is one that is free from captivity to a single central point of reference).

The Unperspectival World embraces the archaic, magic, and mythic structures.

The Perspectival World hosts the mental structure.

The Aperspectival World is the still-emerging integral structure.

Each of these three perspectives is properly called a world because it comprises an entire gestalt, an entire womb of meaning in which we live and move and make our connections. Each has its own distinctive fragrance, ambience, tincture. Each is an authentic pathway of participation, an authentic mode of encountering the cosmos, God, and our own selfhood. Each has its brilliant strengths and its glaring weaknesses. Compositely, they evoke "the width and length and height and depth" of our collective human journey into consciousness.

I am aware that I am walking the razor's edge as I choose my words here, trying to escape the gravitational field of perspectival consciousness that would lock this all back into the evolutionary timeline. It is true, of course, that these three worlds broadly demarcate the three major epochs of Western human cultural history: ancient, medieval, and modern. But it's always been a bit dicey to try to hold these timelines too tightly or to limit structures of consciousness to specific historical eras. We have stunning exemplars of the mental structure breaking through in ancient Greece and Israel, and the mythic still lives among us today in much of the American heartlands. Gebser's model deftly sidesteps these all-too familiar cul de sacs by reminding us that the "worlds" (and the structures they encompass) are phenomenological, not developmental. While they appear to join the flow of linear time at specific entry points, they have in fact always been present and must continue to be present, for they are part of the ontology of the Whole.

Gebser's visually oriented presentation allows him to make one additional very important point. From a visual standpoint, perspective is really a matter of dimensionality, and dimensionality is in turn a function of DEGREE OF SEPARATION. Gebser builds on this insight to draw powerful correlations between the emergence of perspective within the structures of consciousness and the emergence of the egoic—i.e., individual—selfhood so foundational to our modern self-understanding.

In the unperspectival world everything exists in guileless immediacy (remember preschooler art?) There is relatively little separation between viewer and viewed, the external world mirroring a self-structure that is still fluid and permeable. This is the world of "original participation" (as philosopher Owen Barfield once famously described it) where the cosmos is at its most numinous and communicative, and the sense of belonging is as oceanic as the sea itself.

As we enter the perspectival world, the double-edged sword begins to fall. The same growing capacity for abstraction that makes possible the perception of proportion and depth also—by the same measure—increases our sense of separation. We stand more on the outside, our attention fixed on that hypothetical point on the horizon which organizes our canvas and maintains the illusion of depth within a flat plane. Order is maintained, but at the cost of a necessary distancing and a strict adherence to the artifice that makes the illusion possible in the first place. Deception enters riding on the back of that abstractive power, as "original participation" gives way to a growing sense of dislocation and exile. That is essentially our modern world: "oscillating," writes Jeremy Johnson (p. 58) "between a powerlessness to control the forces unleashed by the perspectival world on the one hand, and a total self-intoxicating power on the other"—in a word, "between anxiety and delight."

It is my own observation here (rather than either Jeremy's or Gebser's) that the perspectival contains an inherently deceptive aspect since it is intentionally creating a sleight of hand, the illusion of three-dimensionality within a two-dimensional plane. But if I have not wandered too far off the mark, the observation gives me some strong additional leverage for emphasizing why resolutions to the perspectival crisis can never emerge from within the perspectival structure itself, and why the much-hyped "integral emergence" cannot simply be a new, improved version of our old mental habits—not even a vastly increased "paradox tolerance." We need to get out of Flatland altogether.

For me, that is what apersepectival is essentially all about. It is an authentic transposition of consciousness from a two-dimensional plane to a sphere. Within that sphere, inner and outer world come back together again, and a sense of authentic belongingness returns. Numinosity returns as well: the felt-sense of a cosmos directly infused

with the vivifying presence of Origin. Selfhood once again becomes fluid and interpenetrating even as presence becomes more centered and intensified.

The perspectival is at best a foreshadowing and at worst a mental simulacrum of authentic apersepectival three-dimensionality. The real deal can indeed be attained; in fact, it is now breaking in upon us whether we like it or not! But the cost of admission is not cheap: it entails the overhaul not only of our fundamental attitudes, but of our entire neurophysiology of perception.

I hope to circle back to this point in due course. For now, the most important thing to keep in mind is that in the Gebserian system PERSPECTIVE IS NOT SIMPLY A POINT OF VIEW; IT IS A COMPLETELY DIFFERENT WORLD OF SEEING, unfolding according to its own protocols: its own core values and ways of making connections. To truly take in another's perspective is not simply to take in another's "position" and arrange the pieces dialectically on a mental chessboard. Rather, it is profoundly to take in another world and allow that world to touch our hearts and wash over us deeply until it, too, becomes our own. It is to listen in a whole new dimension. And I believe Gebser would argue that this dimension only truly opens up with the inbreaking of the apersepectival structure.

### **THE VIEW FROM THE PERISCOPE: GEBSER – LESSON 3**

Gebser's brilliant unpacking of the structures of consciousness in terms of PERSPECTIVE (as it is understood in the art world rather than in philosophy) gives us a powerful new visual tool with which to begin to see where we're pinned. In art, perspective is a technique for creating the illusion of depth and space on a two-dimensional plane. It works by establishing an arbitrary "vanishing point" on the horizon, then arranging all the elements on the canvas on a hypothetical line leading back to it. Instantly the size of the objects relative to one another on the canvas comes into correct proportion, and a sense of realism is established.

As I ponder this striking visual metaphor, I am struck by how this same basic configuration seems to apply to that other organizing convention of the mental structure of consciousness, TIME. In perspectival time the "vanishing point" would be that arbitrary "consummatum est" (whether you construe that to be your own death, the Armageddon, the Omega Point, or simply the end of some process you're currently involved in). The line leading back to it is linear time, and what in a painting takes shape as "background" and "foreground" finds its temporal equivalent in "past," "present," and "future." The perspectival world marches to the drumbeat of linear time, and against that incessant drumbeat all our Prospero's castles rise and fall.

I know it may at first sound a bit like apples and oranges to compare the visual/perspectival and the temporal/perspectival. But if you consult your gut, I'll bet that you'll recognize their similarity; it's the same, familiar sense of constriction. Whether in visual or temporal mode, perspectival consciousness is always playing against an endpoint—finding itself somewhere on a line leading back to a point, knowing at some level that it's all a trompe l'oeil, yet enthralled by the ordering power conveyed by that trompe l'oeil. The set-up may be an artifice, but the fruits are hard to deny.

The pervasive subliminal pressure of that invisible line converging on a distant point explains some of the more hypnotic blind spots of the mental structure of consciousness. It's why it's so hard to hang onto the distinction between "evolving" and "unfolding." It's why we naturally group things in threes—"beginning, middle, end," "thesis, antithesis, synthesis." In perspectival seeing things fall naturally into

## THE PERSPECTIVAL MAINSPRING: GEBSER LESSON 4

stages and sequences, and the relationship between objects tends to take on a hierarchical (Gebser calls it “pyramidal”) character as they are assigned their respective rank and value on the perspectival line. Time tends to become spatialized, with “earlier” morphing into “lower” and “later” morphing into “higher.” That is why, in all sincerity and with no intent to cause harm, many people under the sway of the mental structure of consciousness will state categorically that the mythic and magic stages of consciousness (since they appear “earlier” on the historical timeline) are “less evolved.” How could it be otherwise? “Structures of consciousness” collapse inevitably into “stages of consciousness;” they can’t escape the gravitational field. The artist’s prerogative to assign order and proportion becomes the moralist’s duty to impose value and judgment, and it all happens so fast that we don’t even see how we’ve been blindsided.

The real problem, of course, is that we forget that we are seeing through a periscope. What appears to our eyes to be “the real world” is in fact the world as projected through a powerful perspectival ruse that does indeed convey tremendous ordering and synthesizing power, but only within the limits of its governing conventions. Take away the vanishing point on the horizon, and the whole ruse collapses.

Perspectival thinking is by nature sectorized thinking; the validity of the proportions and the illusion of three-dimensionality are legitimate only within the cone of perception it generates, and in order to create that cone in first place, certain things must be excluded a priori from the picture. In single point perspective you can only show two sides of the house; when you try to show three, you have exceeded the terms of the convention. If the sides don’t naturally fall along the same line of sight, you can’t force them together. It breaks the rules; your license expires.

Gebser stresses this point in a hard-hitting paragraph which Jeremy Johnson quotes in full. I believe it is worth quoting in full yet again since it speaks so forcefully to what is so rarely named but can only be seen as “perspectival arrogance:”

*“Perspectival vision and thought confine us within spatial limitations...The positive result is a concretion of man and space; the negative result is the restriction of man to a limited segment, where he perceives only one sector of reality. Like Petrarch, who separated landscape from land, man separates from the whole only that part which his view or thinking can encompass, and forgets those sectors that lie adjacent, beyond, or even behind...Man, himself a part of the world, endows his sector of awareness with primacy; but he is, of course, only able to see the partial view. The sector is given prominence over the circle; the part outweighs the whole. As the whole cannot be approached from a perspectival attitude to the world, we merely superimpose the character of wholeness onto the sector, the result being the familiar ‘totality.’”*

I will have more to say about the totalizing proclivities of perspectival seeing in my next post; I believe it is one of most insidious and virulent contributors to our contemporary cultural impasse. For now, PERSPECTIVAL HUMILITY (if you want to call it that) begins with accepting the givens we Flatlanders must abide within. Those of us who still mostly inhabit the mental structures of consciousness can no more wish ourselves (or proclaim) ourselves into aperspectival consciousness than we can flap our wings and fly. But we CAN wield this extraordinary tool responsibly and indeed courteously PROVIDED we remember that the license to arrange, synthesize, and assign rank and value is valid only within the sector of consciousness that has immediately given rise to it. Above all, it must never be used to colonize or tyrannize another structure of consciousness. To do so constitutes an unpardonable offense against the Whole.

All structures of consciousness have their center of gravity, a core value or “moral mainspring” around which all else is ordered. Often unstated and even unrecognized, it nonetheless establishes the yardstick by which value is measured and priorities are assigned within that structure.

In the mental structure of consciousness the skew is definitely toward THE INDIVIDUAL.

This orientational should come as no surprise; it is essentially built right into the hardwiring of this structure of perception itself. Perspectival consciousness comes into being part and parcel with the establishment of a perceiver, the artist who stands outside of his or her canvas and orchestrates the entire artifice from a perch slightly beyond it. It bursts upon the world stage joined at the hip with the capacity for self-reflective consciousness, the ability to stand outside of oneself and look back upon oneself and upon the world as if in third person. This slightly removed viewing platform is the ego, the crowning achievement of the mental structure of consciousness, and Western Civilization has ridden to glory on its back.

By “ego” I am not referring here to what religious folks are all too quick to demonize as “sinful self-will.” I am using the term in its phenomenological sense, to denote a fundamental structure of perception and the sense of selfhood emerging from that structure. For Jung (the first to really develop this usage), consciousness was unthinkable without an egoic structure to mediate it; in Jungian psychology “ego” does not equate to “sinful self-will” but to the fundamental vehicle of conscious agency. It is in this broader and more forgiving way that Gebser, too, approaches the meteoric rise of egoic selfhood within the mental structure of consciousness. Only when the ego becomes “hypertrophied”—overgrown and barricaded (as opposed to merely boundaried) is there cause for concern.

We all know the strengths and weaknesses of the beast: on the upside, tremendous powers of abstraction, synthesis, and mastery. On the downside, objectification, alienation from the whole, and that chronic, background anxiety caused by having removed oneself from the world in order to perceive it. I have maintained that there is a chronic EXISTENTIAL DISTRUST as well, resting on those two shadow features of ALIENATION from the whole (I don’t believe that we can directly experience belongingness in this structure of consciousness; it overpowers the operating system) and that pervasive sense of TRICKERY built right into the perspectival artifice (“What if it’s all just a ruse?”) Small wonder that the “hermeneutic of suspicion” and post-modern angst should reach their zenith in present times, as we slide toward what Gebser calls the “deficient” phase of the mental structure of consciousness, the twilight of its cultural hegemony.

But the individual self remains its crowning achievement, and as obedient children of this structure, we still walk mostly in its light. When this powerful new unfolding of “The Ever-Present Origin” first swept onto the stage of Western history with the dawn of the Renaissance (and note that “renaissance” is by no means a value-neutral term!) we saw—and celebrated—the sweeping away of the “superstition” and “feudalism” of the medieval Catholic Church before a rising tide of free-thinking, self-empowered human beings. Galileo, Leonardo da Vinci, Copernicus, Martin Luther: what’s not to love? The individual had asserted himself (still “himself” at that point, but the axe was already to the root). As we rolled on into the Enlightenment, more and more of the ancient collective institutions that had once defined the building blocks of ordered society in the mythic structure of consciousness—caste, gender, slavery—fell by the

wayside before the compelling image of the emergent individual, fully endowed with “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” In the two centuries since the founding of our American democracy these “inalienable rights” have been gradually (often grudgingly) more widely extended—to white free men, then to slaves, then to women, then to people of “non-traditional” (by the old rules) gender orientations, and now to people of color. None of these breakthroughs comes without considerable social upheaval, but the overall direction has been steady, based on our prevailing perspectival consensus that the individual is the fundamental building block of a well-ordered society, and that individual rights are synonymous with human rights and are to be protected at all costs. That is the “moral mainspring,” the fundamental priority as viewed through the perspectival structure of consciousness.

Not saying it’s not true...BUT...if we are serious about traveling down the path that Gebser opens before us...

It would seem to me that PERSPECTIVAL HUMILITY begins by acknowledging this leaning as an inbuilt bias of perspectival consciousness, not an eternal and unassailable truth, let alone the measure of our human “evolutionary progress.” We need to relax our stranglehold on the values themselves, at least long enough to begin to look directly at the filter we’ve been looking through.

And I’ll bet that not many of you are willing to go there just yet. But only by taking that risk, I wager, will we begin to make room for the in-breaking aperspectival structure, where the resolution we’ve all been yearning for actually lies in wait for us.

Structures of consciousness have their own life cycles. When a new structure bursts definitively onto the stage of history, it is typically at its most vital and creative, filled with powerful constellating energy and psychic force. It will quickly establish itself as the new culturally dominant structure. When the structure enters its deficient mode (typically toward the end of its era of cultural hegemony), it tends to become stale and increasingly rigid, fixated around its own worse habits.

In Gebser’s analysis, the turbulent social upheavals that erupted full force in the early twentieth century and have continued more or less unbroken right into our own times can be attributed in large part to the phase of the cycle now playing out: the mental structure of consciousness in its deficient mode. The good news is that this turmoil is in fact a birth canal, and the contractions we are collectively anguishing through are indeed the birth pangs of the rising aperspectival structure making its presence powerfully known. The bad news is that labor is bloody hell.

When the mental structure becomes deficient, it displays two signature—seemingly contrary—tendencies: it TOTALIZES, then it SPLINTERS.

We started to explore Gebser’s understanding of “totalizing” a couple of posts ago. What this means, essentially, is that the perspectival viewing platform is by definition a SECTORED reality; by its own governing convention, it can only let you see a part of the picture. When the mental structure enters deficient mode, this inherent limitation is forgotten (or overriden) and the partial view begins to mistake itself for the whole. Paradigms multiply, sometimes dizzyingly, along with the telltale siren call toward meta-synthesis: a “grand theory of everything” that engulfs all paradigms, all components, all “quadrants” in a single comprehensive overlay. The naming and articulating goes on compulsively and at breakneck speed as if, in some sort of magical reversion, we’ve allowed ourselves to

believe that by correctly framing the situation, we have everything under control.

Of course, it’s a bit like rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic even as the dark waters reach up to engulf us. Because that’s what the mental structure really is: simply a deck on the great ship of Being. The frenzied mental manipulation of reality remains at the mental plane, firmly imprisoned within the perspectival seeing that gave rise to it in the first place. What is needed, says Gebser, is not synthesis but SYNTAXIS: a whole new way of seeing, from a place far deeper within us.

As perspectival unease continues to build (remember “paradigm malaise” from Thomas Kuhn’s iconic *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions?*), we see an increasing proclivity to objectify, quantify, and commodify, and a sharp increase in categorical thinking and the use of pseudo-scientific predicative capacities applied across whole blocks of people. There is a growing willingness to sacrifice the person to the paradigm, disallowing for individual variations in favor of paradigm consistency. The temperature of moralism and judgmentalism rises steadily as the embattled mental structure collapses toward a “universal intolerance” (as Gebser bluntly names it.)

In one of his most piercing analyses, Jeremy Johnson comments perceptively on the underlying psychic anguish driving the increasingly intransigent cultural acting out:

*“On a perspectival plane, the event horizon is the end point for the eye that perceives it. If the spatial self—the waking ego—in a material world is all that we are, then of course we are terrified by the thought of it coming to an end. ‘The deeper and farther we extend our view into space, the narrower is our sector of the visual pyramid,’ Gebser writes, speaking of a ‘universal intolerance’ beginning to manifest itself in the twentieth century. ‘He sees only a vanishing point lost in the misty distance...and he feels obliged to defend his point fanatically, lest he lose his world entirely.’”*

*Seeing Through the World, p. 55*

From here, the initially puzzling morphing of totalizing synthesis into splintering is not hard to follow. The perspectival world is already founded on the principle of segmentation, the deliberate cordoning off of a smaller subset of the whole in which the rules can be made to hold sway. Under stress, the same principle is simply extended more insistently: if you can’t bend the whole world to your point of view, simply create a smaller world! Hence the emergence of siloes, identity politics, political correctness, and “the post-truth world” as under the banner of “co-exist!” the overwhelmed mental structure of consciousness abdicates its fundamental responsibility to make moral sense of the world. “The endgame of perspectival consciousness in its deficient phase is infinite fragmentation,” writes Jeremy Johnson—“and therefore the shattering of space itself.” (p. 54) That “space” is our formerly ordered and coherent universe.

Johnson rightly takes Ken Wilber to task for coining the phrase “aperspectival madness” to describe the postmodern condition “where all views are correct and no views are wrong.” For Gebser this phrase would be an oxymoron if not an outright insult, because the aperspectival is irreducibly about COHERENCE, not about madness. Whatever “Integral” may imply vis a vis a structure of consciousness (and we will venture into that terrain shortly), aperspectival does not—repeat, DOES NOT—equate to an intellectual laissez-faire in which a broad-minded (or indifferent) tolerance for other points of view equates to the attainment of an enlightened “nondual” state. Quite to the contrary, according to Jeremy, “. . .the so-called

postmodern age in many respects is merely the perspectival age wrought to its outermost limit: the atomization of all perspectives into their own world-spaces and the utter success of ratio to divide the world up, not into organic difference, but a shattered aggregate of points of view.” (54)

Been there, done that. With shattered hearts and perhaps authentic remorse of conscience, we must prepare to leave the battlefield behind and find our way, once again, toward that ever-present wellspring which even now is flowing powerfully beneath the wreckage as the world stage readies itself to receive the new unfolding. A blessed Thanksgiving, one and all!

## THE MYTHIC AND MAGIC STRUCTURES: GEBSER, LESSON 6

### “You Can’t Go Home Again...”

I know that a number of you, in growing awareness of the of the blind spots and shadow elements in the mental structure of consciousness, have been casting a fond glance toward indigenous cultures, which seem to offer counterbalancing strengths in precisely the areas where the mental structure is weakest: a deeper connection to the natural world, a more organic sense of belonging, and a greater awareness of the evocative power of ritual and the numinous. Your intuition is fundamentally correct, for part of the tragic hubris of the mental structure is its disdain for structures “less evolved” than its own and its conviction that it has “transcended and included” all previous developmental stages, bearing uniquely on its own shoulders “the axis and the arrow of evolution.”

Still, one must proceed cautiously with this mythic turn. It has been tried twice already during the past century, and both times it has arrived at a dead end.

The first attempt got underway between the two world wars and gave birth to the movement known as Traditionalism. Under the guiding inspiration of the brilliant French metaphysician Rene Guenon (1886-1951), it immediately attracted some of the brighter minds of the early twentieth century and has continued to exert a significant (though mostly subterranean) influence on the intellectual current of our times. In addition to Guenon himself, some of the most prominent names associated with this movement include Ananda Coomaraswamy, Frithjof Schuon, Seyyed Hussein Nasr, Titus Burkhardt, Marco Pallis, and in a somewhat less “hardline” form Huston Smith. Thomas Merton was also attracted to many aspects of this teaching, and it is no secret that he was being actively courted by a Traditionalist circle at the time of his death. Many of you in our own Wisdom circle will have met some of these teachings through my former colleague Lynn Bauman, a student of Schuon and Nasr.

The Traditionalist tagline is perfectly encapsulated in the title of Mark Sedgwick’s groundbreaking study of this movement: “*Against the Modern World*.” To Guenon and his lineage, the perspectival turn (as Gebser calls it, not Guenon himself) represented a disastrous mistake: a tragic spiritual profligacy and perversion of the true path of Wisdom. That ancient path still remains, guarded in diasporas of traditional cultures and religious lineages, but regaining the right path requires a strict renunciation of Modernism and a return to the thought styles, artistic genres, spiritual practices and in some cases even dietary habits of those surviving traditional cultures which have not succumbed to the siren call of modernity.

You will recognize a Traditionalist teaching when you hear one because it will inevitably begin with some variation of the theme, “We

can all see that the modern world is going to hell in a handbasket,” then usually proceed to introducing the notion of the Kali Yuga, the famous “Dark Cycle” of Sanskrit provenance, which our own age is claimed to manifestly fulfill. There is a good deal of emphasis on authentic lineage transmission (as opposed to humanly-concocted religions) and an explicit orientation toward the past. The journey back to truth swims upstream against the river of time until one finally arrives at the headwaters “in the beginning...”

The conceptual flaw in this stance, from a Gebserian standpoint, is that *it fundamentally mis-locates Origin*. “In the beginning” is not on a linear timeline. The Origin is outside of linear time and “springs forth” (the literal meaning of the German word *Ursprung*) onto the world screen in the present, amid the cultural and consciousness structures currently prevailing. It cannot be found in the attempt to recreate earlier conditions as we project them in our own minds (another perspectival trap). At very best, such a misconstrued effort can only land us in the “deficient” stage of the structure we are trying to replicate: for the magic structure, in sorcery; for the mythic structure in psychic solipsism. The road we have traveled on our collective human journey toward consciousness cannot be undone—nor was there a wrong turn. Even the anguish of the deficient mental structure at the end of its vital lifespan has not been for naught, for in conferring on consciousness a whole new “world” of consciousness (the perspectival), it has laid the necessary structural groundwork for the emergence of the next unfolding.

The second “mythic revival” is of more recent vintage, roughly contemporaneous (and for good reason) with what we popularly call “the self-realization movement.” Its headwaters lie primarily in C.G. Jung and his game-changing discovery of the close correlation between the mythical as outer cultural form and as inner archetype. Gebser was onto this as well: he recognized the mythical structure as intrinsically tied to the emergence into human consciousness of the notion of the soul. But he also recognized—only too clearly—that when dealing with a structure as inherently fluid as the mythical, one has to keep a firm grip on the “yang.” He never permitted his construction of the mythical structure of consciousness to stray too far from its concrete historical and cultural underpinnings. Once *that* tether is cut, the mythic structure of consciousness can flow all too easily into a privatized and significantly gentrified interior landscape, where its primary purpose is to furnish the language, symbols, images, for our personal soul-work.

That was the coup de grace delivered by Joseph Campbell in his iconic *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* which catapulted him to fame, launched Parabola Magazine, and sparked a lively popular revival of interest in traditional cultures, crafts, artistic genres, and rituals—albeit mostly among the intellectual elite, and this time with aesthetic rather than Traditionalist dogmatic concerns predominating. The mythical structure of consciousness reemerged as a fertile garden for cultivating “the rose within.” And thus it has largely remained to this day. In contemporary evolutionary models (such as Ken Wilber’s and Thomas Keating’s it has lost virtually all connection to historical time and place and become merely the name for a developmental stage in individual human evolution.

Perspectival nostalgia in mythic drag.

Just as Origin cannot be sought through a backward turn, Gebser insists, neither can it be sought through an inward turn. Yin and yang must be held in careful balance because it is on the playing field of our collective cultural journey—history in all messiness, violence, and shadow stuff—that every structure of consciousness has emerged into manifestation; and it is the very mass and weight of that full collective experience that creates the depth and staying power to call forth the new structure of consciousness. It cannot be born until it can be *borne*.

This time-tested cultural pattern is particularly true of the still-dawning Integral structure, which will add yet another dimension to the weight and heft of manifest reality and demand that we meet Origin *there*, in that new dimension we can as yet barely apprehend. In this dark and distinctly paschal season of Advent 2020, I swear I can sometimes sense it drawing near, as if on angels' wings, to see whether the human heart has yet grown deep enough, stable enough, and courageous enough to endure the weight of both the individual and collective suffering that is the necessary price for conscious emergence.

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