

The Revelation in Question

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First published in James Moore's biography
Gurdjieff: the Anatomy of a Myth. Element, 1991, 1999, 415p.

From the moment Gurdjieff set foot in Moscow circa 1912 until his last poignant days of 1949 in Paris, his life moved directly under his compulsion to teach. If circumstance provides the bare bones of life, his ideas are its very marrow. Even the most enthusiastic biographer must therefore pause to grapple with the revelation in question.

What then precisely is Gurdjieff's teaching? This natural line of inquiry seems to promise clarification, but is spoilt by its own rigour. Time deadens authorized versions like hemlock, and Gurdjieff (though he came close) never actually issued one; the vivifying power of his ideas entails the moment, the conditions, the pupil's type, state, receptivity and potential. One solitary constant emerges: Gurdjieff's ideas and methods, in all their breathtaking scope, are constellated around the idea of conscious evolution.

Many interesting people found in Gurdjieff a spring which answered to their special thirst; their need, shorn of its accidental elements, was simple, and his response simple. Then no one need fear to meet in Gurdjieff intellectual virtuosity for its own sake; he considered most of the intelligentsia as titillators or intellectual masturbators. Despite this essential simplicity, Gurdjieff did not come West in order to market some sherbet-flavoured vagary, or offer impractical advice that everyone should be good and kind. His ideas had virility, form, and content; one simply cannot approach them without attention and dogged staying power. J. B. Priestley understates in warning, 'In order to study this movement, nobody will have to do any intellectual slumming.'¹

The rare elements which overtopped Gurdjieff's ideological crucible had cost twenty years to gather. Firing and melting and recasting them, he produced a semantic critique, an epistemology, cosmology, cosmogony, psychology, human typology, phenomenology of consciousness, and practical *Existenzphilosophie* – an astonishing set of ideas and techniques which stirred Philip Mairet to proclaim: 'No system of gnostic soteriological philosophy that has been published to the modern world is comparable to it in power and intellectual articulation.'²

Such a compliment from a complete stranger might have surprised Gurdjieff, for even on his own lips he never completely trusted ordinary language to convey the spectrum of his work. At the infra-red end so-to-speak words were superfluous. 'I teach', he said tartly, 'that when it rains the pavements get wet.' At the ultra-violet ends, words were impotent: by definition there existed no words adequate to describe a metaphysical essence which lay beyond them, in a vibrating and active silence. As to the communication spectrum's middle band, it was unfortunately occupied by a Tower of Babel, a 'confusion of tongues', where any feasible meaning was tragically warped by each man's linguistic and cultural subjectivity.

Gurdjieff accordingly wrestled with the problem of transmitting his teaching, like Jacob with the angel; and was similarly obliged to vary his approach and grip. In early days he favoured an idiom so precise it had almost the quality of gunmetal; in later years one of unbelievable complication and opacity. Simultaneously he cultivated his gift for non-verbal transmission: he taught through diagrams and symbols; he taught through money, through alcohol and through the preparation, cooking and eating of food; he taught through music – building his neo-Platonic ideas into the very structure of his compositions. He taught through his Sacred Dances^A (and at least a handful of dedicated pupils appeared transformed by bodily deciphering his 'universal language' of posture, gesture and movement). Perhaps most remarkable of all were those moments when – abandoning all external procedures – Gurdjieff projected a special doctrine of attention through his sheer being and 'the exacting benevolence of his gaze'.³

By now it is clear that no potted version of Gurdjieff's teaching can remotely do it justice, still less have the transforming power which is its distinctive hallmark. Nor should we be surprised. After all, if Richard Rees' breathless assertion can be credited, 'It is scarcely an exaggeration to say that Gurdjieff undertook to teach his pupils how to secrete God-stuff.'⁴

Gurdjieff believed in God. He had, of course (like Schweitzer, Jung, Simone Weil, Teilhard de Chardin, Buber and Jaspers), somehow to accommodate his conviction to a cultural establishment which still today sets its voguish heel on the numinous as a topic for polite conversation. As Gurdjieff grew older, he grew bolder. In an early teaching period – intent not to provoke the 'edgy resistance of today's "a-

religious" man' ⁵ – he alluded bleakly to 'the Absolute'; but a decade later, confessing his deeper reverence, he extolled 'Our Almighty Omni-Loving Common Father Uni-Being Creator Endlessness'. Even this personification fell prudently short of our conventional stereotype, at which Gurdjieff gently laughed: ('They picture this famous "God" of theirs exactly as an "Old Jew".' ⁶): in his own conception, however patriarchal, there remained ample scope for a theology of subtle refinement.

The sublime myths of creation and man's fall have come down to us from the infancy of humanity; that infancy which, in its innocence and wonder, centred naked man in the context of a universal question and dignified him as an icon of great meaning. Difficult to guess how literally Gurdjieff believed the modern myth of his own devising; it suffices perhaps that at the symbolic or bardic level it projects his deepest insights. He is silent (as confident science ^B falls silent) before the primal enigma, the grandfather of all insoluble riddles – namely the miraculous existence of 'something' rather than nothing. He blithely assumes his First Cause and his cosmic stage properties. But once he is granted his premise of a dramatic universe, Gurdjieff develops a mystery play of rare persuasion and heroic proportions. Whether it amounts to a new revelation must be left to the sober judgement of history; certainly it will light here and there a candle of spirituality in a darkness currently profound.

Gurdjieff's 'Common Father Endlessness' is not located in Heaven. (Both 'Heaven' and 'Hell' he regarded as malign inventions of Babylonian dualism). Nor does his God belong to some ethereal or psychic plane, some wispy parallel world, peculiarly accessible through drugs or ouija boards or wafers. He is centred here in our vast but ultimately apprehensible material universe, on the 'Most Most Holy Sun Absolute'.

In the beginning only the Sun Absolute was physically concentrated in endless space, which was already charged with the primordial cosmic substance *Etherokrilno*. Because this nebulous *Etherokrilno* was in static equilibrium, the super-sun existed and was maintained by our Common Father, quite independently of outside stimulus, through the internal action of his laws and under the dispensation termed *Autoegocrat* ('I keep everything under my control'). There and thus Our Father might have existed forever, delightfully choired by his Cherubim and Seraphim . . . might have, but for the Merciless Heropass.

The Heropass is Gurdjieff's name for time – God's shadow or alter ego, the inescapable concomitant of existence: just and pitiless, blending subjectively with all composite forms, and, in its blending, destroying them forever. Here we revisit Locke's familiar idea, 'Time is a perpetual perishing', and Kipling's, 'Time like an ever-rolling stream bears all its sons away' – but with the significant Gurdjieffian addendum that time is a holy entity, coeval with God.

Immediately our Common Father perceived time's remorseless entropic effect – the infinitely slow but irreversible diminution in volume of his dwelling-place the Sun Absolute – he urgently sought a remedy. Bending all his divine will, he issued from himself the 'Word-God' *Theomertmalogos*, which, in one stupendous dialectical coup (strangely redolent of contemporary astronomy's 'Big Bang'), reacted everywhere with the *Etherokrilno* to create our *Megalocosmos* or great universe. Henceforward this sacred and living creation was nourished by an open system of symbiosis or reciprocal maintenance, termed by Gurdjieff *Trogoautoegocrat* ('Eating myself, I am maintained'): throughout a vast holistic ecosystem, each order of beings now produced the very energies of substances which guaranteed the survival of other groups. Such was God's amended scheme of things and time itself could not prevail against it.

So God had won. . . and lost. He had won by ensuring, for himself and the Holy Sun Absolute, perpetual immunity from entropy; he had lost by creating a universe with which – especially at its involutory frontiers – he could enjoy only the most attenuated contact. From the first syllable of recorded time, the latent omnipotence of God's unmanifested being had been subtly contradicted; but now – world by descending world – his potency suffered progressive degradation. He was like the Emperor in Kafka's haunting allegory, 'The Great Wall of China', who immured in the innermost palace of the Forbidden City, was fatally unable to project his imperial will into remote provinces; he was like a deviser of games, who, once having settled the rules, could not himself beat the Ace of trumps with the two of hearts; he was like the deists' 'absentee landlord'.

Henceforward all God's inferior creation was necessarily maintained in its new and dynamic equilibrium not by him directly, but through the mechanical action of two primary sacred laws: *Triamazikamno* the law of Three, and *Heptaparaparshinokh* the Law of Seven – the former governing the causality of each isolated phenomenon; the latter governing the trajectory of every process or series of phenomena.

Gurdjieff's Law of Three, unsurprisingly, lays down that each phenomenon, from the cosmic to the sub-atomic, springs from the interaction of no less and no more than three forces: the first, or Holy Affirming, being active; the second, or Holy Denying, passive; and the third, or Holy Reconciling, neutralizing. His formulation, 'The higher blends with the lower in order to actualise the middle'⁷, is clear and easy to example: the sperm merges with the ovum to create the embryo (or alternatively the sexual drive is inhibited, giving rise to 'sublimation' or 'complex'); a teacher relates with a pupil ensuring transmission; *Theomertmalogos* animates *Etherokrilno* to actualize the *Megalocosmos* – and so on.

But although this 'sacred dialectic' is straightforward, the Law of Three in its totality should not be written off as simplistic. Gurdjieff would not have been Gurdjieff

had he not also countenanced another and pretty incompatible version – here the third force was not itself the resultant, but the arbiter, agency, or catalyst yielding the resultant. This slightly more complex model breeds its distinctive family of examples: flour and water become bread only when bonded by fire; plaintiff and defendant have their case resolved only through a judge; nucleus and electrons constitute an atom only within an electromagnetic field. In this variant, the third or reconciling force is to Gurdjieff what the Holy Ghost is to the Christians, time to Darwinians, and history used to be to the Marxists: with it all things are possible.

In any case time and reciprocal maintenance ensure that no phenomenon can stand in splendid isolation: 'The higher blends with the lower in order to actualise the middle *and thus becomes either higher for the preceding lower, or lower for the succeeding higher.*'⁷ Thus each event is quickly braided into a process which is itself subject to new constraint – the Law of Seven.

The Law of Seven is undoubtedly difficult to grasp or précis, and Gurdjieff himself left no tidy formula. Seemingly it comes to this:

Every completing process must without exception have seven discrete phases: construing these as an ascending or descending series of seven notes or pitches, the frequency of vibrations must develop *irregularly*, with two predictable deviations (just where semi-tones are missing between Mi-Fa and Si-Do in the C major scale cde-fgab-c.

The absence of straight lines in nature; the customary slackening of human effort; the diversion of enterprises from their original objective; the obscene transition from the Sermon on the Mount to the Spanish Inquisition – all such phenomena arise from the two inescapable deflections inherent in the Law of Seven. Exceptionally, adds Gurdjieff, a process or octave can indeed perfectly maintain its original line – but only when (by accident or design) extraneous and exactly appropriate 'shocks' plug the intervals Mi-Fa and Si-Do.

Gurdjieff's most stupendous and contentious example of the Law of Seven is his 'Ray of Creation'. In this primordial descending octave, Do is God or the Absolute, Si is the universe, La is our own constellation, Sol our sun, Fa the sun's planets, Mi the earth and Re the moon. Gurdjieff's apparent decoding of a cosmological solfeggio (*DO*minus the Lord, *SI*dera the stars, *LA*ctea the Milky Way, the *SOL*ar system – right down to the *RE*gina *COELIS*, the moon or Queen of Heaven) is a fascinating historical distraction. The Ray of Creation is far more rewardingly dwelt on as a philosophical model of the universe, which comes as near as is humanly possible to reconciling the irreconcilable:

involution and evolution, determinism and freewill, entropy and negative entropy, suffering and God's benignity.

But how does the Ray cope with the discontinuity of vibrations? – here unsuspectingly we have arrived at an existential question for mankind!

The break between Do and Si (the *Megalocosmos*) is magisterially bridged by *Fiat!*, the will of the Absolute, and the octave descends unimpeded to Fa our planetary system. At this remove however, God's potency has become so attenuated that his direct aid in reaching note Mi is out of the question: 'In order to fill the "interval" at this point . . . a special apparatus is created for receiving and transmitting the influences coming from the planets. This apparatus is *organic life on earth.*'⁸

With this extraordinary concept of a global organic transformer or filter of cosmic rays, Gurdjieff presents the hard-won solution to his burning question concerning the 'precise significance, in general, of the life process on earth of all the outward forms of breathing creatures and, in particular, of the aim of human life.'⁹ Very few geochemists today would trouble to challenge a 'biosphere' proposition of sorts, but Gurdjieff's emphatic version in his epoch was strikingly original. Like some sudden and terrible climatic reverse, his vision withers all our humanistic dreams. The proud and beautiful apparatus of organic life has never existed in its own right or for its own sake, but entirely for the unsuspected and alien advantage of the planetary system.

And if humanism is rebuffed in Gurdjieff's scheme of things, so too is terrestrial parochialism. Our particular Ray of Creation is only one of an infinite number of creative radii. Extrapolating from Nicolas of Cusa and Giordano Bruno, Gurdjieff renews assault on our obstinate emotional 'truth' that somehow, despite all, we and our little earth are central and especially important. Though in practice he loved and respected our planet, he did not mince words in describing it as 'a source of "offensive-shame" for that poor [solar] system'¹⁰; a petty, paltry, peculiar 'lopsided monstrosity', situated in the Siberia of the universe, 'almost beyond the reach of the immediate emanations of the Omni Most Holy Sun Absolute.'¹¹

With the notion that the earth is 'lopsided', we have finally arrived at the myth of man's fall. A thousand antique legends commemorate some terrible tragedy which overwhelmed our earliest parents; Gurdjieff's amazing and bitter-sweet version has exposed him to more ridicule than any other facet of his teaching. For him it evidently embodied a truth – literal or symbolic – which was pivotal, and in service to which he could welcome even the most spiteful critical dismissal.

Once upon a time (due as he wryly puts it, to 'the erroneous calculations of a certain Sacred Individual'¹²), a vast wandering comet named Kondoor violently struck the as yet uninhabited earth, creating an 'asphyxiating stink'¹³ and precipitating into elliptical geo-centric orbit two detached earthly fragments – the moon and 'Anulios.'

This unnatural and untimely Caesarean birth of the moon threatened such serious consequences and scandals to the whole solar system that the Most Great Archangel Sakaki was urgently dispatched by our Common Father to pacify the situation.

Sakaki concluded that the moon and Anulios could be stabilized and enabled to evolve normally, only if they were steadily supplied with 'the sacred vibration "Askokin" '. Since this precious vibration or substance Askokin was liberated principally on the death of living organisms, Sakaki caused mortal beings, of various shapes and sizes, to be seeded on earth by emanations from the sun. Here on the surface of the planet these little creatures breathed and fed and excreted and procreated; at death their physical remains were digested by the planet, but their Askokin passed by a sort of umbilical cord to feed the moon.

Aeons passed. At length there arose among species a true *Tetartocosmos*: a being triply possessed of thought, sensation, and feeling; a being in whom the Law of Three had intrinsic play . . . the first man. Not only did this new breed promise a surpassing contribution to the Askokin-economy, but it possessed a potential for the attainment of 'Objective Reason'. As generation succeeded generation, men and women did indeed draw closer to an objective understanding of their true situation, 'of their slavery to circumstances utterly foreign to them'¹⁴. But wait! – if ever these underlings comprehended the futile irrelevance of all their personal struggles and suffering, might they not be tempted towards mass suicide? Sakaki feared so. And if they did that, would not it grossly and dangerously distort the flow of Askokin to the moon? Sakaki feared so . . . and, from his sombre analysis and contingency planning, ensued that terrifying scourge, 'the organ Kundabuffer'.

This 'maleficent Kundabuffer', intentionally implanted at the base of the spine, obliged mankind to perceive reality upside-down and to experience indiscriminate gratification from every repetition of stimuli. Man's progression towards objective understanding was instantly arrested: he was as if subdued by opium; he walked in hypnotic sleep through a waking dream; his suggestibility became total; his energies were fatally surrendered to egoism, self-love, vanity and pride. Just as Sakaki intended, man now served the moon blindly – ironically doomed to imagine himself the monarch of all he surveyed.

Not an atom of spite or malevolence was entailed – either in the general creation of the Askokin factory-farm or in man's special corruption. On the scale of the moon's imperious need to 'grow in consciousness' and to fulfil the note Re of the Ray of Creation, organic life, man included, was simply expendable. 'That pale traitress the moon, the cause of all our woes' (the words are the poet J. C. Powys's) was a cosmological innocent, sucking the vitality out of organic life from pure infantile necessity. Sakaki himself meant no harm; indeed, as soon as the moon's crisis abated and the organ Kundabuffer became redundant, it was promptly removed from man.

Precisely here Gurdjieff drives home the dreadful irony of man's present situation. The organic compulsion to see reality upside-down had gone forever. The gift of man's extraordinary potentiality had been restored; he was a 'simulchritude of the whole' – a being who through 'conscious labour and intentional suffering' might slowly perfect himself to the level of Objective Reason and attain immortality by reintegrating with his source, the divine sun. Alas! Though the compulsion to lunacy had gone, the propensity had become crystallized. Delusion, suggestibility, malpractice, and every kind of rotten feeling so permeated human life; so festered in customs, language, social institutions and the family circle; had gained such stormy momentum – that to all intents and purposes man was still in Kundabuffer's thrall. Such was, and still is, the 'Terror of the Situation'.

Our ill-fated tribe and its ensuing story is accorded great significance in Gurdjieff's prodigious and unclassifiable masterpiece *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*. 'Everything in *Beelzebub* historical'¹⁵ claims its author outrageously: an academic provocation easier to forgive when we recall the *Mahabharata*, St Augustine's *Civitas Dei*, Dante's *Divina Commedia*, and Milton's *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* – those towering historico-metaphysical precedents, where the temporal drama is also monitored solely for its bearing on man's spiritual evolution.

Gurdjieff presents his 'theatre of history' in dualistic terms, as an intense struggle between the personified forces of darkness and light; between 'the consequences of the properties of the organ Kundabuffer' and conscious influences incarnated in Moses, Buddha, Christ, Muhammad and other messengers from our Common Father. It first appears that Gurdjieff, by the sheer humanity of his tale, and by his turbulent cast of exemplary and malign characters, is light years away from Auguste Comte's anaemic *histoire sans noms*. Familiar matinée idols (Pythagoras, Alexander the Great, Leonardo da Vinci, Mesmer, Trotsky, Lenin) mingle here with personages completely unknown. Whether the latter are merely the author's creatures or mystery figures who await time's unmasking, who can say? In either case, Gurdjieff is no historian in the formal sense; he is a latterday *ashokh* who's narrative emerges very reluctantly from the domain of primordial myth and of incredibly sophisticated allegory.

To give an example of the allegorical strand: although Gurdjieff is clearly a geological 'catastrophist' in the mold of Georges Cuvier, his daring corollary is that the psychic history of mankind, and even of each individual, recapitulates point-by-point the successive insults suffered by mother earth. (Freud incidentally comes intriguingly close to this in *Phylogenetic Fantasy*, his twelfth tract on metapsychology.) Thus in simple psychological terms the madcap comet Kondoor may represent puberty, the first organic buffet sustained by every life; the moon, the unconscious in its lunatic mode;

Anulios the tiny countervailing prompting to sanity; and Atlantis the voice of conscience, tragically engulfed beneath subjective conventional morality.

In 'historical' terms, Gurdjieff presents Atlantis as the one glorious exception to man's general debasement, affording in its brief Golden Age a model response to the Terror of the Situation. The Atlantean savant Belcultassi is the protagonist of all group work and self-observation; his successor Makary Kronbernkzion studies the Law of Three and a special technique of liberating Askokin before physical death, through 'conscious labour and intentional suffering'. Great benefits ensue – alike to these innovators and their pupils, to mankind at large, and to the moon – yet all is suddenly plunged again into chaos, when the earth's lopsidedness is abruptly accommodated by a horrendous shift in its centre of gravity – and Atlantis disappears beneath the estranging sea.

Gurdjieff is an arch-disturber. Having ushered us soothingly from this apocalyptic scene to more familiar and reassuring tableaux, he sternly insists that we revalue our values, challenge and even invert our historical preconceptions. The classical Greek philosophers are reduced to 'poor bored fishermen pouring-from-the-empty-into-the-void'¹⁶. Alexander the Great is indicted as an 'arch-vainglorious' psychopath; the equivocal hypnotist Mesmer becomes 'an honest and humble Austro-Hungarian learned being who was very meticulously pecked to death'¹⁷; King John is the best English monarch; and Judas Iscariot is canonized as a practical and self-sacrificing saint – 'the devoted and favourite Apostle initiated by Jesus Christ himself'¹⁸.

Nor is there the slightest consolation in the strange causal perspective, the sinister rehabilitation of Compté's *histoire sans noms*, which troubles the mind immediately Gurdjieff's Askokin hypothesis is seriously entertained; for example that the carnage of the trenches in the First World War ensued from the cessation of worldwide animal sacrifice centuries earlier; or the moon was hungry – and will be hungry again!

Happily Gurdjieff's world-view and historical account does not forbid hope; on the contrary, just when the clouds are darkest, our Common Father sends us his emissaries of light. Their message sounds with the resuscitating power of trumpets – Kundabuffer as such is gone forever. Although man is still inescapably fated to serve the moon, he alone among earthly creatures may also serve the sun and realize his potential for immortality.

Of all these incarnations provided from above, the most luminous in Gurdjieffian mythology is Ashiata Shiemash. Whom then does he represent? Zoroaster? Gurdjieff himself? Some impending messiah? Or is he (as portrayed), an unjustly forgotten historical figure born near Babylon c.1210 B.C.? He it was, insists Gurdjieff, who saw

most deeply, felt most keenly, faced most squarely, the poisonous legacy of Kundabuffer: the decay of love into egoism, hope into procrastination, faith into credulity. He it was who divined the redemptory potentiality of conscience, that precious emanation of the sorrow of God – still unsullied, still unatrophied, because embedded deep in man's subconscious. He it was who translated his insights into a spiritual action which, for one blessed decade, eradicated nationalism and castes and war itself, throughout the length and breadth of Asia. An astonishing figure, beloved of God himself . . . and yet none of his teachings passed in any form even to the third generation.

The blame is heaped on a certain Lentrohamsanin, a late contemporary of Ashiata Shiemash. Lentrohamsanin is an only child, the 'Papa's and Mama's darling' of a rich merchant and his abortionist wife – spoilt, conscienceless, stuffed with unmerited and undigested knowledge, full of swagger, desperate for fame. Obsessed with the Kingdom of this World, he is a utopian rationalist who reeks symbolically of the Russian (and French) revolutions: Len for Lenin, Tro for Trotsky. He is the archetypal subversive – incensed against tradition; incensed against spiritual meritocracy; incensed fundamentally against his contingent human state. He demands unconditional freedom, leisure, happiness, liberty, equality, fraternity. He demands it now, he demands it with a bravura on 'a parchment of 100 buffalo hides'. . . And in the current of mass psychosis and civil strife which he instigates and foments, the precious work of Ashiata is swept away.

Scrutinizing societies across continents and down the ages, Gurdjieff identified three independent formative impulses in ceaseless interplay. Of these, infinitely the most rare, elevated, and potent was what he called 'C' influence. Perhaps he adopted this neutral designation to minimize sceptical reaction? Certainly he in conveying here something extraordinary and contentious: the quintessence of truly conscious minds, of messengers from our Common Father, of initiatory schools – influences transmitted by an enlightened master directly to his disciples. Contradicting and superficially overwhelming these was ordinary 'A' influence: big mechanistic societal forces, centred on such perennial obsessions as 'digestion, mother-in-law, John Thomas, and cash'¹⁹. And finally, uneasily accommodated between the two, was 'B' influence – conscious in its origin but fallen into the vortex of life, and mediated more or less mechanically through religion, science, philosophy and the arts.

To label Gurdjieff 'traditionalist', 'pacifist', 'internationalist', 'patriarchal', a proto-ecologist^c and so forth, is defensible as a rough and ready truth; and to note that his ideas were often in advance of his times is fair comment – but to leave matters there is to miss the most interesting point. For although Gurdjieff spoke as he found, although

he drew his observations directly from a life of Rabelaisian engagement – his critique’s full dimensionality entails not merely his breadth of personal experience but the vertical axis of transcendent laws.

The indignation, pity, and benevolence which he unquestionably felt as a human being, could not possibly moderate his grim analysis arrived at *sub specie aeternitatis*: the hypnotized masses, led by equally hypnotized leaders under the banner of preposterous slogans, must fall again and again into the ditch; leech-like ‘power-possessors’, under one convenient rubric or another, would suck the blood of subservient millions; the ‘burning question of the day’²⁰ would change again and again, but not the instability of human reason or the accents of ‘infuriated offensive abuse’²¹. Reform, on its own level, was futile: ‘There is no progress whatever . . . The outward form changes. The essence does not change . . . Modern civilisation is based on violence and slavery and fine words’²². In effect, the consequences of Kundabuffer would be eradicated by a spiritual action – or not at all.

There are photographs of Gurdjieff in old age which convey, particularly about the eyes, a measure of sorrow. It cannot have helped that he was a pacifist who perceived the virtual inevitability of war. This ‘reciprocal destruction’ was for him the abomination of abominations, ‘the most terrible of all horrors which can possibly exist in the whole universe’²³. But, failing a radical spiritual regeneration, nothing could be done. All utopias, Leagues of Nations, peace pledges, disarmament conferences, treaties, alliances and balances of power – all political ‘solutions’ on the horizontal level – were nothing but ironic embellishments on the moon’s implacable need for Askokin.

This cosmic standpoint made Gurdjieff and his followers radically a-political. They would try their utmost to render unto Caesar what was Caesar’s and unto God what was God’s. And in their studied compliance with a society full of glaring and painful absurdities, they would cultivate a sense of humour and an inner detachment. They would help their neighbour; they would help each other; they would live quietly and astutely. And if and when sheer survival dictated that they howl with the wolves on the nightwind of the prevailing mass psychosis, they would simultaneously struggle for a secret dispassion: ‘It does not refer to us. War or no war it is all the same to us. We always make a profit.’²⁴ The sense of an independent evolutionary orientation is absolute.

One final glance confirms the singularity of Gurdjieff’s social viewpoint. He, perhaps more than anyone, qualifies as the philosophical father of our contemporary ecological and holistic movements.^c (At the very least he ranks in the pantheon with Haeckel, J. C. Smuts and Albert Schweitzer.) But Gurdjieff is different. He is not so much advocating a policy of sensitivity to other life-forms on moral, aesthetic, religious, or even utilitarian grounds, as proclaiming – whether we like it or lump it – a universal and inescapable principle of reciprocal maintenance. The nub of the question for

Gurdjieff is each human being's unique option within the grand ecology. If a man lives passively and reactively, only his death and final obliteration will furnish Askokin to the moon; but if he works persistently for consciousness (along productive lines), he can create and liberate Askokin even during his lifetime, together with two complementary substances *which may elaborate in him a soul that can survive death*. The choice is stark indeed: eat or be eaten.

So much for Gurdjieff's world-vision: one full of objective hope for the cosmos at large, but undeniably sombre on the parochial scale of mankind. Turning now to Gurdjieff's 'Everyman', his model of the individual human being, we encounter the same poignant ambivalence, the same sense of potentiality betrayed.

The infant is born in hope and in 'essence'. Essence is essential. It is the self: not the little body in the cradle, but what the being innately and really is; his true, inextinguishable, and fate-attracting *particularity*. It is mysteriously predetermined, perhaps by the stars and planets while he is in embryo or at his birth; thenceforward it is meant to grow and mature, fed by real experiences.

Alas! Essence is quickly overtaken and arrested by personality, it is enveloped and suffocated as Laocoon was by writhing serpents. 'Personality' is what we pick up; it is the mask (Latin *persona*) or societal veneer. It is the crystallization in us of those 'A' and 'B' influences which happen to prevail wherever and whenever we were 'educated'. We unconsciously copy 'our' personality from our parents and from various little tin gods – and later randomly reimpose it on our children. Personality is indispensable, and at its best incorporates a valuable portion of man's linguistic and cultural heritage. At its worst it is a hodge-podge of prejudices, dreams, tones of voice, body-usage, manipulative stratagems and pitiable neuroses, *quite arbitrarily aligned to essence*. Personality is other people's stuff made flesh in us.

Worse is to come. For although essence is single, personality is legion. The idea of hysterical multiple personality was popularized only recently in Thipgen and Cleckley's well-attested case history, *The Three Faces of Eve*. Gurdjieff's version, put forward in 1916, entails marginally less disassociation among personalities, but escalates the condition from a clinical oddity to a universal malaise. All men and women, he warns, play host to scores if not hundreds of different parasitic identities, each with its blinkered repertoire of behaviour. A snub, a flattering letter, a no-smoking sign, a slow queue, a come-hither look – and we are strangely altered. We have one personality with subordinates, another with superiors, one with our mother, another with the tax man – each is Caliph for an hour. One scatters promissory notes which others must redeem: 'Certainly. See you in the morning. Only too delighted.' One despairing humourless personality may even take an overdose or jump off a cliff – crazily destroying the habitat of all the others. To sum up, our professed citadel of

individuality is common as a barber's chair. Very few men are strong enough to confront this impression emotionally and to work within the compass of its appalling implications.

Confounding confusion, all these personalities share behavioural 'norms' which Gurdjieff (in an indictment that ranks with Hieronymus Bosch's 'Seven Deadly Sins') reveals as tragically abnormal. He speaks more in sorrow than in anger; one may almost feel the weight of his suffering as he concludes that his bleak picture is 'a photographically exact snapshot from life.'²⁵

Chiefly to blame, in Gurdjieff's eyes, is man's irresponsibility towards his godlike faculty of attention: ^D he does not reverence it, he does not mobilize it, he does not govern it; and what little he finds access to, he casts to the dogs. Unsurprisingly man's enfeebled attention has no autonomy but it is always attached, glued, surrendered to this or that 'identification': here for example it hardens into sharp configurations of self-pity, irritability, anxiety, resentment, envy, vanity, hatred and every sort of 'negative emotion'; there it softens into treacherous interior fantasies, 'imagination', daydreams and delusional systems; here it supports a complacent judgement on other poor devils, and here, paradoxically, a squirming fear of their verdict on us; here it embellishes ignorance to seem like knowledge . . . and invariably it provides voltage for our inner and outer chattering, for the despotic associations, which flitter ceaselessly through our weary brain.

All this pantomime, all this posturing, cannot (in Gurdjieff's eyes) disguise the fact that man is essentially an impersonal *machine*: a wonderfully complex stimulus-response mechanism which, 'eats impressions and excretes behaviour'²⁶ an apparatus characteristically devoid of self-cognisance and independent initiative; simply a cosmic transformer used by 'Great Nature' to separate the fine from the gross and translate each to its proper sphere.

In the detailed exactitude of Gurdjieff's blueprint, there is something at once astounding and frightening. His human 'machine' simultaneously burns three fuels of ascending refinement: food, air and sensory impressions. These fuels blend to power five *independent* brains or 'centres', which govern five functions: the intellectual centre controls our thinking; the emotional centre our feeling; the moving centre all learned external movement of the body in space; the instinctive centre all the organisms' unlearned interior functioning (respiratory, digestive, cardio-vascular, etc.); and the sex centre all authentically sexual manifestation.

The general design of this human machine or 'food factory' is admirable, but in practice nothing works properly. The five centres – unsupervised and uncalibrated – relate inefficiently, jarring and grating on each other. Some subordinate parts have rusted, some are overheating, and others are inexplicably kept in mothballs.

Breakdowns are frequent and component spares difficult or impossible to obtain. Such a ramshackle contraption is neither efficient nor cost-effective; after a short time it will certainly be demolished and any valuable constituents recycled in the continuing process of mass production.

Is the situation hopeless then? A closed Yezidi circle? An inescapable prison of mechanicity? Sadly but inevitably Yes, for the great lumpen mass of people who perversely imagine themselves already free. But not for everyone fortunately; not for the statistically insignificant minority whose frank and unbelievably painful confrontation of their interior slavery presages a long realistic struggle for emancipation. Psychologists take note: in the final analysis Gurdjieff is not propounding the iron-clad determinism of Pavlov and Watson, but a neo-behaviorism which generously provides for the re-entry of consciousness and free will. In Gurdjieff's scheme of things, man is a very special machine which, uniquely on earth, can fully come to know and sense itself alive. The breathing proof of this we may dimly intuit in such as Buddha, Pythagoras, Christ, Leonardo da Vinci . . . and perhaps some moderns?

We start as unconscious machines then . . . but just as bulldozers, theatre organs and computers are machines of different sorts, so are men creatures of different and classifiable temperaments. Gurdjieff's clearcut idea is that in any given individual, one or another of his three main centres so dominates that in effect it constitutes his type: in 'Man Number One' this is the moving centre; in 'Man Number Two' the emotional centre; and in 'Man Number Three' the intellectual centre. Personality may mask but can never totally suppress these three categories' respective and lifelong inclinations towards the hand, the heart, and the head. Here are Shakespeare's Falstaff, Othello, Hamlet; Dostoevsky's Dmitri, Alyosha, and Ivan. All human culture, all artistic forms, all religions and philosophical systems, may be classified and illuminated from this triadic standpoint.

Such (in a claustrophobic nutshell) is Gurdjieff's basic typology – one which intriguingly enough seems echoed by several empirical psychologists (Kretschmer in 1925, Sheldon in 1940, and more recently and debatably by Eysenck). But beware! The resemblance is superficial. To begin with Gurdjieff is not propounding what psychologists grandly style a 'constitutional somatotypology'; in plain English he does not, as they do, match the body's shape and size with character. But the philosophical distinction is even more important. The many 'constitutional' typologies assign men their type forever and a day but *Gurdjieff affirms that type can evolve*; all secular psychologists dump us in a cul de sac but Gurdjieff plants our feet on an arduous spiritual way.

Here, as elsewhere, Gurdjieff adopts a stance which is profoundly traditional. The hope of perfecting oneself, of escaping from the painful morass of mundane life, of accomplishing some pilgrim's progress towards immortality – this has always relied on the ideal, if not the guidance of unmistakably higher types. Though Gurdjieff elaborates this pantheon with clarity and verve ('Man Number Four' or balanced man, 'Man Number Five' unified man, 'Man Number Six' conscious man, and 'Man Number Seven' perfected man) he allows us only Hobson's choice as to our modest starting point.

The long evolutionary search has from time immemorial engaged small minorities of every temperament; but three distinctive religious 'ways' have opened to meet the respective needs of Man Number One, Two and Three:

1. the way of the fakir
2. the way of the monk
3. the way of the yogi.

The 'fakir' attains will by subduing his body; the 'monk' refines and dedicates his feelings; the 'yogi' cultivates his intellectual powers. (Note incidentally that Gurdjieff goes strictly by these procedural criteria, not by cultural labelling; thus, however paradoxically, a *Bhakti* yogi pursues 'the way of the monk' and a Zen monk 'the way of the yogi'.)

All three classical religious ways would indeed be empty dreams – as influence 'A' cruelly and raucously asserts – were it not for a double blessing: compassionate guidance from those already at higher stations on the evolutionary path; and two mysterious 'reservoirs of grace' already present in every man ('Higher Emotional Centre' and 'Higher Intellectual Centre' as Gurdjieff awkwardly calls them). In consequence the three hallowed institutional ways remain valid and precious avenues of aspiration. Each however demands its exorbitant downpayment – behavioural constraints, celibacy, the wholesale renunciation of normal life – and offers in return a development which, however powerful, is inherently lopsided. In this connection Gurdjieff sounds a cautionary note: to attain Man Number Five without having first attained Four is in effect to crystallize in an unbalanced form.

Gurdjieff situates his own teaching within the shadowy tradition of a Fourth Way (or 'way of the sly man' ²⁷), which demands no 'dying to the world', and studiously avoids lopsidedness by the *simultaneous and harmonious* development of body, emotion and intellect. The man of the Fourth Way picks no quarrel with 'the daily round, the common task'; he accepts his ordinary circumstances, good or bad, and his attitude to money and sex, as temporary indices of his 'being' and a field of struggle.

On his long evolutionary journey, life becomes not only the terrain but the guide. Peter Brook puts it excitingly:

Is the saint the man who withdraws furthest from the squalor and the action of the marketplace, who artificially lops off the undesirable aspects of human experience to make more room for the holy ones? . . . All of Gurdjieff's life and teaching make an opposite statement . . . In his own spiritual search he was constantly moving, and bringing others with him, through the most rich and intense participation in life.²⁸

It must be admitted here that the authentic Fourth Way – setting aside its thousand contemptible modern parodies – has proved ‘in the depths too deep and in the shallows too swift’²⁹ to be netted and anatomized by historians of religion. Its lineage remains obscure. The various archetypal groupings specified by Gurdjieff – the societies Akhaldan, Heechtvari, Olbogmek etc. – mean nothing to history. And yet the ancients were men like us. That some would feel drawn to a balanced way, ‘in the world but not of it’; would receive and validate and pass on its characteristic initiations – this is hardly an extravagant idea. Amateur historians who have gone altogether further, and pronounced for the existence of wandering Fourth Way colonies among the builders of Mont St Michel, among the Cluniacs, the Templars, the Alchemists, the early Quakers, the Russian Freemasons, and certain obscure schools of acting, music, craftsmanship and painting – must bear responsibility for their intuitions. But certainly a Fourth Way influence may be decently suspected wherever a special quality of attention and questioning had a power upon the hour.

Though Gurdjieff shaped his own life with self-imposed vows, he exacted none from his pupils. Their commitment – albeit serious – was to remain, at each successive step on ‘the road to Philadelphia’³⁰, voluntary, provisional, and experimental. He insisted they cultivate a critical mind; he forbade blind faith – commending in its place ‘understanding’. The word commend is really not strong enough here. Understanding was for Gurdjieff vitally important; it was an indispensable inner validation, subsuming mere knowledge; and, far from encouraging any intellectual self-congratulation, often brought an awed sense of ‘standing under’ an entity infinitely greater than oneself.

Today's ‘Gurdjieffian’ through all the trials of his inner and outer life, strives at the very least to understand – Like the youthful Prince Siddhartha (emerging from his golden palace only to meet painful impressions of sickness, decrepitude, and death) he longs almost passionately to penetrate his own nature and the mystery offered him. How absurd to take everything for granted! How much begs to be understood: the great laws of world creation and world maintenance; the enigma of time; geology and pre-history in their deep but forgotten significance; the processional of civilizations; the

subtle intimations of fairy-tales, myths and legends; and the overt and disguised currents of influence at play in our contemporary world . . . The challenge is profound. After all the aim is not to convert oneself into a hot-air pie – a bloated personage belching hearsay learning; rather it is to become a ‘learned being’. And for this, one’s own type, one’s chief feature, one’s place in the scheme of things, must be worked into the fabric of understanding.

‘Being’ – what does this word, evidently so crucial for Gurdjieff, actually signify? Here again we need our best intuition: it means something like the ‘quality of beingness’; it is a man’s grain, his whole mass, his atomic weight: what he really *is*. And, as Gurdjieff devastatingly insisted, ‘the being of two people can differ from one another more than the being of a mineral and an animal’³¹. Compared with essence, being is more amenable, more dynamic, more the function of conscious effort; it is a man’s quotient of unity and gathered presence, his degree of ‘being there’. With the idea of gathered presence and of ‘being there’ we are finally groping our way towards Gurdjieff’s model of consciousness and the practical existential core of his teaching.

That consciousness is the taproot of our experience, the bedrock of all knowledge, and the ground of self-cognition – are truisms we owe to philosophy, strangely without feeling much indebtedness. There is probably more human interest in the peculiar ingenuousness of most Western commentary. Mournfully one traces from Leucippus to Clifford, Huxley, and Hodson, the stubborn materialist heresy that consciousness is merely an ‘epiphenomenon’, a flickering and accidental by-product of the brain’s neural activity. As to degrees of consciousness, Ladd typifies the intelligentsia in owlishly denying them: ‘Whatever we are when we are awake, as contrasted with what we are when we sink into a profound and dreamless sleep, that is to be conscious.’ Bravo! Between this binary naïvety and the Gobi desert of Husserl’s phenomenology it would be difficult to choose.

Gurdjieff’s model of consciousness, or Zoostat as he calls it, comprises six levels, arranged in two tiers. The unconscious mind (more or less synonymous with instinctive centre) exercises its miraculous stewardship over the body’s big autonomic systems – cardio-vascular, respiratory, endocrinological, digestive, nervous etc. Superimposed, and completing the lower tier, is the mysterious subconscious – a whole theme in itself – which Gurdjieff repeatedly extols as the citadel of Objective-Conscience. The Zoostat’s upper tier comprises four ascending levels:

1. objective consciousness
2. self consciousness
3. waking consciousness
4. sleep.

We need not – for converse reasons – dwell here on the lowest and highest categories: sleep needs no elaborate definition, and ‘objective consciousness’ outreaches any definition (though we may hazard that it relates somehow to ‘C’ influence).

Now let us pay attention! For the qualitative distinction between the two intermediate categories, (2) and (3), provides the key to Gurdjieff’s whole evolutionary psychology. Let us begin with category (2): Gurdjieff’s impartial critique of our purported ‘waking consciousness’ finds our attention so scattered or entrapped, our suggestibility so high, our reactions so mechanical, our sense of ‘I am’ so marginal – that the state is better scientifically classified as one of mild hypnotic coma. *We are all asleep.* This is not a metaphor but a fact. It is also a social perception more subversive and revolutionary than anything remotely conceived by all the Trotskys and Kropotkins of history; an idea which, like death and the sun, cannot be looked at steadily – a world in trance!

How to emerge from this trance? That is indeed the question. But Gurdjieff at least makes clear the immediate goal, namely the third level of consciousness (which he actually preferred to call ‘self-remembering’). Until this state more or less prevails in a man’s life, even his sincerest evolutionary aspiration remains tinged with subjective fantasy and neurosis. Fortunately, to no one is this experience a complete stranger. Rare spontaneous episodes of self-remembering have visited all of us in situations of danger, real novelty, intense emotion, quandary, or acute stress – bringing their unmistakable and inimitable impression of ‘*I here now!*’ And depositing their special sediment of memory. *Suddenly we are awake!* It is Gurdjieff’s demand that we acclimatize ourselves, by slow degrees, to living at this altitude. ‘A man may be born, but in order to be born he must first die, and in order to die he must first awake.’³²

At outset the psycho-physical process of awakening seems entirely cohesive: the scattered limbs of Osiris are re-membered; for the sake of a higher unity, a man’s three lower centres – intellectual, emotional, and moving – briefly sacrifice their terrible chaotic autonomy. In the enigmatic promise of Christ: ‘Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am “I” in the midst of them.’ Cohesion then. Yet paradoxically, in the very act of self-remembering, a separation (*Djartklom* as Gurdjieff terms it) is implicit. The fragilely unified or individuated self splits off sharply from its habitual dreams and identifications. A double-bladed arrow of attention points outward to the functional life and inward to the unknown master of those functions.

Well . . . do we not share for a moment Gurdjieff’s despair of words?

If there are any tablets from Gurdjieff's particular Mount Sinai, they are surely graven with the five 'being-obligolnian-strivings' – commandments inescapable for all men who wish to evolve:

The first striving: to have in their ordinary being-existence everything satisfying and really necessary for their planetary body.

The second striving: to have a constant and unflagging instinctive need for self-perfecting in the sense of being.

The third: the conscious striving to know ever more and more concerning the laws of World-creation and World-maintenance.

The fourth: the striving from the beginning of their existence to pay for their arising and their individuality as quickly as possible, in order afterwards to be free to lighten as much as possible the Sorrow of our COMMON FATHER.

And the fifth: the striving always to assist the most rapid perfecting of other beings, both those similar to oneself and those of other forms, up to the degree of the sacred 'Martfotai' that is up to the degree of self-individuality. ³³

Under their aegis, a man's redemption entails his whole-hearted and lifelong struggle against 'the consequences of the properties of the organ Kundabuffer' ³⁴: against egoism, habit, lying, chattering, fantasy, negative emotions, and hypnotic sleep. And a complementary struggle for attention, presence, unity, being, and understanding.

One may acknowledge without a breath of sarcasm that these are fine resolutions. And yet the orientation of spiritual ascent, the mere plan to move 'upwards not Northwards' guarantees nothing. All too easily it can transpose into an imaginary levitation or a comfortable romantic despair. Kundabuffer is tenacious, and at the very heart of any programme for self-development there lurks an insidious paradox. One example must suffice. Understanding and being – both absolutely vital – contend for precedence like the chicken and the egg: a man's being entirely governs his capacity to understand; and yet, conversely, 'Only understanding can lead to being, whereas knowledge is but a passing presence in it.' ³⁵ How to proceed?

It is this cruel psychological impasse – and a dozen others exactly like it – which make a teacher indispensable. Without the benign shock of his intervention, the pupil's evolutionary octave cannot develop; again and again the Law of Three must be invoked and the master's indefinable 'higher' blend with the disciple's 'lower' to actualize the middle. There is of course no salvation by proxy. The path remains long and hard. 'Blessed is he who has a soul,' said Gurdjieff, 'and blessed is he who has none, but woe and grief to him that has it in embryo.' ³⁶ Only the pupil can work his inner transformation but only the teacher can create and sustain becoming conditions. As Gurdjieff wryly added, 'I have good leather to sell to those who want to make themselves shoes.' ³⁷

So Gurdjieff's ideas blend imperceptibly into method; theory into *pratique*. Among the 'becoming conditions' he initiated – virtually his hallmark – was the 'group':

One man can do nothing, can attain nothing. A group with a real leader can do more . . . You do not realise your own situation. You are in prison. All you can wish for if you are a sensible man, is to escape. But how escape? It is necessary to tunnel under a wall. One man can do nothing. But let us suppose there are ten or twenty men – if they work in turn and if one covers another they can complete the tunnel and escape. ³⁸

Concepts of being, unity, presence, awakening – remain glib and treacherous idealizations, until tested and proved by direct experience. The group with its manifold transactions and inner exercises provided a climate in which narcissism withered and real work blossomed. No less significant, the Movements or dances linked a pupil's quest for self-knowledge with his sense of service to the sacred. Who could manifest a lie, or be a lie, in front of that Teacher of Dancing?

We have come full circle. If this man cannot be understood without his teaching, neither can the teaching be understood without the man. Gurdjieff and his revelation are not to be separated by a hair's breadth:

Gurdjieff was a master . . . According to traditional conceptions, the function of a master is not limited to the teaching of doctrines, but implies an actual incarnation of knowledge, thanks to which he can awaken other men and help them in their search simply by his presence. ³⁹

So there looms our quarry: the grandfatherly provoker of fierce and irreconcilable pronouncements; a learned being, a mock charlatan; a poet of situations; a saint with balls.

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