

**GURDJIEFF**

by

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It seems likely that in the near future we shall see a revival of interest in the work and teachings of the eastern occultist Gurdjieff, following the publication of some of his hitherto unpublished writings. Indeed that interest has never died, but has been kept alive especially by his well-known followers Ouspensky and, in England, by J. G. Bennett, who has recently published a critical biography of him, \*already briefly reviewed in the 1974 *Golden Blade*, and by others. It may therefore be of interest to make some comparison between his life and work and those of Rudolf Steiner, his contemporary.

The similarity between the avowed objects of the two men is very striking. They shared many similar thoughts, as to the spiritual potential of man and the significance of human life on the earth planet. Gurdjieff believed in a chain of existence with the Kingdoms of Nature below man and the Hierarchies above him – though he did not use this terminology. Man is called upon to realize his ‘essence’ (spirit being) by which he be become a co-worker with God in the maintenance of the world and the fulfillment of the Cosmic purpose. The world has reached a critical point in which man must find latent powers in himself and effect the “transformation of energies”. It is not enough for him to be good – he has to know what he is called on to become. “What is the significance in general of life on the earth, and in particular of human life? We cannot be responsible unless we know for what we are responsible”.

Gurdjieff, like Steiner, teaches that early humanity was guided from occult centers. He believes in the Fall as having taken place among ‘very high Beings’, and that the whole story of man on earth is the consequence of that Fall. We must neither lose

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\* Gurdjieff: Making a New World. Turnstone Books. (£3.50)

ourselves in other-worldliness, nor submit to the mechanization of the present age, but play our part in recovering the 'Reciprocal Maintenance'— the mutual work of all hierarchies and kingdoms – which make all existence possible.

Further, Gurdjieff taught that the individual man has three centres, the Intellectual, the Emotional and the Instinctive or Motor. These three should grow in harmony, but modern education disrupts them and they live in continued strife. Hence he founded his 'Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man' as a centre where men could re-educate themselves. The chapter in Bennett's book specifically called 'Making a New World' (the title of the whole book) is especially remarkable for its many similarities to Anthroposophy. Much of it could be directly used by lecturer on Steiner's work.

On the other hand, it is hard to imagine two men more unlike each other, in their origin, character and way of life than Gurdjieff and Steiner. Gurdjieff was a product of central Asia, Steiner of central Europe, a difference which perhaps underlies all other differences. From boyhood onward – he was born in 1877 on the Russo-Turkish frontier – Gurdjieff and his family caught up in the movements of peoples caused by the Russo-Turkish war, and the disturbances which lasted till after the first world war. He lived among an astonishing collection of peoples 'on the move', and as soon as he was able he himself became a wanderer. But he was a unique wanderer, always in search of spiritual brotherhood and occult centres. He became acquainted with many religious practices, including the remaining Temple Dances, and the Dances of the Dervishes. He states that he was three times shot by stray bullets in the various wars and risings he encountered during his wanderings – one as far south as Crete – and long convalescences gave him time for reflection. At various times he set up as a clairvoyant, as a hypnotist (there is a rather frightening photograph in Bennett's book of him in this capacity), and as a spiritual healer of all kinds of moral illnesses. During this period he took a vow to hide himself by 'acting a part', and shocking the followers he collected around him by all kinds of absurdities. It seems that he was also a shrewd business man and made much money, when he wanted it, in such various ways as under taking contracts for public works, opening restaurants, financing oil development, and above all by trading in oriental carpets. He founded a group of 'seekers' who visited, individually and collectively, many

occult centres, perhaps especially Sufi-centres but finally he appears in Moscow where he had considerable success, and married a beautiful Countess who was lady-in-waiting to the Tsarina. In Moscow he first conceived the idea of founding his 'Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man' but he was driven away by Revolution of 1917, and went first to Tiflis, where he issued a prospectus of his Institute which was to include 'Gymnastics of all kinds, rhythmical and medical, Exercises to develop memory, attention, hearing, thinking, emotion and instinct'. He claimed that his system was already operating in Berlin, Alexandria, Kabul, New York, Chicago, Christiania and Stockholm. His biographer believes that this was done to shock his followers (who knew it was not true) and to prevent him from becoming a cult-figure. When the British army withdrew from the area, he moved the Institute to Constantinople until political events compelled him to move once more. Throughout all this time, and indeed to the end of his life, his followers believed he was in touch and worked with, an occult centre in central Asia. For he held that his mission was to revive the ancient occultism in his Institute for the benefit of modern man. He must have had immense power – perhaps hypnotic power – over his followers; for he treated them like an oriental despot, often sending them away for no apparent reason, though his biographer again claims that it was for their own good, so that they should develop themselves, apart from his influence.

All this is in immense contrast to Steiner's orderly progress from village school, to Technical High School, to Vienna, to Weimar, to Berlin – all in the tradition of Western culture, and his steady hidden development of a path to higher knowledge, so different from the flaunting of occult powers we find in Gurdjieff. But we can believe the testimony of many outstanding people (also in England) who met Gurdjieff, that they felt him at once to be an astonishing personality with very exceptional occult gifts.

It was only after his failure in the East that Gurdjieff turned his attention to Europe, and first to Germany. After the first world war he would probably have settled in Berlin, or even in the Dalcroze Institute near Dresden, but the terrible inflation in Germany made it too difficult. Mean - while, however, a group of people in England - including Lady Rothermere – had heard of him through lectures by his follower

Ouspensky, whom he had met in Moiscow, and they invited him to establish his Institute in this country. He came to England in 1922 – the year in which Rudolf Steiner lectured in Stratford-on-Avon and Oxford – and attracted a group of important – and rich – followers, who were prepared to settle the Institute in Hampstead, but the Home Office would only give him and his foreign entourage permission to stay for one month. It seems he was more attracted to the Chateau de Prieurie near Fontainebleau, a former residence of Mme. De Maintenon, for his Institute. For the first time he broke his rule to finance his undertakings himself, and accepted large gifts for the Institute, mostly from England.

To put it very briefly, the object of the training at the Institute was to overcome the ‘personality’ and then to transform first the ‘outer essence’ and then the ‘inner essence’ – a teaching derived from Sufi Practice.

A group of distinguished English people were attracted to the Institute – including the writer editor and broadcaster A.R. Orage, Dr. Maurice Nicoll, psychologist and exponent of the Jung philosophy, and Katherine Mansfield, who was obsessed with the idea that her chronic illnesses were due to spiritual disharmony. From her letters it would seem she found a not a little consolation in the Prieurie, where after a short time she died.

The training at the Institute was very rigorous. All members of the Institute were given hard work to do in kitchen, farm and garden. In the evenings they practiced the form of dancing which Gurdjieff had developed from eastern sources, and these sessions often lasted till the early hours of the morning. Gurdjieff gave occasional lectures, and individual instruction to members, of which he thought them worthy of. He seems however to have continued his policy of ‘treading on everyone’s most sensitive corn’, and he sent away some of those who appeared to be his most promising pupils.

If we are to contrast all this with the work of Rudolf Steiner, we may well begin with their buildings. Steiner had created in the original Goetheanum – still standing in 1922 – a unique piece of architecture, incorporating in it new principles such as metamorphosis, uniting colour with form, originating a new technique of glass engraving.

Gurdjieff bought a disused aeroplane hangar, and re-erected it in the ground of his Institute. The floors of stage and auditorium were made of beaten earth, fountain, on which coloured lights were played, was placed in front of stage, and the earth floor was covered with oriental carpets. Sentences from his writings were hung from the ceiling, and a tent-like enclosure, somewhat in the manner of a royal box, called Kosshah, was erected at the back of the auditorium, from which he could direct proceedings or into which he could withdraw for private meditation.

On this stage the dance movements, compounded of many ancient traditions, were practiced and exhibited. One feature of these was the 'stop' technique. At a given signal all the dancers had stop and hold the positions in which they were caught, and experience the arrested movement.

You can say that here we have the same impulse to combine colour, architectural for., movement and the word which were such important elements in Steiner's work. But what a contrast with the spoken word in Goetheanum, with the Mystery Plays revealing the secrets of karma and reincarnation, with the flow of movement in Eurythmy, not dancing to the music, but expressing the movement of music and poetry itself, illuminated with the colour which reflected the mood of the piece interpreted.

In 1924 Gurdjieff suffered a terrible accident. Always a reckless driver (people shrank from being driven by him) he crashed into a roadside tree at 90 kilometres an hour, and almost died of his injuries. When he recovered he interpreted this event as meaning that he should close the Institute, and he devoted the rest of his life in writing. We can compare this disaster with the burning of the Goetheanum, which seemed at the time almost the wreck of Steiner's life work. But how did Steiner respond? By immediately modeling an entirely new Goetheanum, and refounding his Society on entirely new principles, himself uniting his destiny with it, and inviting his followers to become collaborators with him.

Gurdjieff was no writer, as his followers admit and his writings took strange cryptic forms – one of his principal books is called *Beelzebub's Tales* and he was fond of inventing outrageous terms like Trogo-auto-ego-crat (printed without the hyphens) for one of his hierarchies of spiritual beings. But he and Steiner were in agreement as to the fundamental difficulty of expressing spiritual truths in modern intellectual concepts and language. We naturally like the kind of thinking truth is only apprehended through contradictions and antinomies.

Steiner would have echoed these last words. But his was essentially a philosophical mind, and he was a writer, so that his contradictions are in the sphere of lucidity not confusion. It is sometimes in their points of agreement that the two Teachers manifest their differences almost as much as in disagreement. Steiner approached the ancient wisdom of the East through the new 'exact clairvoyance' and clear thinking achieved in the West: Gurdjieff believed he could save the West by injecting a fundamentally ancient knowledge into the West. He held that to move mankind at large you must give them simple ideas which they can understand, and, though he believed that the pollution of the world today has a much wider connotation than us commonly recognized – spiritual as well as physical – yet an effective force in awakening a great anti-pollution movement would be in disseminating his doctrine of reciprocal maintenance'. One might say that this is his immediate answer to the Fall. For though he is far from being anti-Christian he has nothing of Steiner's teaching of the Cosmic significance of the Mystery of Golgotha as the point in which the Wisdom which built the world begins its transformation in the human heart into the future force of Love. It is very great difference.

Gurdjieff's biographer does not shrink from recording that he was incredibly free in his sexual relationships, at times having intercourse 'not only with almost any woman who happened to come with his sphere of influence but also with his pupils'. We may suspect here a gross misuse of occult powers.

Gurdjieff may perhaps be regarded as a mirror image of Steiner, but a mirror which inverts the image, and shows contrast even in revealing similarities, in some respects an ahrimanic, in others a luciferic mirror, whose distortions may help us better to appreciate the revelation of man by the great Seer.

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