THE SACRED COSMOS

TEACHINGS OF G. I. GURDJIEFF

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THE SOLAR INDIVIDUAL

ANYONE who visits the cemetery at Avon, near Fontainebleau, about forty miles from Paris, will have no difficulty in finding the grave of George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff. It is marked by a huge megalith, a standing stone that towers over every other monument in the cemetery and is visible from every part of it. There is no name on it or on the grave.[1] None is necessary.

No more appropriate monument could have been chosen. Gurdjieff was, in the first instance, a human megalith, towering above his contemporaries, in a place by himself, ancient, anonymous, indecipherable. He was an aboriginal force of nature, left over from an all-but-forgotten era when cosmos and humanity were one in the dawn age of Europe and the Middle East, before the arrival of the present religions and civilizations.

He is a messenger from the Bronze Age and the Iron Age, prior to the Greco–Roman and biblical worlds in which we still live—that is, from the age of the divine sun, traces of which in the form of standing stones or dolmens and geometrical and astronomical chambers and constructions (pyramids, ziggurats, stone circles, sanctifying sun and moon measures) are found from Ireland to the Caucasus, and from Scandinavia to Egypt and later Meso-America.[2]

What characterized this pan-cosmic era was the linking of human and divine in the divine's most manifest, life-giving form, the sacred sun, through whose light and warmth every kind of light and energy and consciousness are bestowed. Whatever else may change, this does not change: we remain children of the sun. And in the most sacred hour of the winter solstice,

(December 22)*, perceived by the ancients as the sun's nearest approach to earth, when the "gates of the sun" are open both ways for the solar spirit to pour into the earth and human souls to pass in the reverse direction back into the sun, we have the essential connection still preserved in the central teaching of Christianity, the meeting of divine and human at the solstice. In this moment takes place the maximal interchange. It is a connection still valid if we remember that by the truly human we do not mean the greedy, grasping, lonely, and isolated individual of modern philosophy, science, and culture, but the open, whole, free, and majestic individual of the sun world, most fully represented in the original solar kings.

The gradual disappearance of the sacred from the world, and the consequent shrinking of the human being, starts with the desacralizing of the cosmos in the Biblical law and in the empirical science of Aristotle and culminates in the flattened-out, merely measurable universe of post-Renaissance science. The sacred has withdrawn into the domain of private inner experience where the sacred and the spiritual, as gifts from above, are confused with the grasping and exploiting "psychological."

It is not surprising that the most blasphemous act of modern science has been the desecration of the sun, by copying on earth its release of hydrogen energy (by a mathematics and physics no longer connected with wisdom and the good, as for us the sun is no longer connected with wisdom and the good), wiping out whole cities in seconds. Nothing could better illustrate, at one and the same time, our secret contempt for the dead, dull, natural world we have conceived and for the egotistic power-structures which we call "civilization."[3]

To recover again the sacred cosmos, Gurdjieff reformulated ancient myths in a strange language, full of jaw-breaking neologisms, which force us to slow down, if we are even going to try to pronounce them, and which at the same time mock the fragmented "expertise" of our ignoble science and which hide the serious intent to prevent the reformulated myths from sliding into easily mouthed foolish occultism. Gurdjieff brought to life again, in a protected form which people would have to work to find, surviving knowledge from Egypt, Sumer, Babylon, Greece, Central Asia, and Tibet.

Having been born and brought up at an historical and cultural crossroads where Turkey, Russia, Armenia, Greece, Iraq, and Iran come together in the region between the Black and Caspian Seas, Gurdjieff himself as a child and young man was subject to a bewildering variety of influences. He was raised

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* Modern people distinguish between the solstice, the day on which the days begin to get longer again, and the perihelion, the point at which earth and sun are closest, which occurs on January 2.

with a Greek father, Armenian mother, Turkish native language, and Russian Orthodox religious influences. He developed a need, even an obsession, to find an answer to the question underlying all this diversity: What is the purpose of life on earth? He embarked on a twenty-year search which took him on hazardous expeditions to Egypt, the eastern Mediterranean and Holy Land, Turkestan and Central Asia, and Tibet and the Gobi Desert. These journeys were themselves the stuff of legends, for the goal was neither money, nor fame, nor power (as it was for the adventurers, fortune-seekers, and foreign agents whom he so often encountered), but something far more valuable, unknown to these others.

What Gurdjieff and his companions (of whose real identity we are unaware) brought back was rare indeed: a concrete and usable knowledge from a time when the purpose of human life, of all life on earth, had not been lost, not yet covered over by the vast forgetfulness born of individual and collective egoism which only wants to seize and control the world, instead of simply living in it.

Central in the all-embracing Gurdjieff perspective was the faculty (comprising sensation, emotion, and thought) to see the cosmos and everything in it as part of one universal materiality, a unique pleroma manifesting at different levels of a vast scale. From the flash of a particle, the fleeting life of a gnat, or the momentary feeling of a human being to the long life of suns and stars and galaxies—all are parts of a play of universal energies, transforming and retransforming up and down an inconceivably vast scale.

At the center still remains the Sun Absolute, or Sun-Father, the creative source, but not as set apart from the world in Biblical transcendence. His Endlessness (as Gurdjieff calls him) is the capstone of the wholeness of the world, not its tyrannical ruler. He is indeed very far away (and we have to deal with his intermediaries), but he is not menacing or fearful or punishing. He does not get angry. Anger does not belong to essence.

A small glimpse of how the Gurdjieff perspective unifies and integrates is provided by the conception of three different kinds of "cosmic food": (1) the ordinary nourishment ("eating and being eaten") by which living things feed on each other; (2) the air which plants and animals breathe in and out, the whole biosphere making one vast breathing cycle; and (3) the sensory impressions, "the food of light" which is also required as a sustenance for sentient beings. These are examples of the transformings and retransformings of energies; the cosmos is a network of reciprocal dependencies.

In the Gurdjieff mythos, at the local cosmic plane the moons and suns have special functions. Earthly creatures are all subject to the unconscious gravitational forces of the moon, acting on the fluids of all bodies and in such a way that the moon may be said to eat lower energies. With conscious organisms

the possibility arises of being reciprocally related to the "light energies" of the sun and producing "higher energies" which can be returned to the sun. A different kind of "matter" is created by conscious human efforts, a kind of "soul matter" which, as the Gnostics believed, does not perish when the body dies.

The basic laws of the entire divinely infused cosmos are not the differential and algebraic equations of modern physics (which, from a humanistic perspective, are artificial devices for dealing with a dead, fragmented world which reflects our own deadness and fragmentation), but living principles of inner "numerical" relationality in accordance with which happenings on all levels take place. These he calls the law of three and the law of seven.

Threeness is well known from its Christian, Hindu, and Taoist, as well as Hegelian and Marxist, versions. Gurdjieff speaks of "the Holy Affirming, Holy Denying, and Holy Reconciling" forces. And he also points out a peculiar human blindness, a tendency to see the dualities, confrontations, and conflicts, but to be unable to see the background commonality that makes the dualities possible and makes them, if our eyes were open, "trialities."

We might go even further and say that binariness is visible everywhere, from the symmetry of the human body to the complementarity of male and female, light and dark, true and false, all the logical and conceptual dualities as well as various kinds of plant and animal and human associations. What is not so visible is that every binary relation is also *trinary* if we see that something holds every pair together, as underlying third, or else they would not even be pairs but mere empty twonesses. This is a law which has even wider application than Hegel's famous dialectic of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis.[4]

The law of seven, which is the tendency for developing processes to occur in seven steps, was known to the Babylonians, according to Gurdjieff, in connection with music, astronomy, and physiology, long before the Pythagoreans. In a very dramatic way evidence of this law appeared in the researches of Isaac Newton, in connection with the rainbow and the diffraction of light through a prism, where exactly seven colors are manifested, and two centuries later in the atomic researches of Mendeleev and the table of the elements. Gurdjieff points to many other traditional examples, including the seven-year periods in the stages of human life and the seven visible moving bodies in the sky. (In the last mentioned case, the significance of "visibility to the unaided eye" is not put out of court by what happens when a telescope is used.)

The law of three and the law of seven are combined in the Gurdjieff teaching in what may be regarded (although its past history remains obscure) as the supreme Western mandala, the enneagram, a nine-pointed figure made of three equilateral triangles inscribed in a circle, two of which are "broken" or "interrupted." This symbol was recognized by Gurdjieff as more ancient and universal than the Pythagorean pentagram (or "red star"), the

biblical hexagram (or Seal of Solomon), the crescent moon, Egyptian ankh, swastika, and many Christian crosses. The enneagram is a "condensed map" of the cosmos which can serve as a kind of template for many "inner" relations.[5] As "three times three," nine dominates many natural and human phenomena (e.g., the game of baseball), including the entire structure of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, with its ninety-nine three-lines-apiece cantos, with one added.

The word *sacred*, as we have been using it, does not mean "set apart" or "separated out," as it does in the Hebrew concept of *kadosh* (or holiness), but rather means "wholeness" or "unbrokenness," and "pure" in that sense.[6] Something which loses its sacredness is fractured, "impure," and falls to pieces. We see this beginning to happen in the very foundations of Western civilization in two ways: first, with the separation made by the monotheistic religions between the natural and the supernatural, setting the Father–Creator forever outside the world, and, second, with the separation in Greek philosophy between the changing material world of "becoming" and the fixed eternal world of mind or pure being. These two split worlds coincided in medieval times, and in the modern world have led to the separation of science and religion, each then cut off from the other, fragmenting into smaller and smaller scientific specialties and fields and smaller and smaller religious sects and cults. This breakup of civilization is what then gives rise to the violent reactions leading to the false unities of nationalism, totalitarianism, and war, omnipresent in the twentieth century.

The fragmentation and the violent backlashes together have rendered the individual human being in our time increasingly powerless, isolated, and victimized, and at the same time increasingly at the mercy of collective illusions. The human being, centerless and soulless, is the prey of phantasms, myths, and delusions, identifying with every passing whim and opinion, tossed about with no life of his or her own. This leads us to the second main emphasis of the Gurdjieff teaching: the terrible power which holds sway over human life and our inability even to begin to comprehend it—the power of suggestion.

This horrifying suggestibility can only be compared to a near-universal mass light hypnosis, a kind of waking sleep. (Something of the sort was referred to in Plato's allegory of the cave in Book Seven of *The Republic*.) What we call education, in its central import, is being made susceptible to these mass suggestions and that way of living in the world. Addictions, dependencies and co-dependencies, identifications, inner "keeping of accounts," negative emotions, mechanical associative thinking determine everything we do, think, and feel, while all along we are under the impression that we act, think, and feel for ourselves. What we call our "doing" has deteriorated into violence, busyness, and ego-gratification.

The "enthrallment" of the attention practiced by advertisers, entertainers, politicians, and public relations persons is only a second-level manipulation, since these people themselves are, just as much as anybody else, under the spell of the general suggestibilities. The most powerful man in the world, in this regard, is as powerless as anyone else. As things stand, we are all condemned to die without ever having lived, whatever our status in the world. Without awakened being, we have lived asleep.

The mass hypnosis or waking sleep is so pervasive that it lies beyond the power of individual responsibility to recognize or deal with. In this respect it resembles the Christian conception of original sin or the Buddhist idea of the wheel of samsara. But, unlike the Garden of Eden story in which the fatal flaw in the human situation arises from disobedience to God (prompted by the serpent and the woman), the Gurdjieff flaw was originally a cosmic mistake, since corrected, but still having disastrous aftereffects. Our problem is not finding the way to "get right again" with a patriarchal Father, but rather finding the way to wake up from a mass hypnosis arising ultimately from a cosmic error. To do this we will need revelational help but, as we will see in the next section, help not restricted to any particular religion, and very much dependent upon our own ability to work with it. We are not saved or awakened by divine choice elsewhere, but by our own efforts, once we have listened to a teaching which does indeed come from elsewhere.

How are we to shake ourselves out of the trance which holds us fast—a trance somewhat like that which holds the chicken in the "magic circle" drawn in the dust; like the Yezidi boy also held fast in such a circle whom Gurdjieff wonderingly observed when he was a young man in the Turkish village of Alexandropol?[7]

How are we to wake up? Here was the most needed treasure from ancient times which Gurdjieff sought. The answer, as he formulated it, lay in two difficult but essential practices of conscious awareness, which were labeled *self-remembering* and *self-observation*. Neither Stoic will power, nor Christian grace, nor Hindu austerities and devotions, nor Buddhist meditation or koans can accomplish this task. We must practice an inner separation from the illusory self (and its illusory acts, feelings, and thoughts) by means of conscious attention of a kind virtually unknown to us. The student of Gurdjieff encounters here something of a genuinely esoteric character which he would not have been able to discover for himself, but which, once told of, he may under proper conditions be able to practice for himself.

Self-remembering recalls to mind the practices of several traditions. The ancient Gnostics constantly advised, "Remember who you are, a Son or Daughter of the Most High"; in the Athonite practice of the Greek and Russian Orthodox, the Prayer of Jesus is repeated unceasingly; Muslims

invoke the name of Allah five times every day. Self-remembering for Gurdjieff is remembering our divine link, our essential solar self, as many times a day as possible.

Self-observation, on the other hand, is directed toward catching glimpses (and that is all they will be) of our daily sleeping behavior, our mechanical, negative, vain, and petty performances, which normally are completely hidden from us. This is not done to censor or change, only to "notice." Like Simone Weil, Krishnamurti, and other spiritual directors, Gurdjieff knew that all attempts to change ourselves by our own direct efforts are only a form of shadow-boxing in which the ego wrestles with its own images of itself. Without the additional leverage of an actual separated point, supplied by an additional consciousness, nothing whatever will happen. We can only get outside of prison if some point in us is already standing outside it, and we *know* this.

It is not sufficient to have the thought that we are in prison. We must actually see that we are. This requires a certain kind of looking. As Simone Weil also taught, "Looking is what saves us." (Almost identical phrases appear in the later Wittgenstein.)

GNOSTIC REBEL AND GNOSTIC CHILD

Gurdjieff's cosmic fable, set on a space ship traveling through the universe, revolves around two unlikely figures—the ancient rebel Beelzebub who, as a young being assigned to various cosmic duties by Our Common Father Sun Absolute, has rebelled over some question of justice and been exiled to the planet Mars in a far-away solar system which also contains the planet Earth; and his favorite grandson, the twelve-year-old Hassein. As *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson* begins, it is the year 1921 and Beelzebub has been pardoned for his youthful excesses, and, as it ends, some twelve hundred pages later, he receives back his official "horns of consecration" from a commission of angels and archangels and is revered again as one of the most eminent sacred individuals in the whole cosmos.[8]

The driving force of the *Tales* is the insatiable curiosity of the young Hassein about the "three-brained beings who inhabit the planet Earth and who have taken your fancy" and whom his grandfather has had ample opportunity to observe during his exile by means of an observatory rigged up on Mars, along with six actual descents to Earth. Beelzebub is the observing consciousness who has watched impartially the abnormal, perverted, and destructive behavior of the Earth-beings, unmatched anywhere else in their degradedness. If some of Beelzebub's experiences remind us of episodes in Gurdjieff's own life, the unrelenting desire for answers of Hassein reminds us of the tenacious struggle for being-knowledge which drove on the young Gurdjieff.

The term *being-knowledge* (not in the Platonic, but in the cosmic-participation sense), meaning both knowledge of such being and knowledge belonging to the whole being of the knower, is central to the relation between Beelzebub and Hassein and between Gurdjieff and the reader. It is not mental or intellectual knowledge, scientific or philosophical, all of which is disdainfully called "wiseacring" by Gurdjieff–Beelzebub. The only knowledge which will satisfy them is knowledge that meets the needs of all three parts of a human being at the same time—the thinking, feeling, and instinctive–motor parts. Such genuine knowledge is more or less close to what we call *understanding*. Since our knowledge is all in our heads, we are no longer capable of understanding anything.

Only a certain kind of consciousness (as a fourth factor) can reestablish the unity of the "three brains" (which elsewhere in the universe function in harmony), and make possible gnosis, understanding, or being-knowledge.

What Beelzebub has seen on Earth instead is devastating—creatures whose "instinctive sense of reality" had disappeared, whose greed, ambition, vanity, envy, self-love, and pride have put them in an "upside-down world." Their minds have been transformed into "mills for grinding out nonsense." They lie all the time without knowing it, to the point where any kind of truth makes them indignant (221, 515). They never once in their lives love with a genuine, impartial, nonegoistic love, but only by projecting their own ideas and desires onto others (358). What they call education is teaching children to be insincere and deceitful. Most damningly, they have lost completely the being-impulses of organic shame and objective conscience (414). They cannot tell the difference between right and wrong, but call right whatever suits their interests or the interests of their group.

This planet Earth, Beelzebub tells Hassein, is the only one in the universe where the inhabitants have the unique and terrible peculiarity of every so often manifesting "an-irresistible-urge-for-the-periodic-destruction-of-each-other's-existence" (387, 416, 526, 621, and elsewhere). It is this tendency, running through their whole history, which most disgusts and repels Beelzebub.

Some of the most powerful passages in all of Gurdjieff's writings voice the scorn and disgust which he feels at this periodic mutual slaughter of human beings by each other. It epitomizes everything that is wrong with this peculiar planet. He speaks of the "terrifying evil" and the "hideous property which has already entered their flesh and blood" and the inadequacy and foolishness of their so-called peace organizations (which appear to resemble the League of Nations and United Nations). He writes:

> If indeed with all their Being they were aware of the whole objective terror of these processes and desired sincerely jointly to eradicate this evil

> from the surface of their planet, then they would willy-nilly penetrate into the essence of this question and would understand that such an inherency which had become fixed in their psyche during hundreds of centuries can never be decrystallized in the course of a few decades. (1071)

About the "inherency" he says:

> . . . from the very moment when each of them acquires the capacity of distinguishing between "wet" and "dry," then, carried away by this attainment, he ceases forever to see and observe his own abnormalities and defects, but sees and observes these same abnormalities and defects in others. . . . Thanks to this property . . . always to grow indignant at the defects of others around them, they make their existence, already wretched and abnormal without this, objectively unbearable. (1076–77)

Echoing the teaching of great Gnostics of the past, like Mani, the third-century Persian, Gurdjieff says that the means of abolishing war and restoring a normal cosmic existence to the planet Earth have been brought to Earth in the past by a succession of sacred individuals or messengers from His Endlessness, Our Common Father and Sun Absolute. The five existing religions (Buddhist, Hebrew, Christian, Muslim, and Lamaist) have been founded by five such messengers: Saint Buddha, Saint Moses, Saint Jesus, Saint Mohammed, and Saint Lama. Beelzebub says that all these religions are now in the process of disappearing because their followers have stripped the truth from them and turned them into nothing but "fairy tales" with shreds of truth adhering.[9]

While on the space ship Karnak, Beelzebub receives an "etherogram" which signals that two of the religions, Christianity and Islam, have permitted occurrences which presage their ends. The first is that Christians have permitted the setting-up of a university for Jewish youths in Jerusalem, and the other is that the Turkish government has abolished the wearing of the fez by men and the yashmak by women. Soon, he says, there will be a parking lot where the "planetary body of the divine Jesus" was buried. The religion of Saint Moses will disappear "owing to the organic hatred formed in the beings of other communities toward the beings who follow this religion," while the Buddhist religion has already deteriorated because of the false occultism, theosophy, and spiritualism which have crept into it. Gurdjieff-Beelzebub witnessed the first invasion of foreign powers into Tibet (in the late nineteenth century), anticipating the destruction of the seven initiates he found still residing there and preserving the original revelation or *legominism* of Saint Lama.

All being-truth, in Gurdjieff's view, comes from revelations delivered by sacred individuals, and it takes the form of what he called *legominisms* or

sacred tablets, writings, or practices delivered to schools of initiates pledged to keep them secret,[10] who are also instructed how to deal with evil-doers called hasnamusses. Gurdjieff–Beelzebub described the destruction of just such a secret Tibetan school by such a hasnamuss.[11]

We have to go back to a much earlier time and a greater sacred messenger (in fact one not known to ordinary history) to find the teacher we need today. This is a messenger to the ancient Sumerians, or their immediate predecessors, born near Babylon, to whom Gurdjieff–Beelzebub devotes no less than four chapters in his book. His name is said to have been Ashiata Shiemash, and for Gurdjieff he is obviously the supreme teacher of the solar revelation. Beelzebub mentions several other early saints, such as Saint Krishnatkharna of India and Saint Venoma, discoverer of the Law of Falling (or tendency of objects to go into a nearest point of equilibrium or balance). Ashiata Shiemash established for a time "normal" conditions on Earth, and Gurdjieff–Beelzebub says that he is

> the only Messenger sent from Above to your planet who succeeded by His holy labors in creating on that planet conditions in which the existence of its unfortunate beings somewhat resembled for a certain time the existence of the three-brained beings of the other planets of our great Universe on which beings exist with the same possibilities. (348)

This messenger did not teach ordinary humans but committed all of his teachings to initiates who by "conscious labor and intentional suffering" had earned this privilege. They were called the Brotherhood Olbogmek and remained up to the present in Central Asia where Gurdjieff–Beelzebub encountered one tablet left by Ashiata Shiemash.

This tablet preserves words which look like what Gurdjieff–Beelzebub would regard as the first version of an important Christian teaching, an earlier "solar formulation" of the nature of the three Christian virtues of faith, hope, and love, reading thus:

> Faith of consciousness is freedom
> Faith of feeling is weakness
> Faith of body is stupidity.
>
> Love of consciousness evokes the same in response
> Love of feeling evokes the opposite
> Love of body depends only on type and polarity.
>
> Hope of consciousness is strength
> Hope of feeling is slavery
> Hope of body is disease. (361)

This most ancient of teachings, which Gurdjieff says has come down to us from Sumerian times, speaks of a gnosis of "consciousness" (a modern English term). We might paraphrase it this way: to be a normal human being (as intended by His Endlessness), we must:

> be aware of what we are doing—which is to act in freedom (not to act out of dependency or credulity)
>
> be aware of others objectively (not to relate to them merely emotionally or by physical affinity)
>
> be aware of an open future (not emotionally yearning or living in fantasies)

At the center of the Gurdjieff gnosis, we now can see, is the secret knowledge that the task of human life is to recover our true essence and allow it to take the place of the false personality which the demented world has given us. The task is the development of true solar individuality, what the Pythagoreans called the making of the soul. We are, in this teaching, not born with souls ready-made, but have to wake up from sleep or be born again, not into the Hindu universal self or the Buddhist no-self, but into the full individuality of each unique essential self, of which the seed is in each of us.

Personality, in the Gurdjieff teaching, is the socially and culturally created shell which we develop in the course of growing up, as a protection against the world or a mask-like way of dealing with it. This shell is well formed by the ages of five or six. It is contrasted with the essence, or original individuality, with which we each are born, but which ceases to develop when our main need becomes to adjust in order to survive in the demented world. In most human beings, essence—the only nature which really belongs to us—remains like a small child hidden somewhere deep within the defensive social persona. It is this forgotten essence which has to be refound and allowed to come to full maturity through the practice of work upon ourselves, by which we gradually dismantle the defensive personality structures, slowly transforming them into essence. Personality is a disguise. Essence is what we really are. But the shift from one to the other is fraught with dangers.

The valuable psychology of Gurdjieff and his principal students, A. R. Orage, P. D. Ouspensky, Maurice Nicoll, C. S. Nott, and John G. Bennett, has shed enormous light on what passes for normal human behavior. To live in personality is to be under the control of suggestibility and habitual automatic responses, built into our social conditioning systems. (Psychoanalysis has its limits in adjustment to the abnormal social and cultural situation, since this is the only criterion of normality available to the blinkered analyst. Gurdjieff's definition of "normality" is provided by humanity's sacred teachers and not by the conventions of the day.)

Living in personality we are living in rigid prisons, and the limits are strictly prescribed by social and cultural determinants. It is of this situation that D. H. Lawrence, one of the most prophetic of British writers, said, "People never, never, never change." He was referring to the fixed structures of personality. Only essence has genuine freedom.

Although rigid, personality is also fragmented, producing altogether contradictory actions, feelings, and thoughts in the same human being. This is what makes it possible for a political leader, for example, to say in virtually the same breath that he believes in the Sermon on the Mount, but also in the total destruction of enemies in war time.

We have to catch a glimpse of essence in order to begin to tell the difference between personality and essence. This is the genuine gnosis. In a well-known story about Gurdjieff, it is told that he was once asked by a traveling companion on a train what business he was in. Gurdjieff replied that he was a salesman. "Of what?" asked the other. "Of solar energy," Gurdjieff replied. He was referring to the "higher energies" of essence or soul, which belong to the sun. But he might also have replied that he was a salesman of secret knowledge about how to wake up into essence from the "dreams of life."

THE SUFI WISEST OF THE WISE

Moving in and out of the pages of *Beelzebub's Tales* is an altogether different kind of figure than the members of the cosmic hierarchy of angels and archangels and the sacred individuals or messengers who appear on the Earth as the founders of the great religions, and yet this being is also treated with great deference. He is quoted in every chapter and referred to more than two hundred times. He is described as "very wise" and as having an "apt and pithy saying for each and every peculiar situation great and small." In one place he is given the title of "Our Endlessly Revered Wisest of the Wise" (265). This is the terrestrial wise man, the Middle Eastern folk hero, familiar in every bazaar and school in Turkey as a man riding backwards on a donkey, Nassr Eddin, also known as the Mullah and the Hodja.

An extraordinary individual, indeed what we might call the third face of Gurdjieff after the solar individual and the gnostic rebel and child, and a far more dubious and problematic presence—the Sufi trickster, the folk hero of the villages and bazaars.

While driving through central Turkey many years ago, the present writer had the opportunity to encounter the spirit of Nassr Eddin in the village of Akesir, claimed by its residents to have been the birthplace of Nassr Eddin, though his birthplace has about the status of that of Uncle Sam or Paul Bunyan or John Bull. This village was reached by a mountain road some thirty or forty miles northeast of the old Turkish capital of Konya, where I had

been visiting the tomb of Jalaluddin Rumi, the founder of the Mevlevi or whirling dervishes. It was at what was marked as the tomb of Nassr Eddin in the village that my family and I encountered the unmistakable expression of his spirit. For the tomb was protected by a high ornate iron fence of great impressiveness, in which the gate was set. But this fence extended no more than a few feet on each side of the locked gate! A few steps would take anyone around the fence on either side. Here was a fine example of the wisdom of Nassr Eddin, beyond which even the most advanced logic and philosophy cannot go. When is a "fence" not a "fence"?

Although many of the sayings of Nassr Eddin, including many of those given by Gurdjieff, are almost entirely opaque to the European and American mind, others have a philosophical depth which would not be amiss if put forward by Bertrand Russell or Ludwig Wittgenstein. I have heard a Nassr Eddin story used to illustrate the famous Russell paradox about "the class of all classes that is not a member of itself." Gurdjieff himself says that he "never lost the smallest opportunity to act entirely according to the Mullah Nassr Eddin's unprecedentedly wise and inimitable sayings."

Gurdjieff describes his own teaching method as following the way of Nassr Eddin, which he also calls the "way of the sly man" (perhaps better called, to avoid the connotation of deceitfulness, the "way of the shrewd man"), in contrast to the three more traditional ways of the fakir, centering on the physical body; the monk, centering on feelings, emotions, and devotions; and the yogi, centering on the mind. The shrewd man concentrates on all three parts together.

The shrewd man's teaching methods span a vast range of features and practices which, from the beginning, have baffled not only the general public when it has heard of them, but even Gurdjieff's students themselves. We often do not know what he is up to or how to take his tricks and turns, including methods of disguise, intentional misrepresentation, role-playing, elaborately staged scenes and demonstrations, and, even more difficult to deal with, insults, shocks, and wild bursts of *controlled* temper.

Those who studied with Gurdjieff and those who have spent many years studying his writings and those of his main expositors, Orage and Ouspensky, become aware, quickly or slowly, of the fact that Gurdjieff did not wish to play the role of the traditional guru. Nor could he be simply a counselor or priest. He was on a different level of being from his students, and time and again demonstrated this by his ability to "see right through" them. They knew that he had a mastery and understanding of human behavior which they did not have and could not hope to have without his assistance. If they wanted to have the kind of understanding which he had, they would have to earn it for themselves. He saw it as part of his task to make things difficult for them, to

drive them into what he frequently referred to as "conscious labor and intentional suffering." His wisdom could not be communicated directly; it had to be put in a form where it would arise in the being of the students as their own understanding.

One of the Sufi masters, when asked why he did not explain his cryptic stories, replied, "How would you like it if you asked me for an orange, and I gave you one which had already been sucked dry? The nourishment comes from sucking it for yourself."

Students might spend weeks or even months without apparently even being noticed by Gurdjieff, and then one day might be given a single word or thought so exactly right that it unblocked their whole development and later was never forgotten.

The shrewd man knows how to go to the heart of matters even in ways which may be completely unorthodox. An excellent example of how appearances may suddenly be turned upside-down in order to give a whole new perspective on a problem is to be found in a typical Nassr Eddin story involving a young boy with a rifle. A visitor noticed that a stone wall in the village square had on it a dozen or so bull's eyes which had been hit in each case directly in the center. "How did you become such a good marksman as to hit the bull's eyes every time?" the visitor asked. "It was easy," said the boy. "I fired the shots first, and then I painted the circles around the holes. That way you can get a bull's eye every time."

This "solution" to the problem of target practice is so obvious and so outrageous that we may not realize the practical implications. There appears to be something deceitful, but all we have done is to outwit the problem. There are many similar examples in the wisdom of Nassr Eddin.

All this, like so much in Gurdjieff, borders on both the "fishy" and the uncanny, and contains a considerable element of everyday mystery. Gurdjieff himself was surrounded by, and surrounded himself with, mystery. Biographers debate even the year of his birth, his education, the exact chronologies of his travels, his companions. In his own tellings truth and legend, plain facts and outrageous concoctions are mixed together. Just at the point where we are inclined to disbelieve a story, facts turn up which suggest that it may have been true after all. Such, for example, are stories about Gurdjieff's early relations with Stalin and about his role in high lamaist circles in Tibet.

A recent biographer, James Webb, says:

> It is certainly true that the young Joseph Dzhugashvili—who became Joseph Stalin—was a lodger with the Gurdjieff family at some time during his career at Tiflis Theological Seminary from 1894 to 1899 and that he left owing them a substantial sum of money.[12]

Others identify Karl Haushofer, the Nazi geopolitical theoretician; Herman Hesse, the German author; and Prince Peter Kropotkin, the famous Russian anarchist, as among Gurdjieff's companions on his journeys. Webb believes that Gurdjieff was in Tibet as an agent for the Russian government under the name of Ushe Narzunoff (and not, as others maintained, Lama Dorjieff) and even produces photographs to prove it.

In the introduction to *Meetings with Remarkable Men*, Gurdjieff throws out a clue as to the style of writing he was consciously adopting. Coupled with his frequent excoriation of the "poisonous" influence of the writings called "journalism," this passage helps us to understand the "atmosphere of the marvelous" which surrounded Gurdjieff and which he still awakens in memory. He is speaking of the kind of literature he values:

> These texts—and I speak particularly of "The Thousand and One Nights"—are works of literature in the full sense of the word. Anyone reading or hearing this book feels clearly that everything in it is fantasy, but fantasy corresponding to truth, even though composed of episodes which are quite improbable for the ordinary life of people. The interest of the reader is awakened and enchanted by the author's fine understanding of the psyche of people of all walks of life around him. (18)

Gurdjieff, it seems, wanted his actual life to have just this quality of "fantasy corresponding to truth" which lights up the human psyche. Our Western life, grown gray with technology and humdrum, we feel, could do with some of this sense of the marvelous which pervaded the Gurdjieff world.

At the same time, no one was more on guard against credulity and tomfoolery, the plastic imitations which fill the occult workshops, what Nassr Eddin with his peasant shrewdness called the "twaddle" of spiritualism and the "titillation" of religion (*Beelzebub's Tales*, 698, 768). A teaching which asked people to stand on their own feet, but at the same time to make use of knowledge from very unorthodox sources, must depend upon students holding exactly the balance between credulity and incredulity, belief and disbelief, trust and suspicion.

Since a good deal more than with most teachers had to be taken on trust, the tensions of belief and disbelief remained, we are told, at a high level. Students might be praised one day for doing the same thing for which on another day they were denounced. It was up to them to find out the difference. They might be up and down on a roller coaster of emotional reactions before they realized that it was just such identifications and negative emotions that they were supposed to become aware of. They learned that Gurdjieff did not indulge in personal or egoistic behavior. He was sizing people up and finding the best ways to help them to see themselves.

The ever-shifting and mysterious relation between appearance and reality, which belongs to every religion and every teaching, but is understood differently in each of them, is nowhere more subtle than in Islamic Sufism (as we can learn, for example, from the multitude of Sufi stories collected by Idries Shah). There the diaphanous veil which separates the two requires the most skillful deciphering. This is why Gurdjieff refused to explain anything. You have to decipher for yourself.

An example of the profundity of the shrewd man and something which will make sense only to those who are already "on the way" is a remark made by Gurdjieff in 1924, during his first trip to New York, when he was asked, "Mr. Gurdjieff, what are you trying to do?" "What I try do?" he replied. "I try show people when it rains, the streets are wet."

The answer may well be a kind of spiritual litmus test. Those who see nothing in it will be wasting their time reading Gurdjieff. Those who having heard it keep remembering it and thinking about it (like Edwin Wolfe, who quoted it in his book, *Episodes with Gurdjieff*) will be able to go on learning. Wolfe, incidentally, added a second zinger by also telling us that when he reminded Gurdjieff of what he had said several months later, he got the following response: "'I say this?' he asked me as if with great surprise." To give so generously as not to have to claim what one has given, as if to say, "There is plenty more where that came from" constitutes a model of grace and spiritual freedom that by itself puts Gurdjieff among the greatest of masters.

Gurdjieff himself wore a very evident "disguise" which, as it seems, automatically excluded those people who could not see through it. It was just the disguise of the "charlatan" which kept the largest numbers away. Did he appear slightly shady? Slightly "up to something"? So much the better. Was he perhaps trying to fleece people or take advantage of them? Such a faint aura of distrust (around the one man in all the world who could perhaps, when it came down to it, be most surely trusted!) served its purpose. Only the real searchers would see through it.

We see this distrust fixed around the two questions which Gurdjieff himself said were the most sensitive in all human life and always calculated to make people jump if ever they were seriously mentioned: money and sex.

Gurdjieff felt that those who had much material wealth might properly be asked to give substantially if they found a teaching of great value. There is, however, a striking and, shall we say, rather old-fashioned difference in the way he dealt with personal questions about money and about sex. The first he discussed at length; the second he seems never to have mentioned in autobiographical terms.

In an autobiographical chapter called "The Material Question" at the end of *Meetings with Remarkable Men*, Gurdjieff describes how he made more

than sixty thousand rubles by setting up a repair business in Transcaucasian towns and villages and charging large sums for making minor adjustments to household items which the owners were too ignorant to realize could be fixed in a few minutes. (Gurdjieff would keep the things for several days, reporting how difficult the repairs were.) He makes it clear that he did not take money from the poor in this way, but only from those who engaged in such practices themselves. Such sharp dealings (which he described as common also to the American business world) are expected in Middle Eastern commerce. Large sums were made also by refashioning last season's women's corsets and by reselling many barrels of fish, mistakenly thought by their first proprietor to have gone bad.

The important point, as told to an audience in New York, was that all these funds were expended on "institutes" for teaching, and it was the burden of teaching which he had taken on himself which required concern with the material question.

What bears further discussion is Gurdjieff's attitude in general toward women. The whole cosmic fable, in both its heavenly and earthly dimensions, is virtually exclusively populated by men. Not even wives are mentioned. In fact, there is only one woman to be found anywhere in the Gurdjieff corpus, a woman named Vitvitskaia, and she, we are told, "dressed like a man."

While Gurdjieff autobiographically has a lot to say about his father, he has almost nothing to say in writing about his mother, although it is reported that he mourned her, even excessively, when she died in the Prieuré days. There are nowhere descriptions of affairs or relations with women. Romance and sex do not exist in this atmosphere of religious importance. Gurdjieff even seems on occasion to have voiced the unacceptable view that, whereas men could develop souls on their own and of their own, women could only accomplish this in conjunction with men.*

The shrewd man's attitude toward the world and what he can contribute even to the gnostic rebel and the child is well illustrated by Gurdjieff's description of a meeting which took place while the two of them, Nassr Eddin and Beelzebub, were sitting on the roof of a house in Ispahan, Persia. The Mullah then revealed to Beelzebub the secrets of the Russian and Persian situations at that point. Beelzebub says of Nassr Eddin, "Over his face spread his customary benevolent and as always enchanting grimace, which nevertheless had a slight shade of contempt . . . winking cunningly at me with his left eye." (*Beelzebub's Tales*, 597) The Mullah then points out in

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* NOTE FROM THE FRENCH EDITION: Upon Gurdjieff's death, key roles in the preservation of his work were filled by women: Jeanne de Salzmann, Sofia Ouspensky, Olga de Hartmann, Henriette Lannes, Jane Heap, and many others.

the street below a large troop of Cossacks accompanying a Russian phaeton with four horses and an imposing looking coachman. Inside the coach is a local Persian functionary and, sitting next to him, a Russian general. Nassr Eddin compares the besplendored Cossack and the general to turkeys and the poor insignificant Persian to a crow.

> Just now, in the company of a large number of "well-bred turkeys," a "crow" of this country passed by, who although one of the chiefs and of high rank, was yet nevertheless rumpled and badly molting. During recent times, I don't know why, "high-ranking crows" of this country no longer in general take a single step without these "well-bred turkeys." (598)

Nassr Eddin then decodes the parable by saying that the representatives of contemporary European civilization "must infallibly be called peacocks," while the people who dwell on other continents are called crows—that is, "the most good-for-nothing and dirty of all birds." For the people who try to emulate the Europeans and obtain their "stuffing" from Europe (in this case the Russians), "no better comparison can be found than the bird turkey." Since, he says, the Russians can never "dye" their black crow feathers successfully enough to become real peacocks, they must end up as turkeys. In this passage we are simultaneously given a lesson in history, ethnography, and psychology.

Thinking of Gurdjieff, not only as the solar individual and the gnostic rebel and child, but also as the Sufi trickster or shrewd man, we have to ask ourselves what his students have frequently asked themselves over the years: what was the specific nature of the task which Gurdjieff had assigned himself as an individual, apart from the general teaching role?

In various places, but particularly in *The Herald of Coming Good*,[13] Gurdjieff stated what seems to me, taking everything into account, the most plausible answer: he was trying to assemble in one place in order to observe them together the twenty-eight different types of human beings whom he had for many years regarded as the fundamental typology of human life on this earth.[14] As Jesus Christ had surrounded himself with twelve types for his purpose, Gurdjieff needed these twenty-eight.

This is certain to be regarded as outrageous on the face of it, the worst kind of occult foolishness, bound in itself to discredit the whole Gurdjieff teaching from top to bottom. Even if it is pointed out that there is no particular reason why the number of days in the lunar cycle should be just twenty-eight (why the moon should be at just that orbit) or the number of letters in the alphabet should be nearly the same,[15] the notion of human types will seem absurd, a forced and phony correspondence.

Gurdjieff anticipated this. He indicated that it is not possible to know even one human type unless one knows one's own type first, and this requires the

kind of being-knowledge which is not ours any longer. In other words, we are a long way from even being able to understand the very meaning of the expression "twenty-eight types of human beings." Just as no one who has not been in love can know what being in love is, or no one who has not faced death can know what facing death is, so no one who has not seen in his own case what a human type is can know what this is. There is nothing more scandalous about there being twenty-eight types of human beings (if indeed there are), than there is about there being seven colors in the rainbow (and not six or eight) or five fingers on the normal human hand (and not four or six) or, more infrequently, God being in a particular place at a particular time:

> There are things for the understanding of which a different being is necessary. . . . In order to see types one must know one's own type and be able to "depart" from it. In order to know one's own type one must make a good study of one's life, one's whole life from the very beginning; one must know why, and how, things have happened.[15]

THE GURDJIEFF LEGACY

Despite his powerful and fully protected uniqueness (protected most of all by the extreme difficulty of a modern "clever" person ever being able to read a book like *Beelzebub's Tales*), Gurdjieff invites comparison with other powerful attempts of our time to rescue the individual, particularly those of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Heidegger.

It should be clear by now that this solar-Gnostic-Sufi teaching has no room for the lonely individual of the existentialists (who are far too "subjective" for Gurdjieff's extreme "objectivism"), nor for Nietzsche's will-to-power which, whatever Nietzsche's defenders say, contains the potentiality of an arrogant assertiveness, nor the reappropriation of Greek being by the Heideggereans, which turns upon a questionable interpretation of Plato. Gurdjieff's philosophy is objective, neither egoistic nor elitist. It leaves no room for the glorification of the human ego, war, or militarism.

The general public saw a figure whom journalists (a group whom Gurdjieff derided) described as something like a combination of a Levantine rug merchant, Dr. Faustus, a circus ringmaster, and Santa Claus. And, oddly enough, he *was* all of these, though none of them catches the realness, integrity, and humanity of the man.

Our reaction to Gurdjieff will depend upon how far we are willing to go in diagnosing what is wrong with our civilization as it spirals into more and more massive forms of destruction, misery, disease, and corruption. Gurdjieff forces us to go back to the beginning in considering the question: *What is it to be a human being?*

Such versions as the "democratic man," "economic man," "capitalist or collective man," "humanist man," or "scientific man" simply do not match up. It was Gurdjieff's view that we require something like the "mythic–cosmic human" but freed from the puerilities of "heroism," war, ideology, and nationalism.

The Gurdjieff teaching returns to the Divine Individual, antedating the Christian tradition, but in a direct line backwards from it. And to self-knowledge, understood more "objectively" than by the Greeks; to the awakening of consciousness, a Buddhist task; and to the decoding of everyday life to reveal its "other" meanings, a marvelous Islamic Sufi revelation. This coming together of three or four such different strands, all belonging to the West (if we recognize the "Aryan" nature of Buddhism), does not in Gurdjieff represent a spiritual syncretism, simply pasting together different ideas, but quite the contrary, a miraculously integrated wholeness of life, fully embodied in a single remarkable human being.

NOTES

1. This was the case when I visited the cemetery many years ago, having no idea where the grave was.
2. Among the dozens of sun-temple mounds to be found in Ireland, for example, one of the most carefully studied is at Newgrange. Here the sun's light enters a passageway into the mound at 9:02 a.m. every December 21, remaining for nine minutes. Feminine and masculine spiral markings are on a giant kerbstone at the entrance. For full description, see Martin Brennan, *The Stars and the Stones* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1984). Gurdjieff found dolmens resembling those in western Europe at predicted places. The purpose of this trip, as stated in the autobiographical last chapter of *Meetings with Remarkable Men* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1963; 271), was to search for dolmens .
3. Those who ordered the dropping of the atomic bomb could not have thought there was anything precious in the cities they destroyed so quickly and so totally. Their ignorance of Japanese civilization was indeed profound.
4. Twonesses cannot be "united" except by "something in common." Hegel's limitation was that he conceived this only as "synthesis" (better expressed by the German word *Aufhebung*). Gurdjieff has no "philosophy of history."
5. On the enneagram, see J. G. Bennett, *The Enneagram* (Sherborne: Coombe Springs Press, 1974). Perhaps the most sustained, profound, and remarkable use of the number seven in the Western tradition is to be fouond in the works of Jakob Boehme (1575–1624), by whom Newton is said to have been deeply influenced. See Karl Robert Popp, *Jakob Böhme und Isaac Newton* (Leipzig, 1935). Boehme's influence is also seen in John Milton and William Blake, as well as in a number of Russian religious writers important in Russian Masonic and religious circles, upon whom Gurdjieff and Ouspensky in their time certainly drew. See James H. Billington, *The Icon and the Axe—An Interpretive History of Russian Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1966).

6. Among the innumerable discussions of the "sacred" and the other terms used for this in other languages, one of the most comprehensive is that by Carsten Colpe in the *Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 13:511–25.
7. *Meetings with Remarkable Men*, 64–76.
8. Beelzebub and Satan are more or less identified in angelology. (Since it is a widespread being-impulse, not held by John Milton alone, that the proper response to the Old Testament tyrannical God is protest and rebellion, Beelzebub is almost a popular figure in folk theology.) Gurdjieff's *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson* was published simultaneously by Harcourt Brace in New York and by Routledge & Keagan Paul in London in 1950; a facsimile edition of this original edition was made available by Two Rivers Press, Aurora, Oregon, in 1993.
9. In this way the original messages of the sacred individuals, which were delivered as tasks, are turned into consolations.
10. The sacred dances to which we have not yet referred, but which are a crucial and central part of the Gurdjieff teachings, are such legominisms, shown only to initiates. Since today is a time of great crisis when secret knowledge may be made public (and in a sense is now lying around the streets like gold which, however, people are too ignorant or too ill-informed to pick up), it was permitted by Gurdjieff to put on now and then, for those who would seek them out, public demonstrations of the dances. These were filmed by Jean Renoir, the well-known French movie director and son of the even better known artist. A brief glimpse of the dances appears at the very end of the motion picture about Gurdjieff, *Meetings with Remarkable Men*, produced and directed in 1978 by Peter Brook, with a screenplay by Peter Brook and Jeanne de Salzmann. The music for the dances was collected by Gurdjieff and transcribed by the pianist and composer Thomas de Hartmann. It was released on a four-record set by Triangle Records in 1985 and subsequently in tape and CD formats.
11. The word *hasnamuss*, for evil-doer, calls to mind the prototypical super-enemy of the Hebrews, Haman (from whom all subsequent enemies have in a sense been mythically descended (Esther 3:1–9:24). Taking into account when Gurdjieff's text was written, some students have seen in it also an amalgam of Hitler and Mussolini.
12. James Webb, *The Harmonious Circle: The Lives and Works of G. I. Gurdjieff, P. D. Ouspensky and Their Followers* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1980), 45. Webb's book joins Ouspensky's *In Search of the Miraculous* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1949), J. G. Bennett's *Gurdjieff: Making a New World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), and Fritz Peters' *Boyhood with Gurdjieff* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1964) as part of the indispensable literature about Gurdjieff.
13. G. I. Gurdjieff, *The Herald of Coming Good* (Paris: privately printed, 1933; reprinted New York: Samuel Weiser, 1971).
14. In his last years, for reasons which we do not know, Gurdjieff, apparently still pursuing this purpose, had cut the number of types down to twenty-one, now known as "kinds of idiots" and regularly toasted at the ceremonial meals held in the flat where he lived on the rue des Colonels Renard. These extraordinary final

teaching episodes were described by J. G. Bennett and his wife Elizabeth in their diaries of 1949, published under the title *Idiots in Paris* (Sherborne: Coombe Springs, 1980). It appears from this book that he was pretty close to having all twenty-one types there in one place the year of his death.

15 William Blake pointed out the strange fact that there are exactly twenty-eight cathedrals in England, one of them "missing." We must suppose that like the ancient dolmens Gurdjieff tracked down in the Caucasus, they occupy sacred sites, spaced at the right distances and directions from each other to indicate some knowledge of "earth lines." See John Michell, *The View over Atlantis* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972). When shown the "sorcerer" prehistoric painting in the cave at Lascaux, Gurdjieff suggested that the number of branches on the horns indicated degrees of initiation and also said that dolmens would be found a particular distance from the cave.

16. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, 246–47.