

## INVENTORY AND CLASSIFICATION OF GURDJIEFF'S LEGACY

*Art without a magical component does not exist. Great magic cannot exist without great art.*

– Valentin Bresle

When Gurdjieff died, on the 29th of October 1949 at Neuilly, near Paris, he left an oeuvre comprising a script for a ballet, three books, three hundred musical compositions and just as many dances, which are referred to as his “Movements” in this book. In addition, there are sound recordings of him playing the harmonium, and on occasion recordings of his voice, made in the twilight years of his life. This is the most direct and tangible part of his legacy, exceptional in its diversity. Of course, there have been religious figures who have written philosophical treatises, such as Teilhard de Chardin, and also philosophers who composed music, such as Nietzsche, but Gurdjieff's legacy is beyond comparison, given the three fields that it covers. And then, there is the sheer volume of the works! The first book alone has 1300 pages of India paper in small print. His Movements are set out in the smallest detail: one single Movement comprising a complexity of combined multiple roles. His musical compositions appear to have been composed in passing, in the midst of his creative eruptions, in just a matter of years. How should this legacy, created with such passionate energy, be regarded?

A preliminary inventory presents us with three main elements, each representing a different discipline, three independent worlds as it were: Gurdjieff's books, music and Movements. These elements

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originate directly from Gurdjieff. He wrote his books himself in his own words. His music, though not scored by him, is still clearly his. His Movements have been passed on by several of his pupils independently and we can assume that around 250 of them have been preserved in a historically reliable form.

In the first place, Gurdjieff was an esoteric teacher and not an author, composer or choreographer. When I mention Gurdjieff's teaching, I mean his own words of explanation that he gave in a form that was comprehensible for each and every one of his small circle of pupils in the first stage of his teaching, from 1912 to 1924. Why then are his teachings missing from the elements of his legacy? The reason is that the logically structured component of his teaching reached us exclusively through his pupils and, as such, cannot be mentioned in the same breath as the aforementioned elements of his legacy. It should also be considered that the content of the pupils' words is colored by the reader's or listener's subjective associations, and on top of this altered in the course of time by the "spirit of the times." Words lack the precision of the mathematical physical positions, movements and rhythms of Gurdjieff's Movements that leave no room for doubt or vagueness. Words are more vulnerable to false interpretation, manipulation and even sheer fabrication.

An attempt to classify the elements of this legacy immediately raises questions of how this should be tackled. Are they interconnected, and if so in what way? How do his books, music and Movements relate to his teaching? Are all parts equally important? Or does one of them form the center of gravity, around which the other parts revolve as mere illustrations, or clarifications, of the core? This last question is essential, because after Gurdjieff's death his legacy has been studied by groups, institutes or organizations that focus on one of the components at the expense of the others, depending on the preferences and tastes of those leading these groups. Therefore, each group or organization has already answered this question. Their answers are far from unanimous.

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For an analysis and historiography of the Movements, it is necessary to examine the aforementioned questions, although I do not labor under the illusion that I can completely answer them. All I can do is present and classify the facts as I understand them, defining keywords, providing them with a historical framework. No matter how rudimentary and clumsy the definitions of these keywords may be, they will hopefully prevent us from losing our way and serve to keep us on a negotiable path.

### **ART, SCIENCE OR OTHERWISE?**

Under which banner can the components of Gurdjieff's legacy be accommodated? Gurdjieff's music and his Movements can clearly be categorized as "art," but does this apply to his books too? The blend of mythical, fantastic and autobiographical elements they comprise argue in favor of this, were it not that many believe that the books proclaim a new kind of science about the human and the cosmos. Should they be classified as esoteric?

In the above paragraph, words like "art," "science" and the "esoteric" are bandied about. The meanings of these words float around us like leaves falling from a tree, carried along on every gust of wind. Let us set up these three keywords in relation to each other as if they were the corners of a triangle. Entering the silent realm of geometric abstractions, we will label the points of the triangle and look at what they have in common and where they differ from each other.

Art is an irrational domain in which the question of truth or falsehood is irrelevant. The fact that a work of art exists is its truth. Science is a rational endeavor, in which the veracity of statements or propositions can be tested through logic or experiment. The result of such investigation is either a confirmation or negation of their correctness. The esoteric, a banner that accommodates all religions and a wide variety of occult and mystical ideas, may meet with a response from

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the inner being, borne out by the fact that since time immemorial, every religion and culture has been in search of an answer to “the ultimate question,” as described by Gurdjieff and Breton in the previous chapter. Unfortunately, the truth or falsehood of all these ideas can never be proven. Were this the case, humanity would have been spared insufferable misery, religious wars and genocides. The irrational system of the esoteric is on good terms with the other irrational system, the arts. Gurdjieff’s legacy is proof of this.

Let us consider this from a broader perspective and continue our geometrical exercise with the triangle we have imagined. Let us suppose that the triangle’s origin was a single point, from which, over time, three lines grew longer and further apart, to such an extent that they have now become wholly alienated from each other. This geometrical picture is close to the historical truth. In ancient times, art, science and esotericism formed a unity, and each in its own way testified to a harmonious universe, created and governed by a higher intelligence than that of the human. Over the course of time, scientists did their job so well that this view of the world, in which they had a deep-rooted faith, was played out. Sir Isaac Newton was one of these scientists. He was not just deeply religious, but also spent more time on treatises about alchemy than on physics. Even so, he is *the* father of contemporary physics. Only in the nineteenth century, a period so aptly called “Flight from Reason” by historian James Webb, did the paths of science and esotericism part for good. It is no coincidence that the devotees of esoteric systems are often nostalgic for the past—for those distant days when science, art and religion formed a whole—that they display a weakness for ancient monuments, such as pyramids, Aztec temples, shrines overgrown by forests, medieval cathedrals, Tibetan monasteries and such. Beliefs and ideas that have drifted miles apart, historically speaking, such devotees of the esoteric attempt to reunite within themselves. This is not exclusive to them. All of us are the products of history and doomed to personify random hybrids of the rational and the irrational.

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For some, Gurdjieff's books are the harbingers of a new science, but can they actually be classified as such? This is an important question, even more so because bridging the gap between Western sciences and Eastern mysticism was one of Gurdjieff's goals. His first and most important work, *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*, is about as accessible for an approach employing a logical conceptual basis as a raw piece of marble. The reader feels something of the incredible energies and high fusion points that created this rich material, veined and veiled with secret code, but it cannot be deemed scientific. There is little other choice than to classify it alongside Gurdjieff's music and his Movements as "art." The important role played by unusual concepts and images in his book confirms this classification. In other words, for the time being we can conclude that the tangible parts of Gurdjieff's legacy—his books, music and Movements—comprise artistic expressions.

### NEW QUESTIONS ABOUT COHERENCE

The versatility of the parts of Gurdjieff's legacy makes these artistic expressions unique, but this versatility also instantly poses new questions. Are they the work of a talented individual who has not been able to formulate a clear, uniform vision? Is this oeuvre incoherent, or not? During the period in which he pursued writing, composing and physical movements, the chronology of Gurdjieff's life has clearly delineated periods, but this does not mean that there is coherence among his works. Does this coherence exist and, if so, from what is this evident?

These are not rhetorical questions. If indeed there is no coherence, each part of this legacy could assume a life of its own. And this is exactly what is happening on a large scale, but this is certainly not what Gurdjieff had intended. A free interpretation of Gurdjieff's music has recently made it into the Top Ten of a classical music chart, and the majority of those presently practicing his Movements, or what

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they believe to be as such, have never read any of his books. It is even doubtful if they are actually interested in Gurdjieff's ideas at all.

My motivation for writing this book is to reply to the question of coherence in Gurdjieff's legacy with a straightforward, heartfelt *Yes*, and my answer is based on four solid reasons:

- Gurdjieff's works complement each other
- they all share a ritualistic character
- they all share a hidden content
- their common source is the same: his teaching.

I will explain these four reasons in order.

### **Complementing Each Other**

Gurdjieff's books, music and Movements should be seen in the light of his basic idea that thoughts, feelings and the body constitute the three main functions of the human and that, consequently, he tailored his Works for each of those functions respectively—a *trichotomy which gives the works a complementary character*. Just words, sounds or movements separately were not enough for him.

### **A Ritualistic Character**

Gurdjieff's creations in the three artistic disciplines can be seen as a *Gesamtkunstwerk* and that explains their ritualistic character. The idea of a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, in which different arts intermingle to evoke a new vision, was first introduced by Richard Wagner and greatly influenced Russian Symbolism. This is not to say that Gurdjieff's work displays any affinity with Wagner's work. In fact, it is difficult to imagine a greater difference. However, one particular element in the idea of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* has a very strong presence in Gurdjieff's oeuvre.

To explain this, it will be necessary to dwell briefly on Symbolism, a cultural development from the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth.

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Symbolism had a marked influence on the intelligentsia, in Belgium, France and Russia, but was not exclusive to them as it also formed a seedbed from which many other esoteric systems sprouted. Symbolism was a reaction to the increasing industrialization of the nineteenth century, and more especially a reaction to the tarnishing of the old, classical model of humankind by more modern, scientific developments. Galileo had already robbed humankind of its central position in the universe, but now Darwin undermined the divine origins too. Finally, the notion of humans as at least the lords and masters in their own castles was unmasked by Freud. We are subject to vital forces outside the periphery of our perception, in the subconscious.<sup>1</sup>

Symbolism preached the return to the realm of the spirit, to the restoration of human dignity and emphasized the singularity of each individual's personal experiences. In whatever form Symbolism expressed itself, two characteristics stand out again and again. First, that this deeply individual mysticism is usually experienced as tragic, and secondly, the belief that artistic expression is essentially a religious act, meaning that all the arts should together form a liturgy enabling the human to evolve into a higher form of being. It is this last point, the liturgical and ritual element that forms a useful clue. Gurdjieff's legacy can be seen as the result of a major effort to create an entirely new ritual in which essential questions are approached not only through a mental effort, but a ritual that simultaneously stimulates and mobilizes the sensitivity of the body and emotional life.

### **Shared Hidden Content**

Another argument for regarding Gurdjieff's different artistic expressions as one single entity is the fact that they all have a hidden content,

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<sup>1</sup> This, in a nutshell, is what Sigmund Freud wrote in an article about narcissism, dating from 1917.

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and this is very typical for everything regarding his teaching and his work. The word “esoteric” is usually used as a synonym for a deeper, hidden meaning, although the original meaning of this word is “that which lives inside a human being.” The esoteric plays a role in all religious, spiritual and mystical systems and Gurdjieff’s works are no exception. Secrecy, concealing information or taking gullible souls for a ride has nothing to do with it. This is not esotericism but deceit. A useful alternative word for esotericism is “inaccessible.”

The inaccessible in Gurdjieff’s work can be understood in three ways:

1. First, the geographical inaccessibility of the sources of his knowledge
2. Second, an insight can be inaccessible because it is cast in another, less obvious form, such as allegorical stories or hidden in a traditional art form.
3. Finally, a lack of preparation or a lack of knowledge can create a barrier.

Let me comment one at a time on these three forms.

As a young man, Gurdjieff was convinced that somewhere on earth an old form of knowledge still existed and he went looking for it. Whether or not he succeeded in finding it is unclear, but his idea is less otherworldly than it might at first seem. The existence of ancient forms of culture in remote areas certainly seems plausible. In contemporary ethnological musicology, “uneven distribution” is a recognized phenomenon. This accounts for the continued existence, in geographically or culturally remote areas or communities, of music that cannot be found anywhere else anymore. A farmer who grew up in the Appalachian Mountains in North America could bellow out a song that had crossed the ocean with his ancestors and had been preserved in his remote village, but long forgotten, in Europe.

Gurdjieff grew up in an environment where stories, myths, music and dance were passed on without losing any discernible vitality. Not

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just his native soil, but also his travels through the East must have brought him into contact with an enormous divergence of traditions and arts that originated from the ancient past, and had not been swept away by the “tidal wave of mud,” a term with which he referred to Western civilization. He suspected that their folkloric form was just a cloak for real knowledge, purposely disguised in the distant past. In the case of myths, this was obvious, but traditional music and dance could contain information too, and about anything at all: a historical incident or bread recipe. Important knowledge could also be found in customs, habits and folklore, a secret codex transmitted from one unsuspecting generation to the other in a deceptively innocent form, waiting to be deciphered some day in the future. This form was akin to a time capsule, having a very long lifespan and protected from misuse. Gurdjieff used the word “legominism” to describe this form. In the future, only those who could interpret the codes could obtain access to the secret, others could not. “Those who know, know. Those who do not know, do not know” was one of Gurdjieff’s cryptic statements that would not be out of place here.<sup>2</sup> It is consequently logical that Gurdjieff’s own artistic works have a deeper heart of insight hidden under their artistic cloaks.

### **The Common Source**

Finally, consider the inaccessibility caused by a lack of knowledge or resources. This is the meaning of the old adage that states that “something cannot be given that cannot be received.” This is true for everything. A layperson cannot perceive the structure of a building in the way an architect does, nor can an untrained ear absorb music as a musician’s. It may seem dogmatic, but I believe the significance of

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<sup>2</sup> Solange Claustres, one of Gurdjieff’s pupils, remembered this statement by Gurdjieff during an interview published in *Bres*, number 186, 1997 (see footnote in Preface). Quoted with kind permission from *Bres Magazine*.

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Gurdjieff's works and his teaching can only be understood by putting them into practice. To the extent that people attempt to apply the content of his books, music and Movements, his doctrine will gradually unfold. His works must be understood as a single work of art, created in different areas, but fed from a single source and energized with a single force: his vision of fate and the potential of the individual considered within the scope of a vast creation. Gurdjieff's legacy provides the material in the form of a ritual. This ritual puts his teaching into practice in order to test it, study it and decode it, like in a laboratory. His legacy also provides the material as in a workshop, in which, in quiet contemplation, his books are read aloud, his musical compositions are listened to and his Movements can be practiced. Books, musical compositions and Movements are the liturgical elements of his works.

As noted previously, the bulk of Gurdjieff's teaching, in the form of explanations to his immediate circle of pupils, was given from 1912 to 1924. Not that he was no longer active as a teacher after this, he continued to teach until his death, but he made use of entirely different means. The clear argumentation, by means of which he displayed his daring vision during the period prior to 1924, was definitely confined to the past and was replaced with personal conversations, readings from his books, his music and his Movements. The Movements could be described as his final, regular and structured form of education.

Like a continent split by a fault line, in 1924, the year of his car accident, the rationally accessible part of Gurdjieff's teaching was divided from everything that followed. His biographers and pupils offered various reasons for why this happened. The opinions vary markedly and are no more than surmise and speculation. More likely, he realized that spiritual ideas cannot be conveyed rationally, or through employing rationality alone, and for this reason he later hid them in his works of art, his "legominisms." One way or another, it must be emphasized that it is impossible for anyone to form a complete

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picture of Gurdjieff's teaching without knowing his pre-1924 expositions. The same is true for the comprehension of his books, music and Movements. The study of a fragment of Gurdjieff's legacy, isolated from his teaching, will produce a distorted picture and only deliver results that have little or nothing to do with the content and with Gurdjieff's actual objective.

The odd thing now is the fact that his teaching, understood here as its rational part, unlike its irrational part formed by his works of art, is the source of his legacy as described in the opening lines of this chapter, but that it is not named as such, nor can it be. *It has reached us solely through other people's testimonies.*