

An Experiment at Fontainebleau

A Personal Reminiscence

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Like his colleague-physicians Mary Bell and Maurice Nicoll, Dr. James C. Young abandoned the practice of Jungian therapy to study at Fontainebleau. Originally delivered as a talk to the Medical Section of the British Psychological Society, Young's essay describes the ideas presented by Ouspensky in London and his own practical experience with Gurdjieff at the Prieuré. He also depicts the state of mind that led to his departure from Gurdjieff's Institute.

J. W. D.

I do not doubt that there are many and varied opinions about the nature and significance of the Institute founded in 1922 at Fontainebleau by George Gurdjieff, a man of Greek or Georgian nationality (I never knew which for certain). Probably there are as many different opinions as there were people who went to the Institute or who stayed in London and wove the fabulous things which they heard about it from friends who had been there into their dreams. There remain, also, the opinions of those who had no other information than that derived from the descriptive articles and the inevitable pictures which appeared in the Daily Mail or Daily News. The headline of one of these articles ran: "The Forest Philosophers." I remember that this caption amused me hugely at the time. It also exercised me, because I have had moments such as Raskolnikoff in Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment must have had when he asked himself "Am I Napoleon or a louse?" I was not quite sure whether I was philosopher or fool!

I am not concerned at the moment, however, with these various opinions, fantastic and otherwise. I have been asked to give an account of "what it was all about," and I do so willingly, with the modest reservation, of course, that it is only my account of "what it was all about." I shall do my best to relate as much as possible of what I have

to say to the common interest in modern psychological problems. It will be necessary to recall the motives which led me to take a plunge into the dubious sea of occultism. At the outset I would point out that every form of occultism, "spookish," as the significance of the word has come to be, implies its own particular psychology, "spookish" or otherwise. Also, I think it may be said that every form of occultism aims at self-development through deepening, or expanding the limits of, self-consciousness, or however you like to express it. Now it is obvious that this laudable object cannot be obtained merely by embracing the ideas of a system, however rapturously. The all-important factor of the exercise and proper application of will must enter, if anything is to be achieved. If it does not, then the ideas, however beautiful and intriguing, in the end become merely "dope." I need not remind you how many people make the classical Adlerian "escape" into occultism, and how difficult it often is to cure them of this "dope habit." Such people constitute the pseudo-occultists of our time and of all time. So it may be said that "pseudo-occultism" only exists by reason of the "pseudo-occultists." I even venture to think that the term occultism will tend to disappear altogether with the realisation that the essentials of its matter (in so far as it contains true psychology – and ruling out speculative theory) are implicit in the interpretations and findings of modern psychology.

However that may be, I said above that the all-important factor in self-development by any system whatever was necessarily the will. The insistence, in the Ouspensky-Gurdjieff doctrine, on the need for development of the will through ceaseless application to the "work," in the specific sense, impressed me deeply. I was not so overwhelmingly satisfied with the results of my analytical therapy that I could afford to ignore any ideas or theories bearing on the question of will, because it seemed to me that "failure of will" was the "bête noire" in neuroses. Roughly, the neurotic symptom from the Freudian standpoint is the disguised expression of an affect which is too painful to be faced. From the Adlerian standpoint, it is an "incomparable arrangement," by which the patient avoids facing a certain aspect of what we call reality. In the broadest sense in both systems, it is a question of failure to face up to reality. Now it by no means follows that, when it is made clear to the patient by analysis what aspects of reality he has been unconsciously avoiding, that he will at once be able to cope with it. This is particularly evident in the case of obsessionists, as I have proved to my own satisfaction again and again. A washing obsessionist, for example, cheerfully subscribed to the theory of origin of her washing, but when called upon to make the slightest new adaptation, always falls back on her washing. In effect she says: "I cannot marry or do this, that or the other, because you see, I wash." To put the matter in a nutshell, analytical knowledge is not necessarily effective knowledge.

Now I think it will be generally agreed that what I have called "failure of will" is often bound up with an endocrine deficiency or dyscrasia, sometimes acquired and sometimes apparently so fundamental as to justify the term "primary plasmic insufficiency," which corresponds to Adler's organic inferiority. Unfortunately, the science of endocrinology was not, and is not yet, so far advanced as to enable us to

remedy such dyscrasias with anything approaching to certainty or precision, even granted that our powers of diagnosis may be able to divine the true nature of such complicated conditions. My problem, then, was how to overcome the difficulty of "failure of will" by means of a definite psychological method. What I learnt in the early stages of my acquaintance with the system which was afterwards tried out at Fontainebleau gave me reason to hope that here was something which I had been seeking. It must not however be supposed that I embarked on this adventure chiefly, or even mainly, to improve and expand my psychological and therapeutic technique. I cannot lay claim to such a purely impersonal motive. It may be that I was a little discouraged by the less consistent and more ambiguous results of analytical therapy in contrast with the precise and concrete results of surgery, which I had practised a good deal, both before and during the war. This state of mind was helped neither by the paeans of joy and jubilation which issued from the ranks of those who acclaimed the successes of a cut-and-dried technique, nor by the acrimonious discussions which seemed to centre round the maintenance of a dogmatic standpoint rather than round the need to cure patients. This vital point for physicians seemed often to be lost sight of, so that I was inclined to sympathise with the sceptic who changed the old quip, "the operation was successful, but the patient died," into "the analysis was successful, but the patient committed suicide." I was ever mindful at that time of Jung's story of the patient who came to him from another doctor and speaking of the latter, said: "Of course, he never understood my dreams, but he took so much trouble with them." In brief, psychopathology seemed to me to be claiming too much for itself as a science, thereby stultifying itself, and too little for itself as an art, thereby impoverishing itself. Perhaps I was stale. This is just the condition in which one is ripe for a spiritual adventure. So I went on it.

I scented the possibility of a substantial addition to my knowledge of psychological problems by accepting a discipline calculated to force one to experience oneself in a new way or from a different angle. It is an axiom that in experiencing a thing one experiences one's self. If the circumstances of one's life are uniform, one experiences one's self in a uniform way; in other words, one becomes stale. Staleness tends towards a mechanical state, and ultimately to petrification. Of course, one can devise means, if one is ingenious, of experiencing oneself in a new way. An enthusiastic disciple, for example, used to stand on his head, propped up against the wall, and try to think out a problem. He found that he could not at first. But he persisted and succeeded, thereby overcoming mechanism, which only allowed him to think in an ordinary uninverted posture. Whether there is any ultimate value in that particular form of achievement is open to question, but the principle holds good that the soul must experience itself in new ways in order to grow. It is needless to say that the new ways must be significant, and not trivial. As I understand it, this is the sine qua non in any attempt at all-round self-development. The idea of the Institute, then, was to provide an artificial milieu so arranged that the pupil would be forced to experience himself in radically new postures, both physical and psychological. The new postures were to be brought about by "shocks," as they were called. Instead of the shock bringing

about insanity, as the novelists put it, "shocks" were to produce sanity! It was to be one more attempt to put into practice the age-old maxim: Know Thyself. "Shocks" there were in plenty, and by no means always premeditated or arranged by M. Gurdjieff.

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The ideas of the system which was to be put into practice were expounded with great skill and consistency in London for a period of about a year before the Institute was begun in France, by M. Ouspensky. The fundamental tenet would be, I suppose, called pessimistic. It is to the effect that the great majority of mankind are machines or mechanisms subject to the caprice of forces which cannot be controlled in any real sense. One way of expressing this is to say that we can do nothing. Everything is done. We are merely passive agents, however much we cling to the illusion that we are active and free agents. As machines, then, we are entirely driven from outside, by external circumstances. We are under "laws of accident." So long as we are under these "laws of accident," we remain in a dream-state or "asleep." Those who recognise that they literally are in a dream-state may or may not attempt to wake up. This will largely depend on whether their dream is a happy one or not. But it by no means follows that an attempt will be made because the dream is unhappy. There are many people, not only neurotics, who do not want to sacrifice their suffering. They cling to it as if it were their last claim to human consideration. Those who do resolve to wake up from the dream-state must pass out from under the domination of the mechanical laws of accident. These mechanical laws of accident immediately resolve themselves into laws of psychological being. The laws of external Nature remain constant; only our attitude towards them changes. The process of becoming free of these laws may be compared to what happens in the military hierarchy. Laws or rules which apply to the private do not apply to the sergeant, and the sergeant-major is exempted from rules which apply to the sergeant. The commissioned officer is exempt from many of the rules which apply to all three, and so on. But the discipline by which the aspirant is to become free of the burdensome mechanical laws of his own being is more arduous than that existing in the military hierarchy, where promotion comes more or less automatically with the passage of time. Moreover, instead of being imposed from without, it is self-imposed.

The cardinal rules of the system are: (1) Self-remembering; (2) Non-identifying; (3) Non-considering.

They must be the watchwords of all those who, like the heroes of mythology and religion, would conquer the dragon; that is, shake off the inertia and the sweet poison of the personal, the traditional and the racial past. They are the principles—and the only principles—under whatever other terms they may be formulated, by which the normal man, so-called, as well as the neurotic, can attain to greater stability and harmony of his being. A man may have learnt, through analysis or otherwise, that he has a "mother-fixation," and know all about it; but if he continues to resent in neurotic fashion a

supposed slight or slur at the office, because "his mother would not have spoken so to him," then, in terms of the system, he is "identifying" with the supposed insult. His so-called knowledge is ineffective and has not allied itself with his will. If he ceases to resent the supposed slight, then his knowledge has informed his will and has become effective. He has "self-remembered" through "non-identifying." To "self-remember," then, may be said to be to make self-knowledge effective through the will. "Considering," in the Ouspensky system, is merely a variety of identification, but it is sometimes easier to explain "non-considering" than "non-identification" to a tyro. The man who identifies himself with an ideal of false noblesse oblige and keeps a whole room in an uproar until someone takes a more comfortable chair than himself is a rough example of "considering." His extravagance or fussiness is "mechanical" in the Ouspenskian sense. From the Adlerian standpoint such extravagance always indicates avoidance of a real imperative. It is an "incomparable arrangement" of the neurotic "will to power." For those who do not use any jargon, it is a form of insincerity. Both "non-identifying" and "non-considering" are implicitly contained in the idea of "self-remembering" and the object of "self-remembering" is to "wake up," to become more conscious. This constitutes the "work."

The *raison d'être* of the Institute at Fontainebleau, as I understood it, was to provide a milieu for the intensive practice of this work of self-observation in order to develop will. The essential in self-observation is to observe one's mechanisms as objectively as if they were the antics of another fellow, to be constantly taking mental photographs of oneself, as it were. There are pathological states—particularly melancholia—in which the sufferer always sees himself doing things and hears himself saying things, almost as if he were watching or listening to another person. This is a form of disassociation. In such a case the observing element is just as "mechanical" in the Ouspenskian sense as the observed. The difference between the mechanical observation of the disassociated state and true self-observation lies in the absence of will in the former. "Work," then, in the sense of the system consists in self-observation with a view to overcoming "mechanism."

A proper or effective recognition of our mechanisms then leads to greater consciousness, to self-consciousness. Four states of consciousness are postulated by the system as follows:—

- (1) Sleep state—subjective dream-state. (Dream-state, or ordinary life-state.)
- (2) Waking state—objective dream-state. (Dream-state, or ordinary life-state.)
- (3) Self-consciousness.
- (4) Higher consciousness.

The first two states together represent the dream state of average mankind, from which the attempt is to be made to wake up into the third state—self-consciousness. According to Ouspensky, Western psychology has missed the fact of the self-conscious

state altogether, by confusing it with the ordinary waking state. The fourth state, higher consciousness, need not concern us here.

With regard to the third state, "self-consciousness," I never could see the justification for the postulation of such a specific state, in the sense that sleeping and waking are specific states. It seems to me obvious that there are varying degrees of self-consciousness, or, to put it in another way, varying degrees of wakefulness in what we call the waking state. I once read somewhere that the higher animals, such as horses and dogs, are not supposed to be able to see the stars. Whether this is true I do not know, but it is certain that, if they can, the stars can have no ideational significance for them. The range of consciousness, then, in the higher animals is so limited that, in comparison, human consciousness might be said to belong to a different dimension. Similarly, self-consciousness was postulated as being so radically different from waking consciousness (so-called objective dream-state) that it might be said to belong to a higher dimension, although it was not stated in such terms. I may stand open to correction on this point, but, so far as I can remember, the criterion of this hypothetical state was that in it one would foresee all possible results of one's action, much as the greatest chess-players can foresee all possible results of their moves, but substituting the world in general for the chess-board. A much-to-be-desired, if exalted state, you will admit. So much to be desired, indeed, that the idea of the possibility of it is all too liable to become a neurotic power-fiction for the simple-minded. Nevertheless, as a guiding fiction for self-integration, in the sense in which Vaihinger uses the term "fiction" in his book, *The Philosophy of As if*, it is as good as many and better than most. The practical import, then, of the postulation of the state of self-consciousness may be formulated thus: "Work upon yourself, by means of self-remembering in the most rigorous sense, as if it were possible to attain to a state of being able to control not only your actions, but the effects of your actions, that is, to foresee the results of your action." The work, if properly understood, means death to all day-dreaming. In so far as there cannot be psychological stasis, that is, if there is not progression there must be regression, so there must be continual effort. The mind must never be allowed to flap uselessly, as it were. The sail of consciousness must ever be brought up to the wind. So much for the system as far as the development of consciousness was concerned. This was for me the stone which became the head of the corner.

One more word about "self-remembering." In so far as it is a disciplinary régime directed towards overcoming and controlling the mechanism of body, emotions and mind, it may be said to include or combine the three classical disciplinary methods. These are:—

(1) Asceticism, such as that of the early Christians or of the Fakirs of India and the East. These practices have the purpose of gaining control over the mechanism of the body, and are sometimes revoltingly and unspeakably drastic.

(2) Monasticism.—This is the typical discipline of the monk, and its main purpose is to gain control over the emotional, and what we would call the fantasy life. The bells which traditionally are rung at all possible and impossible hours serve to keep

people "awake" in the Ouspenskian sense, and to break the hypnotic spell of useless day-dreaming. The voice of the Muezzin from the tower calling the faithful to prayer, and the ringing of the bell during the Catholic mass have the same ultimate significance.

(3) Yoga. – The European counterpart of this form of discipline may be said to be Pelmanism and other more dubious "systems" which are advertised in the newspapers as royal roads to "power of concentration" and "mind control."

The objection to each of these disciplines separately, according to Ouspensky, is that they develop only one part of the human machine, sometimes even at the expense of or by the derangement of the other parts, so that often the machine, as a whole, works worse than ever. Thus the man who follows the way of the monk may become a kind of a saint, but a very stupid one, and the man who follows the third discipline may attain to mental concentration, but lose power of action. Certainly there seems to be some Nemesis for all attempts at the over-development of one particular function. In the vernacular – "there is always a snag somewhere."

The Ouspenskian system, then, advocated the use of all three methods in moderation, and according to individual needs. It became a matter of personal ingenuity how to devise exercises along these lines, whilst following the daily avocation in London. Some people took to doing counting exercises in the Underground, instead of staring at their fellow-passengers or reading the daily papers; others tried to overcome the "mechanism" of their dislikes in the matter of food by eating what they would not have otherwise eaten, or the "mechanism" of their likes by abjuring favourite dishes, and so on. Some experiences which were recounted were interesting, most of them banal. There seemed to be a general consensus of opinion that most people tended to deceive themselves and avoided tackling what appeared to others to be their most outstanding unconscious mechanism, their "chief feature," as it was called. There was a good deal of fun about this. Everybody wondered, for example, when it would dawn on a person, who at meetings talked too much for the sake of talking, to tackle that particular mechanism. When it did dawn on her (it was a lady) or perhaps, when it was hinted to her, she became rigidly silent, almost as if offended; which, of course, was equally "mechanical."

On the whole however, sincerity gained at the expense of "mechanical" politeness, and conversation, perhaps, became more alive and real when people met, although certainly not in all cases. There was also a marked tendency to be concerned with other people's mechanism. People would accuse one another of being "mechanical," an aspersion more resented than any charge of immorality! The obvious retort was, of course, "Mind your own mechanism." This was more or less the kind of thing that went on in London before the Institute began at Fontainebleau. I may mention one of my own little "stunts." I fasted four days whilst carrying on my ordinary work. On the evening of the third day there was a meeting of this section [the Medical Section of the British Psychological Society, before which this essay was originally read] and I had to read the minutes. I was feeling rather feeble and I sucked two lemons as I

walked along Harley Street to the Royal Society of Medicine. I had heard that the physiological effect of lemons during fasting was to make more fuel available for consumption. They certainly had that effect in this case, as I felt perfectly normal during and after the meeting. Apart from the verification of the beneficent effect of lemons, I made no observation on myself of any moment. So it was not "work" in the Ouspenskian sense.

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During the period of the lectures and meetings in London, M. Ouspensky had spoken of a remarkable man called Gurdjieff whom he had known in Moscow as the composer of an original kind of ballet, and whom he had met again in Constantinople after the Revolution. He averred that Gurdjieff had travelled widely in the East, in Turkestan, Mongolia, Thibet and India, that he had an intimate acquaintance with monastic life in those countries, that he had acquired an unrivalled knowledge and repertoire of their religious exercises and dances, and a profound understanding of their application to psychological development, and that he wished to found a school in which his knowledge would be incorporated and applied in accordance with the psychological system which M. Ouspensky was expounding. The latter also stated that Gurdjieff, who was then in Dresden, had a trained staff of instructors in physical exercises and all sorts of handicrafts, and counted among his entourage a number of distinguished artists, musicians, doctors and philosophers, most of whom were refugees from the Bolshevik régime, and who had already formed the nucleus of an institute in Dresden.

Gurdjieff came to London twice I think; he was an enigmatic figure, but on the whole, he created a favourable impression. A few timid people were scared away – perhaps by his completely shaven head. There was a project for founding the Institute in London, which fell through on account of passport difficulties. The Dalcroze Institute in the Rue de Vaugirard, in Paris, was taken temporarily during the summer vacation of 1922 and there in August of that year, I with a number of English people, joined up. The exercises were soon in full swing. They were of a kind I had never seen before, and certainly fulfilled expectation in that they were directed towards overcoming the inertia or limitation of body habit. I found them difficult and stimulating, probably on account of their strenuousness. I can perhaps, best convey an idea of their strenuousness by reminding you of a game which was probably familiar to us all as children. It consisted in trying to massage the stomach with a uniform circular movement of one hand, and at the same time to pat the top of the head rhythmically with the other. Most people find this very difficult; the movements usually become irregular and blurred, and end in a chaos. The will finds it difficult to combine two such unaccustomed movements and to keep them clear-cut and regular at the same time. The exercises were mostly devised on these lines, and some of them required the combination of four different movements, each of which had its own distinct rhythm. To attempt these exercises involved a great strain, and to continue for any length of time was very fatiguing. One became intensely

aware of the inertia of a body, perhaps otherwise well-disciplined (as by athletics), when called upon to make these unaccustomed combinations of movement. The struggle against this inertia, then, was one of the means to be employed in order to "wake-up."

The other main activity of this period in Paris was the making of costumes which were to be worn in the public exhibitions of the exercises and dances given later at the Institute. Gurdjieff cut out the materials with great skill, and the members were employed in sewing, hand-painting and stencilling designs on them. Metal ornaments for such things as buckles and belts were also fashioned with varying degrees of skill. Other things were made or improvised, dancing pumps and Russian boots, for example, which called for a knowledge of various handicrafts. Not having this knowledge, one had to pick it up as best one could, which meant overcoming one's awkwardness and diffidence, and sometimes, be it confessed, one's indifference or even dislike. This work was carried on with feverish activity, and occupied, together with the exercises, thirteen or fourteen hours every day. The keynote was "Overcome difficulties—Make effort—Work." There was little time for meals during the day, but at night there was a fairly substantial meal. You may imagine that this kind of communal work, together with misunderstandings that arose from language difficulties, called upon one's exercise of the virtues of self-remembering, non-identifying and non-considering to the utmost.

My impressions were very mixed. The people fell short of the standard of culture which Ouspensky had led me to expect. However, I tried to reassure myself with the thought that we were all "machines," and that one machine is as good as another so far as "mechanical" life is concerned. I don't think I quite succeeded, and certainly I had grave doubts when I listened to the never-ending chatter of some of the women, which struck me as the essence of "mechanism." I was naturally particularly interested in the doctors. There were only two. One had an expression which I can only liken to that of a solemn goat. I could not associate the idea of "waking up" or becoming more "conscious" with him at all. I am afraid that I forgot to "remember myself" in relation to him very often in later days. The other was a genial giant with a sagacious expression and Mongolian cast of features. Later, I proved both his geniality and sagacity. For the rest, there were Russians, Armenians, Poles, Georgians, and even a Syrian. Among these were a Russian baron and his wife and an alleged ex-officer of the Czar's bodyguard, who afterwards became a very successful taxi-driver in Paris. My impressions were, as I have said, mixed, like the people. But it was a case of "in for a penny, in for a pound."

In due course, Gurdjieff found and rented a suitable place for the Institute. It was a chateau on the outskirts of Fontainebleau, with large formal gardens and about 200 acres of wooded land. It was called "Le Prieuré des Basses Loges," and belonged to Madame Laborie, the widow of Maître Laborie, defending counsel in the Dreyfus* case. Although left fully furnished except for the servants' quarters, it had not been occupied since the beginning of the war. The grounds were overgrown and neglected. Four

stalwart Russians, another Englishman and myself went on an advance party with Madame Ouspensky to cook for us. Our job was to clear up and get rid of the general appearance of decay and neglect. We weeded and trimmed up the almost indistinguishable paths, washed all the glass of a large "orangerie" or vinery, which afterwards became a workshop and smithy—and, in general, worked like demons. Then came the main body and more people from England. Amongst the latter was Mr. Orage, late editor of *The New Age*, with whom I shared a room in the servants' quarters, to which those students who were going to stay for some time were relegated. The best rooms were reserved for visitors, distinguished and otherwise, in the part of the chateau which was called "The Ritz" by those who were not living in it.

A multitude of activities were soon set afoot by Gurdjieff. A Russian bath was improvised from a solidly built stone house in the grounds. This involved laborious excavation to a depth of ten feet. The bottom was cemented, the boiler, improvised from an old cistern, installed, and a quite luxurious and, for a time, efficient bath-house was achieved. Gurdjieff took a large part in this work, and did most of the brickwork himself. But the *pièce de résistance* was the building of the "study-house." An area of ground large enough to accommodate an ordinary aerodrome was levelled after exceedingly strenuous work with pick, shovel and barrow. The framework of an old aerodrome was erected on this, fortunately, as I thought, without loss of life or limb. The walls were lined within and without between the uprights with rough laths. The space between the laths was stuffed with dead leaves. The laths were then covered over inside and out with the material out of which the Hebrews made their bricks, a mixture of mud and straw, or hay chopped very small. Stoves were then put in the building and the walls dried and hardened before painting them. The roof was made of tarred felt nailed on to the joists; glass extended all the way round the upper half of the walls. This glazing was improvised from cucumber frames—a really good piece of work. After these had been fixed in position the glass was painted with various designs. The lighting effect was very pleasing. The floor, which was the naked earth pounded thoroughly and rolled, and dried by means of the stoves, was covered with matting, on which were placed handsome carpets; the walls below the windows were hung with rugs in the Oriental fashion. A stage was devised, and a kind of balcony for an orchestra; also two tiers of seats all round the walls, padded with mattresses and covered with rugs and skins, for the accommodation of visitors. A gangway ran between these two tiers of seats and a low wooden railing, which enclosed the charmed circle, reserved for the pupils.

I have described the building of this edifice to give some idea of the amount of labour that was put into it and to show how it was evolved out of the most primitive materials, with improvisation almost as guiding principle. All this was calculated to call forth ingenuity and above all, patience—some of the jobs being woefully monotonous. During the period before the completion of the study-house, after the strenuous day's work (from sunrise to sunset) was over, the exercises were practised in the salon of the chateau—usually until midnight or later. Sometimes after this evening salon, Gurdjieff

would have us out to work at the building until two or three in the morning with the aid of big electric lamps hanging from the rafters. One could never be sure when one was going to get to bed. Everything was arranged, or rather disarranged, so that nobody should be allowed to fall into a routine. The multiplicity of occupations was continually being increased. Cows, goats, sheep, pigs, poultry and a mule were acquired. Those who were deputed to look after these animals had no sooner got their job going to their satisfaction than they were taken off and made to begin all over again on a new job. Verily, there was no rest for the wicked. There can be no doubt that it was an excellent training in adaptation and development of will. For a week at a time we would not have more than three or four hours of sleep at night, and sometimes even only one. My hands were often so stiff in the morning from digging or pick-axing or barrowing or sawing or felling trees that the fingers exhibited the phenomenon which is known surgically as "snap-finger"; when one had coaxed them to a certain point they suddenly straightened out with a kind of snap. Every night in the study-house people would fall asleep during the mental exercises. On one occasion this excessive sleepiness nearly resulted in a serious accident. A very strenuous Russian, who was determined to "wake up" if work would do it, was putting in bolts in the cross-pieces of the rafters in the building during an all-night séance. He was sitting in the angle between a horizontal and an upright beam, about 20 feet from the ground. Suddenly I was horrified to notice him asleep in this position, but not before Gurdjieff, who was already half-way up a ladder and got to him in time. The least movement would have resulted in what would have been a very serious fall.

Of the organised mental exercises, which were practised in the study-house in the evening, the following is a very simple example. A series of statements was made, such as $2 \times 1 = 6$, $2 \times 2 = 12$, $2 \times 3 = 22$, $2 \times 4 = 40$, $2 \times 5 = 74$. Find the process by which these results are arrived at. In this case to the first product 4 is added, to the next 8, to the next 16, and so on. Or, again, a code (Morse, for example) was announced and had to be learnt as quickly as possible. Messages were rapped out on the piano. Everybody became moderately proficient at Morse in that way. Or, again, a list of twenty words would be read out. They had to be repeated in the same order. At first it was all one could do to remember ten, or even less, and in the wrong order. One or two of the Russians who had had much practice could remember fifty words in the right order. No great value was attached to these things in themselves. The value lay in the amount of effort expended on them.

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So far, I have painted the picture of the Institute roughly and inadequately, without reference to the central figure, Gurdjieff. In spite of the fact that the whole movement had taken a direction utterly unexpected by me – the bizarre, not to say exotic, nature of the study-house, for example – I had been content for the first six months at least to repress, or keep in the background, my own criticism and frequent sense of bewilderment, partly because, theoretically, criticism from any conventional standpoint

was "mechanical;" and partly, perhaps, because I was willing to let my cup of criticism gradually and naturally fill until it overflowed into action. It was also interesting to watch the ever-changing developments and frequently inconsistent changes of policy which flowed from Gurdjieff's fertile mind. At the same time I was uneasily aware at times that there was a certain amount of hypnotism involved even in my own case; otherwise I should not have been able to lay aside my critical sense so easily. This hypnotism was only too obvious in the great majority of the others. Gurdjieff was a very powerful personality—a type of man that I had never met before. There was no doubt about his capacity in manifold directions. He was a man to be reckoned with, an outstanding event in the life of a psychologist—a man whose riddle I was determined, if possible, to read.

As soon as I began to take my own criticisms seriously, my former observations added fuel to the fire. A few of these observations will serve to show the degree of hypnotism to which practically the whole of the members were subject.

Gurdjieff decided to buy a car. There was a certain subdued excitement about this for many, probably because unconsciously it stood for the inclusion of something human and commonplace in a world which was rapidly becoming inhuman and outside reality. It was understood that Gurdjieff had never before driven a car, which was probably true.

It was believed by many, including presumably intelligent Englishwomen, that Gurdjieff would not have to learn to drive in the ordinary way. He would be able to drive, so to speak, by inspiration. This amounted really to a superstitious belief that Gurdjieff was endowed with mysterious and exceptional powers. When there was a ghastly noise suggestive of tearing of gear-wheel cogs, the faithful insisted that it was a test of faith for sceptics such as myself. I soon discovered that it was impossible to cope with such sophistry and "will-to-believe." So, with a certain inward satisfaction and, no doubt, a sense of superiority, I hugged my belief that Gurdjieff was as happy with that car as a child with a new toy—and, moreover, that he came as near to breaking it at the outset as a child often does. Indeed, I could not help being rather in sympathy with his evident enjoyment. It recalled my own joyful feelings when I first owned a bicycle. At the same time, I could not but be impressed by the power which accrues to a man once he has been invested with the magical attributes of the "all-powerful father" or has had the "magician" archetype projected into him, as Jung would say. People in the grip of such a transference are oblivious to criticism, because they project their own unconscious power fantasies. "Himself," as masters or "gurus" are spoken of in India, can do no wrong. He is infallible. Every act of the magician has always a hidden and wonderful significance. It is never to be taken at its face value. So it was in the case of Gurdjieff.

Another example: the parents of an imbecile child got it into their heads that Gurdjieff might be able to help this child in some mysterious way, and brought it all the way from England. The child had an attack of diarrhoea soon after arrival, probably due to change of diet. In this case I was really astonished to find that people who might

have known better said that Gurdjieff had begun to "work" on him. They meant that by some mysterious means best known to himself he had produced the diarrhoea. As I have said, it was no use trying to cope with this kind of thing; one had simply to ignore the atmosphere of increasing sophistry in support of it. I was also assailed by another kind of sophistry by what friends I had. They said I suffered from spiritual pride, that I was opinionated, that I had never really accepted the spirit of the place, that I had never really "worked" in the true sense, etc., etc. I began to see the time of my departure rapidly approaching.

But I was still intrigued by the obscure and enigmatic factor of personality in the man which attracted such projections and held them. I came to the conclusion that that factor was intensity of purpose. I had no idea what that purpose was, but I became convinced that it had nothing in common with, and was probably antagonistic to, my own fundamental feelings. I felt that the whole business was a personal enterprise so far as Gurdjieff was concerned, and that that was where I "stepped off," as the Americans say. I first confided this belief to one of the many birds of passage who came to stay for shorter or longer periods at the Institute. He was a man of letters and an excellent fellow. We corresponded. I have not got my own letters at that time, but some extracts from his replies will give the gist of my own conclusions:—

Since my return, all my seething impressions gradually settled, and the one thing that survived strongly was that the place is real. By that I mean that Gurdjieff does possess certain knowledge, and is willing to impart it to one or two who may prove, from his point of view, worthy. It is, in other words, a Path of development. The question in my mind thus narrowed itself to—what Path? Put at its briefest there are two Paths: one to what we will call 'God,' the other to Power (or what the Hindus call Siddhis). Well, everything in me, as also everything in the judgements of the friends I have talked with,—points to the latter. The methods, the Chief, the bullying, what I might call the brutality, and the corollary, the total lack of what one means by the terms spirituality (love, compassion, heart, etc.) all point to that 'dark' Path which is taught generally in the Mongolian monasteries where, probably, Gurdjieff got his own training. It is the Path to Powers (Siddhis), and when one gets there, if ever, and has obtained the fruits of the 'will-to-power,' which ... frankly is after, the advance of the Soul itself towards God is—nil. One arrives at the wedding feast without that essential and necessary wedding garment (as one man put it to me) which is LOVE. You know what I mean, because you said it yourself in so many words. A man I know who has studied these things à fond, though admittedly he has not practised them, tells me that in many of the Mongolian Schools the mental bullying, via anger, temper, swearing, etc., we are familiar with where you now are, is carried further into physical bullying, sticks, ropes, fists being used. Efficacious it may be, but the progress acquired is not real, not of ultimate value, that is. Old Blavatsky, also taught of Mongolia, was notorious for her rages, language, etc. The Path to which these Teachers belong is one that aims finally at power to rule the planet, and if you come across Ossendowski's 'Beasts, Men and Gods,' you should read the final chapters about the 'King of the World.' It is curiously suggestive. My own intuitions and conclusions about the Institute and its chief may be quite erroneous, but my reason and intuitions are all I have to go upon, and both lead me to the same result. Nothing in me points the other way. The path there is a path to power and powers. The entire absence of love, compassion, spirituality in the method is a significant absence. Without these, it cannot be the Path to what I may call God... [another pupil] says that these virtues are useless to one 'without power'—i.e., love and compassion without power are a nuisance merely—and also that if they are real in one they will survive the training. But what afflicts me is that they are not included in the training. I am ready to believe that

Gurdjieff can teach one to develop in a certain direction, but I am convinced this teaching will be given only to those who he feels certain will use them to the end desired by himself and his own Teachers, whose emissary he probably is. The majority might spend their lives there and get nothing. I am writing, as you see, merely a general account of my own point of view, much as we used to talk together, and with frankness.

And, in answer to another letter: —

I am extremely interested in your letter. I shall read it again and again and digest it slowly. It is full of value for me. In my own mind lies no longer any faintest doubt about Gurdjieff and his Institute. Signs of hoofs and horns are all over the place, and my deep and instant distrust, which increased with every day I spent there, find confirmation now wherever I turn. Much, of course, remains inexplicable, and will always remain so. Gurdjieff, with reason, is aloof and inaccessible, and the full truth of his motive we shall never know. That it is wholly a self or selfish motive, I am convinced. Promises will ever outweigh achievement there. The note of fear, rather than love, is too conspicuous to miss. Did you meet a Russian named P., who was there recently? I have not met him, but I hear he went to the Institute with another friend last month. I hear he had to retire to his room nightly to conceal his explosions of laughter. He reports also that what struck him so unpleasantly was that he noticed this 'fear' in the general attitude of the pupils. 'All slaves of Gurdjieff,' he described them. K.'s reasons for being there, I am more than ever convinced, are in the nature of 'conversion,' or as a man satiated with the world of sense, and loathing himself, yet too weak to struggle out alone, seeks the shelter and penance of a Monastery. His attitude of being determined to justify his step, of finding explanations for every blessed thing, confirm this view in me.

To come down to our fundamental criticism: I simply cannot believe that a genuine Teacher would indulge in so much bunkum, or would produce that persistent and increasing distrust that were produced in me. Doubts one might feel, yet hardly that type of doubt which Gurdjieff's fantasy, cheapness, spectacular use of show, of megalomaniac hints of this and that to come, etc., etc., inevitably do produce in one.

These opinions will make fairly clear the state of mind which led to my departure from the Institute. I should be sorry, however, to leave the impression that the whole experience had been nothing but complete waste of an irrevocable year. So far from that, I am convinced that much that was valuable was met with on the way; and if I have failed to indicate this, it is because it is hard to communicate to others the personal gains derived from an individual experience.

Nevertheless, it was with a feeling of supreme satisfaction that I turned my back finally upon the Institute and returned once more to embrace the habits of the so-called "mechanical" life.



Note — * pg. 10 Alfred Dreyfus (1859–1935) was a French army officer and Jew, falsely accused in 1894 of being a spy for Germany. Because of the anti-Semitism that dominated government, he was repeatedly denied due process in the French courts. Dreyfus' case became an international cause *célèbre*. He was pardoned and fully exonerated in 1908. During the litigation, he had several attorneys.