

## **Gurdjieff, ‘Old’ or ‘New Age’: Aristotle or Astrology?**

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*In his written teachings, G.I. Gurdjieff (1866?-1949) uses two opposing modes of defining the universe, humanity and their relation to each other, and thus sets up two conflicting sets of instructions for his reader. One set of definitions is Gnostic, hierarchical and complex, in which ever more precise definitions are arrived at by the Aristotelian method of classifying things, people, and the world according to their differences. This method of classification answers questions such as, ‘What is special about this?’ and ‘How is it separate from the mass of the all?’ The other mode which Gurdjieff uses is that of astrological correspondences, in which things are defined by their similarity to others. This method leads to an ever widening net of likenesses and answers questions such as, ‘How is this thing like other things?’ and ‘How can it be joined to other things and approach closer to the all?’ His texts require the reader to make some reconciliation between these two modes of defining and understanding himself and the world around him.*

*This paper will outline the modes of definition and relate them briefly to Gurdjieff’s references to the ‘Old Age’ theologies, philosophies and sciences of the last two millennia and to the pre-Aristotelian and post-modern ‘New Age’ modes of classification. It will show that while Gurdjieff’s texts seem to provide a rigidly defined frame-work of cosmology and psychology, they are in fact paradoxical and anomalous. The multivalence of these texts reveal a teaching that is more ‘New Age’ than ‘Old’.*

G.I. Gurdjieff (1866?-1949) was born in Alexandropol of Greek and Armenian parents, travelled widely in the Middle and Far East, and returned to Russia, arriving in Moscow in 1912. There he began to teach an occult cosmological and psychological ‘system’ of ideas. Leaving Russia because of the revolution, Gurdjieff travelled, via Tbilisi and Constantinople, to Europe, arriving in France in 1922, where he set up his ‘Institute For The Harmonious Development Of Man’, attracting English and American pupils. He also gave his teaching in a form of sacred dances, and demonstrations of these were open to the public. During the 1920s Gurdjieff had a high profile in Paris and the reputation of a ‘mage’. He took his dancers to America in 1924, but a near-fatal car accident on his return caused him to reassess his mode of teaching. Reducing the activity of the Institute, he began to put his teaching into a written form (see bibliography). He made nine or ten further

visits to America establishing his teaching there and spent the World War II years teaching in Paris, where he died in 1949.<sup>1</sup>

Gurdjieff's texts and the readings from them formed an important part of his teaching. Their roots in Gurdjieff's experience of the Turkic oral tradition of his childhood are shown in the way they were composed and also by the way they were read aloud, not necessarily in sequence, and were sometimes preceded by music composed for the purpose by Gurdjieff and his pupil Thomas de Hartmann (Wellbeloved 2002:27-31).

In his teachings Gurdjieff uses two opposing modes of defining the universe, humanity and their relation to each other. In the first set of definitions man is defined as separated from the above (the Absolute, the All or God), subject to involution – time, decay and death. These definitions answer questions about differences: What is special about this? How is it separate from the mass of the all? This Aristotelian mode of definition is the one stressed by Gurdjieff's pupil, P.D. Ouspensky, in his account of Gurdjieff's teaching (Ouspensky 1987). However, Ouspensky notes, in some bafflement, that Gurdjieff also made use of stories and riddles, and elsewhere we find Gurdjieff stressing that his cosmological ideas should not be taken literally (Ouspensky 1987:277; see also Wellbeloved 2003:216-17) .

I will show that Gurdjieff's second mode of defining humanity's relation to the universe is embedded in the zodiacal structure of his texts, within which humanity belongs in a universe in which the above and below, the macrocosm and microcosm are already inter-connected and these connections are defined by astrological correspondences. These second-mode definitions answer questions about connectedness: How is this thing like other things? How can it be joined to other things and become closer to the all?

Both these sets of thinking have their origins in Mesopotamian astronomy/astrology of the pre-Christian era, but while the first, Aristotelian mode became mixed with Judaic millenarian thinking and was absorbed into the Christian theological establishment where it is understood that time will come to an end, the second, Mesopotamian thinking on interconnection and recurring cycles of time was rejected by Christian theology. However, this way of understanding the universe did not disappear but has remained in occult teachings and as a common language of European culture for the past two thousand years.

We will see that Gurdjieff incorporates both modes of definition in his teaching. The first, Aristotelian mode is related to the 'precise' language which he says is needed by pupils and readers, in order to define themselves and the universe. The second language is related to myth and symbol, which are multivalent. Myths and symbols must not be defined in a fixed or final definition. Gurdjieff requires both sets of language in order to express both 'subjective' and 'objective' knowledge. He defines subjective knowledge as that which we acquire via ordinary means of observation and scientific deduction, belonging to the 'subjective', i.e. our ordinary everyday states of consciousness. This requires a 'precise' language. Objective knowledge is that which is based upon ancient methods of observation and which is 'a knowledge of the All'. It can be expressed via myth and symbol and can be received in a state which we may understand as higher than our everyday state (Ouspensky 1987:278).

## **1. Language: Gnostic Separation**

Gurdjieff's cosmological and psychological teaching, as recounted by Ouspensky, outlines a complex set of theories and includes Gurdjieff's teaching on the necessity for a precise language. This is justified on the grounds that, in general, people do not understand one another: "[T]he language which people speak ... is full of wrong concepts, wrong classifications, wrong associations" (Ouspensky 1987:68).

Gurdjieff offers his own teaching terms as a way to introduce a universal language based on the principle of 'relativity', in which everything is defined in relation to the evolution possible to it. Thus man may belong to one of seven levels, each having differing degrees of knowledge, understanding, materiality and life-span (Wellbeloved 2003:114-15). Gurdjieff's cosmic laws and his Pythagorean, Neo-Platonically derived Ray of Creation set out the relation of man to universe, in which the higher is more unified and valuable than the more dispersed lower. In Gnostic terms we are distant from the Absolute, the All or God, imprisoned in matter, helpless, lost, asleep and in need of messengers from above to awaken us. His cosmic, chemical and psychological laws provide labyrinthine but apparently rigid theoretical structures within which we can make sense of ourselves, and through which we may hope to evolve, although in fact Gurdjieff's teaching constantly subverts this hope by re-defining our human condition in terms which suggest the impossibility of escape. This can make for a kind of snakes and ladders game in which no pupil can rise more than a few squares up the

board before being sent sliding back down to the beginning (Wellbeloved 2003:48-50).

Gurdjieff seems to use the terminology of science. There are references to physical, medical and psychological experiments in each of Gurdjieff's texts, and also in the records of his group meetings during the Second World War.<sup>2</sup> He gives 'friendly advice' to the reader of the *Beelzebub's Tales To His Grandson* (Gurdjieff 1950) as the result of "numerous deductions and conclusions made by me during experimental elucidations concerning the productivity of the perception by contemporary people of new impressions from what is heard and read" (Gurdjieff 1950:vi). He asks his pupils to test the results of their Work (as Gurdjieff's teaching is known) through repeated experience, and stresses the necessity for a critical mind. "If you have not by nature a critical mind your staying here [at Gurdjieff's Institute] is useless" (see Gurdjieff 1976:201, 275).

In all this, as well as his insistence on 'precise' language, Gurdjieff appears to be adhering to the notions of Aristotelian methods of classification by difference as he defines his theory of cosmic levels, material density, speeds of vibrations, and the complex analysis of the digestion of food. However, much of this apparently scientific mode of teaching belongs to 'occult science' a re-definition of the occult which arose after the Enlightenment. Where previously the teachings, unaccepted by established Christianity, had become occult religions, these now became occult sciences. Occult teachings, the Work Foundations<sup>3</sup> included, have since then tended to re-define themselves as psychologies or philosophies, and some are now, like the Work, in the process of becoming traditions, returning, as it were, to a religious fold which had its origins in the pre-Christian era.

Nonetheless, Gurdjieff's texts show that he had a lively interest in and knowledge of the theory and experimental methods connected with science of his time, especially medicine, and in relation to this with narcotics. He demonstrates in the *Tales* (Gurdjieff 1950) his interest in electricity, and in *Meetings with Remarkable Men* (Gurdjieff 1978) his fascination with mechanical devices; 'sewing-machines, typewriters, bicycles, gramophones, music-boxes, electric, photographic, medical and other apparatus; gas and oil lamps' are among the items which Gurdjieff writes that he undertook to repair in his 'Universal Travelling Workshop' (Gurdjieff 1978:255).

However, whether it is occult or Aristotelian, the language of science is itself subject to change as the established 'truths' of one age are replaced by new

understandings. Gurdjieff acknowledged that even his own 'precise' universal language will be subject to time, and therefore to change. It will become incomprehensible for future generations, thus we have need of another form of language which will survive the destructive nature of time (Gurdjieff 1976:210-11).

## **2. Myth and Symbol**

A second and opposing 'language' offered by Gurdjieff as an aid to our awakening is that of myth and symbol, both of which can transmit 'objective knowledge', that is, the knowledge of the All.

Realising the imperfection and weakness of ordinary language the people who have possessed objective knowledge have tried to express the idea of unity in 'myths' and 'symbols' (Ouspensky 1987:279).

In Gurdjieff's terminology our emotional and intellectual functioning are represented as 'centres' having higher and lower parts. The aim of myth is to enter the higher part of the emotional centre, while symbols are aimed at the higher part of the intellectual centre. In these higher centres the 'objective' truth would be free from the distortion and corruption of our attempts to understand from an ordinary everyday level of being.<sup>4</sup>

Thus ordinary states of being are connected with the lower parts of our centres which function best with the 'precise' language which defines through separation; while the higher parts of centres, operating in non-ordinary states, can receive the 'objective knowledge of the all' contained in myth and symbol.

Gurdjieff specifically mentions magic, alchemy and astrology as symbolic means through which a knowledge of the all may be transmitted, but warns:

a symbol can never be taken in a final and definite meaning. In expressing the laws of the unity of endless diversity a symbol itself possesses an endless number of aspects from which it can be examined and it demands from a man approaching it the ability to see it simultaneously from different points of view. Symbols which are transposed into the words of ordinary language become rigid in them, they grow dim and very easily become 'their own opposites' ... the cause of this is in the literal understanding of symbols, in attributing to a symbol a single meaning. (Ouspensky 1987:283-84)

The mode of definition common to astrology, alchemy and magic, is that of astrological correspondence in which things are defined multivalently by similarities, their connectedness to the All: by which the above and below, the macrocosm and microcosm are inter-related.

Gurdjieff disparaged contemporary thinking and appeared to agree with a late nineteenth century view of the Greeks as originators of a 'rational' mode of thinking which destroyed an earlier mode of 'something akin to mythical thinking based on the use of images' (Kirk 1976:285-86; Welch 1982:79). Gurdjieff writes a section of *Meetings* in "a style called 'the creation of images without words'" (Gurdjieff 1978:231-35).

### **3. Science and Religion**

The Western European cultural history of astronomy/astrology from early in the Christian era to our own time, has wrestled with the dichotomy between science and religion, and this divide was re-enforced after the formal establishment of Christianity. Although this is an extreme simplification, one branch of astronomy/astrology aimed at precise measurement and calculation required by science (Ptolemy, Copernicus, Galileo), and the other, 'religious' side of astrology focused on the myth and symbolism of the zodiacal gods and on astrological correspondences (Pythagoras, Neo-Platonists, Theosophists, Jung). At its most rigid, astrology determined the mechanistic fate of a person's entire lifespan against which there was no option of change, whilst magical arts used astrological charts (elections), correspondences, and house symbolism to form talismans and spells which sought an amelioration or escape from fate (Garin 1990:xi-xiii). Both these aspects of astrology remained entwined until after the Enlightenment, and both strands of thinking are discernable in Gurdjieff's teaching: the 'mechanistic' fixed fate of man as he is, and the hope of freedom from that fate via the evolutionary path that he teaches.

The history of astronomy/astrology in the West shows something of how the two kinds of language Gurdjieff refers to came about. While the 'scientific' side with its 'precise' language has been gradually privileged by the West, the religious side, stemming from Eastern myth and numerology, has remained present in occult teachings and also in Christianity, because, although Christianity rejected the practise of judicial astrology it retained its myth and number symbolism. These are incorporated into paintings, architecture and, most relevantly for our enquiry, in the structure of texts both sacred and secular.

Gurdjieff echoed Blavatsky's aim to bring the science of the West and the religion of the East together, and one way to understand his approach to this is through his distinction between the kinds of languages he used.<sup>5</sup>

#### **4. Numerological and Astrological Structuring of texts**

Mesopotamian number symbolism is found in the Hebrew scriptures. Number symbolism was used by Philo Judaeus (c 30BC-50AD) as a tool to help find some reconciliation between conflicting Judaic and Platonic cosmologies. "Biblical exegesis influenced St Augustine who gave a numerological structure to his *Civitas Dei* and to the Christian Fathers who used number symbolism to interpret and inter-relate the Old and New Testaments" (see Butler 1970:22-4, 27-8). Structuring texts according to number symbolism remained a common practice as late as the eighteenth century. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Blavatsky's Theosophical cosmology, astrology and numerology helped to further an interest in zodiacally structured texts. Theosophical astrologers interpreted Biblical and Greek myths and Archaic Epics in terms of zodiacal patterns, and this interest extended to Modernist writers, for example Joyce (1922; 1939) and Yeats (1937).

Elsewhere I have outlined the astrological origins of Gurdjieff's cosmological Laws of Three and Seven in the three modes and seven planets of the zodiac, zodiacal structure, his use of astrological correspondences in the *Tales*, and his use of the zodiac as a source of myth and symbol (Wellbeloved 2002:35-76).<sup>6</sup>

#### **5. Gurdjieff's Texts**

All of Gurdjieff's four texts, including *The Herald of Coming Good* (Gurdjieff 1988), are myths which enshrine his cosmic and psychological teachings in a fictional form, and which, if we regard them in accordance with his own teaching on myth, are offered to some higher part of our emotional centre and thus beyond the interpretation which would give rise to any final or closed reading.

The *Tales* (Gurdjieff 1950) is a myth that subverts the myths of Western Europe, and among them the Biblical myths of Creation, Fall, Redemption and Revelation; the myth of Atlantis; the myth of the supremacy of Classical Greece, with its scientific and philosophical achievements; the esoteric and occult teachings, as well as the received understanding of the teachings of

Buddha, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad, (the teachers of the religious Traditions are not themselves derided in the text); and the modern myths of Enlightenment and industrialisation, Marxism and Darwinian evolution, notions of 'progress' via contemporary science, medicine or education. We might understand some of these myths to have become lodged in the lower part of centres and therefore to have had any true meaning corrupted. The *Tales* is structured as a forward moving zodiac, that is, from Aries to Pisces, through the ordinary flow of the year. Time is shown in its involutory and destructive flow from the unity of the all to the diversity of the many (see Wellbeloved 2002).

In *Meetings* (Gurdjieff 1978), Gurdjieff creates a myth of his own life story in which the many, his group of friends, become unified into one, a brotherhood of Seekers with a single aim. In his teaching Gurdjieff used the term 'Philadelphia', the city of brotherly love, as the necessary destination for all pupils. There are many references in this text to Gurdjieff's brotherly feelings and to ancient brotherhoods.

This text is also structured as a zodiac. However, unlike the *Tales* it moves backwards from Aquarius via Capricorn to Pisces (contrary to the flow of the year). A person who travels through the zodiac is subject to time and therefore involution and death. However, if he reverses his direction and moves backwards through the zodiac against time he is on an evolutionary path.<sup>7</sup> The narrative of *Meetings* shows the Seekers relation to time in that they are travelling back away from their contemporary culture, towards ancient cultures, texts and teachings. The past is represented as a higher idealised place, an origin or Paradise which they strive to re-enter. We can understand this myth as directed to the higher part of the emotional centre. Gurdjieff suggests this in his appreciation of the *Thousand and One Nights* in the Introduction to *Meetings*:

anyone hearing or reading 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 or listener is awakened and, enchanted by the author's fine understanding of the psyche of people of all walks of life round him, he follows with curiosity how, little by little, a whole story is formed out of these small incidents of actual life. (Gurdjieff 1978:18)

In *Life* (Gurdjieff 1991), Gurdjieff creates a myth, often accepted as a true autobiographical account of events in his life in New York in the early 1930s. Paul Taylor has shown that of the events Gurdjieff records some took place as described, while others took place but on different dates, and some never took place at all (Taylor 2001:167-172).<sup>8</sup> In this myth, Gurdjieff has evolved to a place where he is free of the constraints of time; the text takes place in the ‘real’ or eternal present where ‘I am’ is a defeat of time.

*Herald* (Gurdjieff 1988), the text which Gurdjieff ‘exiled’ and forbade his pupils to read, is a myth of ruin and exile, in which the exile of the book echoes the exile of Satan from Heaven, or Beelzebub from the Sun Absolute. It shows a myth of Gurdjieff as an occult magician, corrupted by time and subject to devolution and degeneration in which he wishes to cause ‘lasting suffering’ to former pupils alive and dead (Gurdjieff 1988:76).

We can see that in the *Tales* (Gurdjieff 1950) and *Herald* (Gurdjieff 1988), time divides and separates – the movement is involucional from the one to the many; while in *Meetings* (Gurdjieff 1978) and *Life* (Gurdjieff 1991), love unifies and joins – the movement is evolucional from the many to the one. In the *Tales* (Gurdjieff 1950), Gurdjieff defines love and time as unlike any other forces in the universe; they are alone in having no separate place of their arising, and are present everywhere.

Time alone ... has no source from which its arising should depend, but like Divine-Love flows always, ... independently by itself, and blends proportionately with all the phenomena present in a given place. (Gurdjieff 1950:124)

We can connect the destructive element of time with the ‘precise’ language which will corrupt and become meaningless, and the creative force of love with the incorruptible language of myth and symbol.

## **6. Reading Gurdjieff’s texts**

As readers we may ask whether it is possible to separate everyday precise definitions required by the lower centres from the myth method of a non-interpretative grasping of the All required for the higher centres? We also need to ask how these two approaches to understanding can be related to Gurdjieff’s instructions on how to read his texts.

At first, it might seem that the ‘myth method’ of not interpreting the text would be the one for us to adopt as readers, and this is the approach taken by the Gurdjieff Foundations. However, this does not accord with Gurdjieff’s instructions to his reader. Gurdjieff requires us to read his books, firstly as we would usually read a ‘contemporary book or newspaper’, secondly as though aloud to another person, and only later, in the third reading, to ‘try to fathom the gist’ of what he is saying (Gurdjieff 1950:vi) . If we attempt to read the *Tales* (Gurdjieff 1950) like this we will find that the advice proves impossible to follow. Gurdjieff’s long, complex syntax demands close attention; we cannot read it as we read books and newspapers, because it is not written the way books and newspapers are written. Unless we try to make some sense of the multiple clauses we are not reading at all, merely letting words pass in front of our eyes. Thus, before we reach the second required mode of reading we are already involved in the third. As readers we may embark on this journey in a spirit of enquiry, but Gurdjieff’s complexity of language and ideas calls for considerable investment of time and effort. The longer we stay trying to understand him, the further we become entangled in and confused by his texts. Gurdjieff’s apparently simple instruction proves deceptive, and echoes the paradox of his practical teaching which demands that pupils must make efforts to work on themselves, to struggle to awaken, even though they are machines and have no ‘will’, no central ‘I’ to work on, and no ability ‘to do’.

## **7. The Karatasian language of the *Tales***

We can recognise Gurdjieff’s cosmic and psychological teachings, originally given in an oral form and expressed in the apparently ‘precise’ language, in each of his texts. However, these are made more complex, and less easily grasped in the *Tales* (Gurdjieff 1950) by his use of ‘Karatasian’, the language of Beelzebub’s home planet. Thus the Law of Three becomes the Law of Triamazikamno; the Law of Seven, the Law of Heptaparaparshinokh. As readers we must retain some knowledge of Karatasian in order to negotiate the text, and as there is no glossary, and Gurdjieff only defines words once, we need to take notes of the vocabulary. Some Karatasian words suggest possible English and/or other earth language sources and possible interpretations, but they also seem to provide a subversion of the exact language Gurdjieff has earlier demanded. The mode in which Beelzebub instructs Hasein on these laws is also more dense and complex than that in which Gurdjieff instructs his pupils.

Gurdjieff uses other strategies within the narrative: contradictions, inconsistencies, deceptions and humour. These ensure multivalence and make it impossible to have closure, that is, any 'precise' definition which would destroy the 'objective truth' they contain (Wellbeloved 2002:77-83).

On the other hand, as shown above, it is not possible to read the texts or listen to them being read without any sense of meaning at all, i.e. to accept the texts as meaningless to all but the higher part of the emotional centre. Gurdjieff demands a great deal of his reader who needs to have some knowledge of the commonly held Biblical, scientific and religious and other myths on which he drew. If we cannot recognise the references he makes to these origins we will be unable to understand his commentary on them. The reader is left to work out how to make a reconciliation between the two languages Gurdjieff uses, the 'precise' and the 'mythic'.

## **8. Conclusions**

Despite Gurdjieff's patriarchal tone, apparent or actual misogyny, authoritarian mode of teaching, and admiration of political and spiritual hierarchies; and despite the apparently Aristotelian precision defining his complex ideas, his demand for logical reasoning from pupils, and his own interest in contemporary science, technology and medicine; nevertheless, much of the material which Gurdjieff draws on comes from the same underground, subversive occult teachings as those which 'New Age' practices are exploring and re-expressing within our culture. These include astrology, alchemy, Kabala and forms of magic and healing. In all of these the fundamental language employed to connect microcosm and macrocosm is that of astrological correspondence.

Gurdjieff's texts are a critique of the modern, expressing complex laws and sets of information, but also enshrining eternal verities, primarily, love's defeat of time. This is, in essence, the Christian myth where, by the sacrifice of his own life, and through the power of his love for humanity, Christ redeems time and conquers death. However, this myth has its origin in earlier times. Gurdjieff reaches back to Mesopotamian astronomy/astrology and to early Greek number symbolism and myth representing a pre-Greek rational and pre-Christian Western European culture; he also reaches forward into a post-Einsteinian, post-First World War culture, and its willingness to question Christianity, long Europe's central social, moral and political power, and to question also Enlightenment science and the supremacy of rational thinking. He did this in the context of a European culture that was,

and still is, in the process of re-defining time, humanity, the universe, and their inter-relations.

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**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> See entry on “Gurdjieff” in Lewis (2003).

<sup>2</sup> See the entries on “Experiments” and “Groups in WW2” in Wellbeloved (2003:76-7, 88).

<sup>3</sup> The Gurdjieff Foundations were formed, initially, by Gurdjieff’s successor Jeanne de Salzmann in order to protect and disseminate Gurdjieff’s teaching as received by his immediate pupils.

<sup>4</sup> Gurdjieff’s best known visual symbol is the Enneagram, which although it has gone on to acquire a life of its own, is beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>5</sup> Blavatsky ends her Preface to the *Secret Doctrine* with her aim that the book may ‘show that Nature is not “a fortuitous concurrence of atoms”, and to assign to man his rightful place in the scheme of the Universe; to rescue from degradation the archaic truths which are the basis of all religions; and to uncover, to some extent, the fundamental unity from which they all sprung; finally, to show that the occult side of Nature has never been approached by the Science of modern civilisation.’ Blavatsky, H. P., *The Secret Doctrine: the Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy*, 2 vols, London: Theosophical Publishing House, 1888; repr. 1988, p. viii.

<sup>6</sup> See also entry on “Gurdjieff” in Lewis (2003).

<sup>7</sup> For a Theosophical source of this idea, see Bailey (1951:337-38).

<sup>8</sup> Explained more fully in “Deconstruction of History in the Third Series”, in Sharp & Ors eds (1997).

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