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‘THE WORK’: THE TEACHINGS OF G. I. GURDJIEFF AND P. D. OUSPENSKY
IN RUSSIA AND BEYOND

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INTRODUCTION

The teachings of Gurdjieff and Ouspensky, and of their descendants and lineages, are difficult to categorise. James Webb, in a pioneering analysis of the movement, describes it as ‘neither a church, a sect nor a school of philosophy’ (Webb 1980: 18). The cluster of beliefs and practices known as ‘the Work’ synthesizes the teachings of Georgii Ivanovich Gurdjieff (1866?-1949) and Petr Demianovich Ouspensky (1878-1947), persons of considerable charisma who taught a range of ideas and practices usually described as ‘occult’ or ‘esoteric’ but which also contain elements of (in Gurdjieff’s case) oral and folk teachings and (in Ouspensky’s case) of a practical mysticism. Both teachers were adroit in instructing a range of people, especially artists and intellectuals, in subtle yet challenging practices for application in everyday life. Their teachings, especially Gurdjieff’s, were usually given orally but later supplemented by texts which at first were read aloud amongst practitioners and only published posthumously: the most important being *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments from an Unknown Teaching* (Ouspensky 1950 [1949]), *Beelzebub’s Tales to His Grandson* (Gurdjieff 1999 [1950]) and *Meetings with Remarkable Men* (Gurdjieff 2015 [1963]).

In his comparative study of new religious leaders, Rawlinson (1997) categorizes Gurdjieff and Ouspensky as ‘Western Gurus’ operating in a modern tradition of ‘western teachers in eastern traditions’, by which he means individuals in Europe and North America who propound a ‘western’ version of Buddhist, Hindu and Sufi teachings. Rawlinson includes Gurdjieff on grounds of the attribution of Sufi sources to his teachings: for example, by Gurdjieff’s English follower, John Bennett in *Gurdjieff: A Very Great Enigma* (Bennett 1973a) and *Gurdjieff: Making a New World* (Bennett 1973b).¹ Other interpreters argue for esoteric Christian or occult sources, both of which historically arose within ‘western’ rather than ‘eastern’

¹ See also Pittman (2012), Chapter One: ‘Gurdjieff and Sufism: the Creation of a Discourse’, pp. 9-68. A more sceptical view of Sufi influence is given in the chapter ‘Tradition and Consciousness’ in Sedgwick (2016).

cultures. The problem is that robust data is often lacking for many of the claims made by Gurdjieff (especially) and Ouspensky as well as by their successors and followers. The reliability of primary sources is therefore a constant question and the historiography of the movement has been strongly coloured by normative claims. For example, many of Gurdjieff's autobiographical statements are either unverifiable, fictionalized or a mix of the two, and perhaps were never intended to be understood other than metaphorically. This is implied in the subtitle of a major Gurdjieff biography: 'the anatomy of a myth' (Moore 1991). Ouspensky wrote little about his own life apart from one brief essay written in 1935, 'Autobiographical Fragment' (Ouspensky 1986), which Hunter (2006) draws on heavily for his memoir. As with Gurdjieff, the resulting portrait struggles to transcend myth.² But this is of course one reason for their fascination amongst followers and sympathisers.

Sociologically the groups, networks and societies which emerged from the Gurdjieff-Ouspensky teaching could be categorized as a new religious movement of the early twentieth century which anticipates the more diffuse 'New Age' movement of the 1960s onwards (Sutcliffe 2003) but which now, one hundred years after its first appearance, functions as a 'tradition' in its own right (Needleman 2006). Nevertheless the term 'religious' tends to be rejected by practitioners, and the extent of disagreement and even schism amongst teachers of 'the Work'—not least between the founders themselves—qualifies the concept of a singular 'movement'.

The teaching was first presented in 1912 during the climactic years of the Russian 'Silver Age' (c.1890-1920), which included widespread interest in Spiritualism, Mesmerism, Hypnotism and Theosophy across all sectors of Russian metropolitan society. The imperial Russian context of formation is therefore unquestionable. The early teachings were developed in Moscow and St Petersburg by two (perforce) 'imperial Russians': Gurdjieff, a Greek-Armenian from a lower class background whose surname appears to have been 'Russianized' from Georghiadis, and Ouspensky, a Muscovite of the professional classes. These teachings recruited strongly amongst metropolitan Russians, including musicians and doctors, and its content resonated with contemporary Russian religious idealism and mounting cultural-political crisis, as we discuss later. In exile after the Russian Revolution of

² On the historiographical challenges for scholarly study of Gurdjieff-Ouspensky, see Sutcliffe (2014); on the ethnographical challenges, see Willmet and Sutcliffe (2016).

1917, each founder remained at least culturally identified with Russian Orthodox Christianity, and it is notable that requiem masses were held for Ouspensky following his death in London in 1947 and for Gurdjieff following his death in Paris in 1949. The first public notices about the teachings were published in the Russian press: in Moscow in November 1914 and in Tiflis in July 1919 (Taylor 2010: 13-16). However, although the movement emerged in pre-revolutionary Russia, and interest continued in the Soviet and post-Soviet periods, its most extensive uptake has been in Western Europe, North America and Australasia.

In what follows we summarize the activities of Gurdjieff and Ouspensky in Moscow and St Petersburg (Petrograd) between 1912 and 1917, followed by a brief account of the founding of the Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man in Tbilisi (Tiflis), Georgia, in 1919. We then sketch the development of the teaching in Paris, London and New York and indicate some further lines of travel, including the emergence of the International Association of the Gurdjieff Foundations after Gurdjieff's death which, initially under the direction of Gurdjieff's longstanding follower, Jeanne de Salzmann (1889-1990), continues to present itself as the orthodox guardian of 'the Work' in the Gurdjieffian lineage.³ We give a brief outline of the teachings as a set of practical ideas and techniques by means of which a subtle yet demanding self-presence may be engendered and developed in everyday life circumstances. The aim is to create or acquire a 'soul' and thereby fulfil human beings' role in the divine/cosmic order. The question of the 'Russian-ness' of 'the Work' remains a moot point which we address at the end of the chapter.⁴

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³ Its constituent societies are in Paris, London, New York and Caracas: see <http://www.iagf.org/> (accessed 23/7/18). There is a longstanding debate amongst practitioners on the nature of the relationship between Gurdjieff and Ouspensky and in particular about whose 'work' it is. Most sources concur (although with different emphases) that Gurdjieff was the originator and that Ouspensky served as his student and (initially) mouthpiece. Nevertheless Ouspensky formulated and taught his own distinctive version, personally introduced many followers to Gurdjieff, and was a key communicator through his detailed exposition of Gurdjieff's early teachings (Ouspensky 1950). For present purposes, therefore, we treat 'the work' as a co-production.

⁴ Our main primary sources are the three 'official' texts by Gurdjieff (1991, 1999, 2015) plus Ouspensky's account of Gurdjieff's early teaching (Ouspensky 1950). Long treated as 'canonical' sources, they have been complemented by transcripts of Ouspensky's meetings (1977, 1986, 1992) and of Gurdjieff's teachings, both from the early Russian period and the later Paris years (Anon 2009, 2012, 2014).

Befitting a mythic biography, Gurdjieff's parentage, date and place of birth, and youthful travels are all disputed. The consensus is that he was born in 1866 in Alexandropol, now Gyumri, in Armenia (then under Russian control) to an ethnic Greek father and Armenian mother. Gurdjieff was educated in Kars, Turkey, a Russian stronghold newly acquired during the 1877-1878 war with the Ottoman Turks. Here he sang in the Russian Orthodox cathedral choir as a protégé of an enigmatic tutor whom he calls Dean 'Borsh'.⁵ The mystery of his biography is deepened by the allegorical account he provides of his early travels, published posthumously as *Meetings with Remarkable Men* (Gurdjieff 2015), in which he claims to have journeyed widely in Egypt, Persia, Tibet, and Mongolia with a company called the 'seekers of truth'. The dates given for these travels in another enigmatic document, *Herald of Coming Good* (Gurdjieff 1933)—which he withdrew immediately after publication—lend credence to a birth date of 1866, since the itinerary described would have been impossible were Gurdjieff born in 1877, the date he himself often used in official documents. Given that Gurdjieff appears to have borne little physical resemblance to his other family members, and that on his death in 1949 medical opinion was that he was aged over eighty, a later biographer, Paul Beekman Taylor, argues that Gurdjieff was in fact the son of his family's neighbours, and had been informally adopted, assuming the identity of a deceased son, when the Gurdjieff family left Kars (Taylor 2012: 161ff). The implication that Gurdjieff was a kind of 'changeling' enhances the folk narrative flavour of his biography in which the saviour arrives wrapped in mystery and portent.⁶

There is scant corroboration for Gurdjieff's travel itinerary in *Meetings with Remarkable Men* in the highly sensitive Transcaucasus region, where travellers were viewed suspiciously and carefully documented. None of the company of 'seekers of hidden truth' can be reliably identified and the people whom they in turn encountered—the eponymous 'remarkable men'—are equally nebulous. Towards the

⁵ It is tempting to interpret 'Borsh' as a rough transliteration of the iconic Russian beetroot soup борщ (correctly transliterated *borshch*). Gurdjieff's humorous wordplay is well attested: see the jokes and puns in the transcriptions of the 'Rope' group in Paris (Anon 2012).

⁶ Caryl Emerson describes this as 'a genealogical myth deeply familiar to Russian high as well as common culture, and studied as *samosvanstvo* (pretendship or self-naming): Grishka Otrepiev who claims to be Dmitry of Uglich but who is probably an irregular son of the Romanovs; Pugachev who is a foundling but really a prince ... [U]sually this mystifying 'lostness' is assumed to be royal, and prophetic. And of course these figures too appear in times of transition and Times of Trouble' (pers.comm. 18 August 2018)

end of the book, near the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, Gurdjieff describes meeting Father Giovanni, a former Catholic who now lives in a monastery inhabited by a 'World Brotherhood' into which 'any man could enter, irrespective of the religion to which he had formerly belonged' (Gurdjieff 2015: 235). Gurdjieff continues:

Among the adepts of this monastery there were former Christians, Jews, Mohammedans, Buddhists, Lamaists, and even one Shamanist. All were united by God the Truth ... All the brethren ... lived together in such amity that, in spite of the specific traits and properties of the representatives of the different religions, [we] could never tell to which religion this or that brother had formerly belonged (Gurdjieff 2015: 236).

Rather than a strictly historical record, this narrative of 'seekers' and 'remarkable men' is better understood as a metaphor for a search for perennial truth underlying difference during a period when modernity was increasingly encroaching on indigenous tradition. The latter is personified in the figure of Gurdjieff's father, an *ashokh* or bard, to whom we are introduced in the first chapter of *Meetings* 'chanting the legend of the Babylonian hero Gilgamesh and explaining its meaning' (Gurdjieff 2015: 35). The fable-like register of *Meetings* with its framing structure of embedded stories is implicitly fashioned according to the structure of the collection of Arabic folktales known as the *One Thousand and One Nights* (or *Arabian Nights*). To make this point, Gurdjieff introduces early on an 'elderly, intelligent Persian', whom he describes as 'intelligent not in the European sense of the word, but in the sense ... understood on the continent of Asia, that is, not only by knowledge but by being' (Gurdjieff 2015: 10). This Persian exemplar contrasts contemporary European literature, characterised by a 'complete lack of any knowledge of reality and of any genuine understanding', with a traditional text like *The Thousand and One Nights* where 'anyone hearing or reading this book feels clearly that everything in it is fantasy, but fantasy corresponding to truth' (Gurdjieff 2015: 20).⁷ A further aspect of this indigenous oral culture is echoed in the form of Gurdjieff's later teaching in Paris, which he conducted in part through the medium of elaborate meals and ritual toasts,

⁷ A similar fabulism or 'magical realism' informs Gurdjieff's modernist fable *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson* (Gurdjieff 1999); on its oral-folk correlates, see Pittman (2015).

including copious alcohol consumption (Anon 2009, 2012; Bennett and Bennett 1980).

In contrast to Gurdjieff's closeness to folk tradition, Ouspensky was brought up within the urban Russian middle classes. As for Gurdjieff, robust biographical details are scarce.⁸ Ouspensky also seems to have been an autodidact, since although he described himself as 'lazy', and that he 'hated school routine in general', he also 'worked very intensely on biology, mathematics and psychology'. Declaring himself 'very anarchistically inclined', he decided 'never to pass any examinations and never to take any degrees' (Ouspensky 1986: 300). He began to travel as a 'scholar-gypsy' and journalist although his itinerary remains obscure: as Webb (1980: 99-100) notes, 'between 1896 and 1905 there is little known with certainty about his movements' although whether this is due to a dearth of data or creative mystification on the part of the protagonist is unclear as is so often the case within this movement. In 1907 Ouspensky became interested in Theosophy and in 1909 he moved from Moscow to St. Petersburg where he became associated with artistic and intellectual circles interested in ideas about time and the 'fourth dimension'.⁹ In 1912 he published in Russian a work in mystical philosophy and psychology, *Tertium Organum*, which was received with acclaim and translated into English in 1920. Ouspensky travelled to India and Ceylon in 1913 to further pursue his interests in these topics, spending six weeks at the Theosophical Society headquarters in Adyar. Returning to Russia, he met Gurdjieff in Moscow in 1915 (Webb 1980: 126, 133). Gurdjieff knew of Ouspensky through the success of *Tertium Organum* and was apparently keen to attract his attention, while for his part Ouspensky was still searching for the elusive 'school' that he believed held conclusive answers to his questions.¹⁰ *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (Ouspensky 1950) gives a systematic

⁸ See Ouspensky (1986) and Webb (1980: 94-131; who frustratingly lists only a few of his sources).

⁹ On the 'fourth dimension' in the Russian *fin-de-siècle*, see Mannherz (2011) and Mannherz (2012: 62-65); on the 'fourth dimension' in the UK, including Ouspensky's influence, see Maclean (2015: 104-116 and *passim*). Ouspensky describes himself as 'enormously excited by the idea of the fourth dimension' (1986: 300).

¹⁰ The idea of a 'search' was a common motif in the *fin-de-siècle* occult milieu. Mannherz (2012: 9) describes an 'ideology of seekership': 'a painstaking search for a deeper truth that would bestow meaning on all aspects of everyday experience and transcend quotidian reality by integrating all forms of knowledge'. The idea of seekership frames accounts of entering 'the Work' in particular. For example, Gurdjieff joins a group called 'seekers of truth' in *Meetings with Remarkable Men*, Ouspensky's account of the early teachings is called *In Search of the Miraculous*, and the autobiography of their follower John Bennett is called *Witness: The Story of a Search* (Bennett 1962). See also Lippmann in this volume.

presentation of Gurdjieff's teaching at this time approached as a system of ideas. Gurdjieff reportedly admired *Tertium Organum* but considered that although Ouspensky was intelligent, he lacked deeper knowledge, which Gurdjieff called 'being'. Ouspensky himself records Gurdjieff telling him witheringly that 'if you understood everything you have written in [*Tertium Organum*] I should come and bow down to you and beg you to teach me. But you do not understand even what the word understand means' (Ouspensky 1950: 20).

This statement supports a common view, even stereotype, that Gurdjieff's teaching was practice-oriented, emphasising knowledge in action—what Blake (2012: 238) calls 'know how, an understanding of how things work'—while Ouspensky's contribution lay in systematizing the underlying ideas. This view has been qualified by some defenders of Ouspensky's reputation, who have emphasized the force of his presence as a teaching device, like Gurdjieff, but expressing a very different personality. Yet Ouspensky was apparently not interested in learning or teaching the movements, a series of physical exercises performed to music which address the automation of the untutored body as an obstacle to self realization, which are crucial to the Gurdjieff lineage. A comparison of the transcripts of their group meetings shows clear performative differences in how they interacted with participants.¹¹

In the wake of the October 1917 revolution, Gurdjieff and Ouspensky left Moscow like many artists and intellectuals. They travelled to the Caucasus with a nucleus of followers, plus members of Gurdjieff's family. *Our Life with Mr. Gurdjieff* (de Hartmann 1964), an account by the Russian composer Thomas de Hartmann and his wife Olga, vividly describes how, during the period 1917-1920, Gurdjieff continued to teach this group amid the turmoil of the Russian civil war, suffering considerable hardship and danger as they dodged between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks¹². In 1919 in Tiflis (Tbilisi), Georgia, Gurdjieff founded the 'Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man'. This was an appropriate location given the cultural interconnections post-revolution between Tiflis, and Petrograd and Moscow. According to the journalist C.E. Bechofer-Roberts, the city 'had become a centre for what was left of Russian society. One found the strangest people there. Poets and

¹¹ Compare the wordplay and improvisation in Gurdjieff's 'Rope' group (Anon 2012) with Ouspensky's more ritualised question and answer format (Ouspensky 1986)

¹² For a comparative account of the Russian revolution and civil war in the context of the European-wide fall-out from the 1914-1918 war, see Chapters Two and Seven in Gerwarth (2016).

painters from Petrograd and Moscow, philosophers, theosophists, dancers, singers, actors and actresses' (cited in Taylor 2010: 18).

Bechofer-Roberts records visiting the new Institute and spending time with Gurdjieff, whom he describes as 'surrounded by a strange entourage of philosophers, doctors, poets, and dancers' by whom 'he was esteemed, almost worshipped, as a guide to the eternal mysteries of the universe'. Bechofer-Roberts ascribes 'extraordinary all-round intelligence' to Gurdjieff, finding him 'interesting company' and 'out of the common theosophical ruck' (*ibid*: 19-21). Ouspensky left the entourage towards the end of this period, apparently valuing the content of 'the Work' but disagreeing with Gurdjieff's often provocative teaching style (Webb 1980: 159-161). This 'schism' has been presented as inevitable and self-evident in primary sources. In fact sporadic contact continued between Gurdjieff and Ouspensky over the following twenty years and many significant followers crossed freely between the two authorities, such as the Anglo-Scottish psychiatrist Maurice Nicoll (1884-1953) and the English engineer John Bennett (1897-1974).

Eventually Gurdjieff left Russia, first for Constantinople and then Germany. In 1921 he tried to obtain a residence visa for the UK, where Ouspensky had settled in 1920 and had built up an audience in London amongst artists and intellectuals. Gurdjieff's application was blocked, however, and in 1922 he settled near Paris in the village of Fontainebleau-Avon in a former chateau, the Prieuré des Basses Loges. Here, with financial help from British and American admirers, he re-established the Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man which in the 1920s became a magnet for transnational 'seekers' from the middle and upper classes. A visit by Gurdjieff to talk to Ouspensky's group in London generated considerable interest, and some, including the aforementioned Nicoll and Bennett, visited the Prieuré. As the relationship between Gurdjieff and Ouspensky continued to decay, devotees were increasingly encouraged to affirm their allegiance to one or the other.

Ouspensky continued to lead his more cerebral version of 'the Work' with his wife, Sophie Grigorievna Ouspensky (1878-1961)—who like Gurdjieff preferred a more practical teaching style—in and around London until 1941. In the late 1930s Ouspensky's centre was a large country house and grounds, Lyne Place in Surrey, which served as an analogous colony to Gurdjieff's Prieuré, with around one thousand English pupils at its height (Moore 2017). In 1941 the turbulence of the new war of 1939, including the threat of Nazi invasion, prompted the Ouspenskys to emigrate to

the United States. He returned to England in January 1947 but Madame Ouspenskaya remained in the US. Ouspensky died later the same year and was buried in the Anglican churchyard at Lyne following a Russian Orthodox requiem mass in London.

In Fontainebleau-Avon Gurdjieff oversaw the Institute in one form or another until 1932. During this period he made several visits to the US to raise money, to found work groups with the help of the former editor of *The New Age*, journalist A.R. Orage (1873-1934), and to give demonstrations of the movements. This sustained proselytization established his transatlantic reputation and attracted many Americans to the Institute. However, maintaining the Prieuré had become financially onerous and in 1932 the Institute folded. Gurdjieff moved into Paris where he lived until his death, teaching in a more intimate style over meals which he cooked in his apartment, or through meetings in cafes and restaurants.¹³ When Gurdjieff died in 1949, his pupil Jeanne de Salzmann (1889-1990) assumed leadership of the International Gurdjieff Society. By then significant pupils who had known Gurdjieff and Ouspensky, particularly Maurice Nicoll and John Bennett, but many others, as well as second generation teachers who had contact only with the first generation, were already teaching their own iterations of ‘the Work’ (Petsche 2013).

‘THE WORK’ AS A PRACTICAL TEACHING

Gurdjieff’s ideas, both theoretical and practical, were released piecemeal, in a manner deliberately self-contradictory or misleading, and had to be fitted together by his pupils and even completed by the pupils’ investigations (Webb 1980: 139).

By all accounts ‘the Work’ was (and is) difficult. The term implied sustained effort towards an ‘alchemical’ transformation in embodied consciousness, or ‘being’. ‘The Work’ taught that people were metaphorically asleep and only able to live through their ego, which can only react to external forces. The ego controls all the actions of a person. People must ‘wake up’ by curbing this reactivity, so that a true self, called ‘real I’, can germinate. By cultivating ‘real I’ a person can develop their active ‘essence’, which is present from birth but dominated by ego, thereby creating in themselves a ‘soul’.

¹³ Transcripts of meetings in 1935-1939 and 1941-46 can be found in Anon (2009) and Anon (2012).

Towards this end, as taught by both Gurdjieff and Ouspensky, the practitioner must practise 'self-remembering'. Within each person operate three metaphorical 'centres'. Unless consciously interrupted, these centre automatically govern the faculties of moving, feeling and thinking. The aim of self-remembering is to stop the automaticity of their operation and to bring them consciously into harmonious co-operation. For example, the emotional centre in most people is automatically expressed through 'negative emotions' such as anger, sadness, pride and lust. To 'cleanse' the emotional centre requires self-observation in order to catch the moment at which a negative emotion arises, thereby to prevent identification with it. Self-remembering was therefore designed to facilitate a kind of *apatheia* which could enable disinterested action. For example, Needleman describes 'self-remembering' as a state of conscious attention in which a 'higher force', latent within the human structure, could make contact with the three centres of moving, feeling and thinking. By practising self-remembering, the individual 're-members' (literally, puts back together) the self with the assistance of this latent 'higher force' (Needleman 2006: 451). In *Lost Christianity*, which advances an interpretation of 'the Work' as a form of esoteric Christianity, Needleman (1980) argues that a person in their early years experiences their 'essence' or 'real I' as a nagging question which becomes dulled during maturation. However, when emotional pain is experienced, the question of who or what is 'real I' resurfaces. Unless one can self-remember, and thus work consciously, the pain will be smothered by the everyday reactivity of 'feeling centre' and the embryonic soul will be aborted (Needleman 1980: 175). Only with authoritative guidance can a person learn how to harness the energy to build 'real I'.

Although 'the Work' is in a descriptive sense 'self-oriented' and must be practised by the 'individual', it is not 'individualistic' in the sense of fostering isolation or solipsism. To understand and to practice effectively, pupils must interact within a group environment in order to come to know themselves and their particular foibles (their 'chief feature'), and through this encounter to support each other to 'wake up' through negotiating their interpersonal frictions. In *In Search of the Miraculous* Gurdjieff says that 'a "group" is the beginning of everything' and that 'the Work' can help the group to escape from a prison constructed by 'false I':

But how escape? It is necessary to tunnel under a wall. One man can do nothing. But let us suppose there are ten or twenty men – if they work in turn and if one covers another they can complete the tunnel and escape.

Furthermore, no one can escape from prison without the help of those *who have escaped before* (Ouspensky 1950: 30).

In other words, to break free of ego and to build ‘real I’, practitioners need to gather together under the authority of an ‘escapee’. Gurdjieff and Ouspensky created a series of experimental environments in which such metaphysical ‘escape’ could be practised. These included the early small groups in Moscow and St. Petersburg, the ‘traveling circus’ (Webb 1980: 163ff) in the Caucasus during the Civil War in 1917-20, Gurdjieff’s Institute at Fontainebleau and Ouspensky’s colony at Lyne Place which served as ‘intentional communities’ for intensive practice (Cusack 2015), and the drama of Gurdjieff’s ritual feasts during his last years in Paris.

The practical work of self-remembering is supported by a complex cosmology which recognised two underlying laws: the Law of Three and the Law of Seven. According to Sophia Wellbeloved (2003: 122-123), ‘taken together, they are an expression of how creative, destructive and redemptive processes function in the universe’. Briefly, the Law of Three claims that all physical processes can be reduced to the interaction of three forces: ‘active’, ‘passive’ and ‘neutralising’. The first force is active and expresses ‘desire or impulse towards action’. The second force is passive and represents ‘resistance or opposition to the impulse to act’. The third force is neutralising and ‘reconciles the first and second forces’. For example:

[A] person may desire to work (active/first force), but this is opposed by inertia (passive/second force), thus nothing happens. However, a reconciling third force, perhaps in the form of new knowledge, may appear and enable the person to begin work ... Our understanding of the world in relation to only two forces is the reason we do not see the ‘real world’ (Wellbeloved 2003: 123).

The Law of Seven describes the universe in terms of vibrations proceeding through matter but which—unknown to laws of science—operate discontinuously and can slow down or speed up (Wellbeloved 2003: 121). All processes develop in seven steps, forming a musical octave. In each octave there are two intervals, or points of impediment (the semitones between *mi* and *fa* and between *ti* and *do*) where an external ‘shock’ is needed before the process can continue:

In terms of human life experience, for example, when having an aim to do something, the intervals are the places where direction is changed

unconsciously, where energy does not continue to flow in the planned direction unless ... a shock is given (Wellbeloved 2003: 121-122).

On this schema, the actualisation of 'real I' can be understood as a process of transformation of energies subject to the Law of Seven. The 'shock' of 'self-remembering' is required to overcome the first interval. Other shocks will be required for the process to proceed through the octaves, some of which may be unpleasant and must be given by authorities external to the self, especially by a recognised teacher.

These 'Laws' were endorsed by both Gurdjieff and Ouspensky and despite other disagreements form a shared element in their teachings. We can note four more.

First, ritual methods were used by both figures in that the content of the teaching was not divorced from the teacher's presence. There are multiple attestations to a powerful physical presence. Both teachers in effect employed a variation upon classical Socratic dialogue in which the vitality of the exchange is determined by the quality of the students' questions. For example, the presentation of Gurdjieff's teaching in *In Search of the Miraculous* (Ouspensky 1950) almost entirely comprises Gurdjieff's reported speech through questions, answers and short lectures, while Ouspensky's teaching style consists in a more formal but no less Socratic 'Q and A' format.¹⁴

Second, specific bodily practices were taught. Gurdjieff in particular emphasized the importance of practising a series of 'movements', so termed, which he introduced in several series from 1916 and taught through oral instruction (Azize 2012). Like other systems of expressive movement in this period, such as Rudolf Steiner's Eurythmy and the Dalcroze method, their purpose was to facilitate a harmonious re-alignment of the whole person by reconciling 'moving' centres with 'thinking' and 'feeling' centres, as described above. The aim was not primarily to create an artistic performance (although Gurdjieff was not averse tactically to present them as such for public outreach), but to practise a bodily discipline whose function was to recalibrate the practitioner's phenomenological experience of their body.

Gurdjieff also taught specific exercises to individuals. The aim of one, 'The Four Ideals', given in 1948 to George Adie, is summarised as follows: the practitioner should 'make contact with four "ideals" (Christ, Buddha, Muhammad and Lama), and introduce into their own ... bodies certain "higher substances" ... produced when

¹⁴ See transcripts of meetings between 1928 and 1947 published as Ouspensky 1977, 1986, 1991.

worshippers pray or address themselves to those “ideals” ’ (Azize 2013: 178). George Adie’s notes on this practice, which was probably given to him by Gurdjieff in Paris in 1948, describe three stages. First was a preparatory visualisation of the ‘four ideals’ as a ‘foyer of substances formed by the vibrations of the faithful in the direction of the ideal’, which were to be visualised as hovering above the chief geographical centres of the four religions. Second, a period of regulated breathing was to follow in which the breath was directed through a series of visualised parts of the body. Third and finally, the practitioner was to spend ten to fifteen minutes resting ‘in a collected state’ to absorb the effects of the exercise (Azize 2013: 180-181). This recalls contemplative practices in other traditions, although its design is appropriately comparative for an era of heightened religious pluralization. Although Azize considers that this particular exercise was only taught to a few practitioners, there is evidence that other exercises were taught by Gurdjieff from the early 1930s—for example, the ‘I AM’ exercise discussed in Azize (2015: 151-154)—which suggests that an individually ‘tailored’ teaching of contemplative practices was also part of Gurdjieff’s repertoire. In contrast, Ouspensky’s teaching style appears to have drawn largely on Socratic exchanges.

Third, some of the most devoted followers of both teachers were either turned away, or left to create their own lineages, or exited ‘the Work’ altogether. This schismatic tendency could be explained in various ways: for example, that a talented pupil needed to practise unencumbered by their teacher’s charisma, or that a forceful seceder no longer accepted their teacher’s authority. For example, first generation teachers who had been directly exposed to Gurdjieff and/or Ouspensky, such as Maurice Nicoll, J. G. Bennett and A. R. Orage, either left their teacher(s) honourably or were tactically expelled. This also held for Ouspensky in relation to Gurdjieff.

Fourth and finally, both Gurdjieff and Ouspensky presented ‘the Work’ as a ‘fourth way’ to be practised in everyday life and not become institutionalised as a ‘new religion’. This was in contrast to the three recognised ‘ways’ of the fakir, the yogi and the monk, according to Gurdjieff’s early teaching, each of which required ‘renunciation of all worldly things’ (Ouspensky 1950: 47). The fourth way, in contrast, requires only ‘understanding’:

No ‘faith’ is required on the fourth way; on the contrary, faith of any kind is opposed to the fourth way. On the fourth way a man must satisfy himself of

the truth of what he is told. And until he is satisfied he must do nothing
(Ouspensky 1950: 49)

Maintaining separation from the way of the monk, who symbolized the ‘habit’ of western religion, was crucial for Ouspensky. He worried early on that Gurdjieff’s approach might be acquiring the trappings of religion: ‘If after three years of work I perceived that G. was leading us in fact towards the way of religion, of the monastery, and required the observance of all religious forms and ceremonies, there would be of course a motive for disagreeing with this and for going away’ (Ouspensky 1950: 375).

SOURCES OF ‘THE WORK’

In contrast to the Sufism identified by Bennett (1973a) and the esoteric Christianity ascribed by Needleman (1980), Webb locates Gurdjieff’s ideas in a more proximate source: the ‘nineteenth-century occult revival’ (Webb 1980: 525) which included a bricolage of earlier systems such as the perennial philosophy, Pythagorean views of the harmony of the universe, the Kabbalah, and Gnostic expressions of Christianity. Webb argues that versions of these and related sources were all available in St Petersburg and Moscow in the early twentieth century and were assimilated by Gurdjieff and Ouspensky during their immersion in the Russian arm of this ‘occult revival’.¹⁵

An alternative terminology is ‘western esotericism’, employed by Birgit Menzel in her introduction to *The New Age of Russia* (Menzel *et al* 2011) which succeeds *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture* (Rosenthal 1997) as the main academic source for contextualising the early formation of ‘the Work’. Menzel introduces Antoine Faivre’s definition of esotericism as ‘a mode of thought’ whose characteristics include ‘correspondence’ between visible and invisible dimensions of the cosmos, the role of religious imagination in providing access to ‘intermediary’ levels of experience between material and divine worlds, and the role of ‘spiritual transmutation’ through which ‘the inner man is re-regenerated and re-connected with the divine’ (Menzel 2011a: 21). These characteristics are broadly consonant with ‘the Work’ of Gurdjieff and Ouspensky. Faivre identified two further markers of esotericism: belief in a ‘fundamental concordance’ amongst religious traditions at a

¹⁵ The ‘occult revival’ is a convenient term to describe pan-European interests during the *fin-de-siecle*: in the Russian context, see ‘Wise Men from the East’ (Webb 1976: 145-211) and Rosenthal (1997: 381-397). On Ouspensky’s involvement, see Webb (1980: 109-131).

deep hermeneutic level (in other words, a perennialist philosophy) and a ‘more or less secret transmission of spiritual knowledge’ (Menzel 2011a: 21). If ‘secret’ is interpreted as a combination of resistance to casual enquiry coupled with a predominantly oral transmission, then these characteristics are present in the normal dissemination of ‘the Work.’¹⁶

Ouspensky reports Gurdjieff’s satisfaction with the category of ‘esoteric Christianity’. In response to a question on ‘*how to become a Christian*’, Ouspensky reports Gurdjieff as saying that ‘I do not know what you know about *Christianity* ... [b]ut ... if you like, *this is esoteric Christianity*’ (Ouspensky 1950: 102). Needleman similarly reports Gurdjieff saying that ‘the aim of the Institute [for the Harmonious Development of Man] is to help one become a Christian’ through the practical injunction ‘to love all men’ (Needleman 1980: 169). Needleman espouses such an interpretation of ‘the Work’, which repudiates the ‘social gospel’ in favour of a revival of mystical pietism:

May no one in the name of God reform anything. Let even one or two people begin by recognising in their hearts that Truth is the sustained consciousness of Error. In this way, the Holy Ghost appears within the individual. May even one or two people understand what takes place within a man in the state of Questioning himself. Let them seek help on that basis (Needleman 1980: 177).

‘The Work’ may also be understood as practical psychology. For example, Maurice Nicoll (1884-1953), a psychiatrist close to the early analytical psychology of C.G. Jung, attended Ouspensky’s lectures in London where he heard Gurdjieff speak. Enthused, Nicoll joined Gurdjieff at the Prieuré but reverted to Ouspensky with whom he worked into the 1930s before beginning to teach his own groups. From 1952 he published five volumes of talks and addresses to his groups which are acknowledged by many as an authoritative presentation of ‘the fourth way’ as a psychological system (Pogson 1987). Recent interpreters in this vein include the English group psychiatrist, Robert Skynner (1922-2000), co-author with *Monty Python* comedian John Cleese (b. 1939) of the best-selling self-help book *Life and How to Survive It* and a long-standing Gurdjieffian (Skynner 1996).

¹⁶ The literature on western esotericism has expanded and developed since Faivre introduced these characteristics in the early 1990s, but his scheme has been widely adopted. For a detailed discussion see Hanegraaff 2012.

As noted, part of the problem in identifying the ingredients of ‘the Work’ is the unreliability and/or mythicization of sources combined with the cultural, religious and political ferment in which the teachings developed. The polyglot cauldron in which Gurdjieff grew up fostered multiple religious identifications. Bennett (1973a: 32-3) argues that Gurdjieff was influenced both by the Russian Orthodox Church, through the tutelage of ‘Dean Borsh’, and by his mother’s Nestorian Christianity, but he also claims that Gurdjieff said: ‘If you really want to know the secrets of Islam you will find them in Bokhara’, implying the influence of Naqshbandi Sufis (*ibid*: 59). The multiple religious foci in the ‘Four Ideals’ exercise, above, shows Gurdjieff’s awareness of modern religious plurality and his skill in grounding his authority in a perennialist tactic; at the same time, in restricting the scope of his teaching of such individual exercises, we can see the care taken to maintain ‘secret’ transmission.

GURDJIEFF AND OUSPENSKY IN RUSSIA AND BEYOND

Now that we have set out some basic knowledge of the practical teachings of Gurdjieff and Ouspensky we are in a position to address the ‘Russian-ness’ of ‘the Work’. Its historical germination between 1912 and 1920 in Moscow and Petrograd, and then in Essentuki, the Black Sea coast and Tiflis/Tbilisi, all took place within the territories of the Russian empire (1721-1917). The Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man—Gurdjieff’s primary institution—was founded at the border of this empire, in Tiflis/Tbilisi. The cultural conditions of ‘Silver Age’ Russia were evidently conducive to receiving and propagating the message of ‘the Work’. *Fin-de-siècle* Russia hosted an effervescent occult culture, predominantly in Moscow and St. Petersburg, served at its height by ‘more than thirty Russian journals and well over 800 discrete book titles’ (Carlson 1997: 152). Occult interests penetrated the intelligentsia, the gentry, and lower classes alike, combining Western European influences—for example Spiritualism, introduced to St. Petersburg by the Scottish medium D. D. Home (Carlson 1997: 136-139)—with indigenous Slavophile mysticism.¹⁷ In *Modern Occultism in Late Imperial Russia*, Julia Mannherz identifies lively interest in several phenomena, including the séance, which in Russia as in

¹⁷ For primary sources, see Edward Kasinec and Robert H. Davis Jr., ‘Russian occult journalism of the early twentieth century and emigration’ and Maria Carlson and Robert H. Davis Jr., ‘Russian occult journals and newspapers’, pp. 419-423 and pp. 423-44 in Rosenthal (ed, 1997).

Western Europe was approached as a form of ‘scientific’ religion,¹⁸ and ‘occult mathematics’, especially fascination with the existence of a ‘fourth dimension’ which particularly interested Ouspensky. Hypnosis was widely discussed; Gurdjieff himself was a practitioner and later referred to the hypnotic state of passive identification as the immediate target of ‘self-remembering’. In Russian popular culture, hypnotism became a recognized mode of ‘putting occult forces to personal use’ (Mannherz 2012: 87) in the service of the quasi-Nietzschean ‘powerful individual’. Occult interests were widely represented in society, from the ‘boulevard mysticism’ of the lower classes (Carlson 1997: 135) to the Tsarina’s enthusiasm for the healer and mystic, Grigory Yefimovich Rasputin (1869-1916). The extent of enthusiasm at court, for example, can be gleaned from the diary of the French ambassador, Maurice Paléologue, who wrote in December 1915:

I called on Mme S— for tea rather late this evening. Her company numbered about a dozen. Conversation was general, and very lively. The subjects of discussion were spiritualism, ghosts, palmistry, divination, telepathy, the transmigration of souls and sorcery. Nearly every man and woman present told some personal anecdote or incident received from direct tradition ... [O]nce a conversation of this kind is in full swing it may last until morning (cited in Webb 1976: 167).

Theosophy and Anthroposophy were influential as more systematised philosophies of the occult, especially amongst artists and writers. Carlson (1997: 139) describes Theosophy as ‘the most intellectually important’ of Russian occult trends in the late nineteenth century. The Theosophical Society was founded in New York in 1875 (moving to Adyar, India in 1886) by another imperial Russian, Elena Petrovna Blavatsky (née von Hahn, 1831-1891), born in Ekatorinoslav (Dnipro) now in Ukraine.¹⁹ News of the international activities of Theosophists appeared in Russian journals as early as the 1880s and ‘private Theosophical circles’ existed from the 1890s (Carlson 1997: 141). Censorship reform in 1905 led to the foundation of the Russian Theosophical Society in 1908 when more than one hundred members attended its first meeting in St. Petersburg; by 1910 ‘there were probably several thousand Russian Theosophists, the majority of them women’ (Carlson 1997: 141-2).

¹⁸ See also Vinitsky (2009: 3-20) on the coming of Spiritualism to Russia 1853-1870s.

¹⁹ Blavatsky, like Gurdjieff, whilst born in the Russian empire, came from a composite ethnic background (German-Russian). See Petsche (2011) for a comparison of Blavatsky and Gurdjieff.

Ouspensky developed strong Theosophical interests and visited the international headquarters in Adyar, India, in 1913. Gurdjieff would have been familiar with Theosophists in Moscow and they would have been amongst his early audiences when he began to teach there in 1912. In 1913 the Russian Anthroposophical Society was founded with branches in Moscow and St. Petersburg, drawing support from ‘philosophical and literary discussion shaped by Symbolism’ – novelist Andrei Bely (1880-1934) was a key proponent - and functioned until 1923 (von Maydell 1997: 153,157). In sum, as Carlson (1997: 135) puts it: ‘occultism permeated the atmosphere of upper- and middle-class Russian society and was one more manifestation of the general spiritual hunger that generated ... the Russian religious renaissance’. In other words, from at least 1907 (Ouspensky) and 1912 (Gurdjieff), the founders of ‘the Work’ proselytized within a sympathetic environment where the *strannik*—the wandering ‘holy man’ possessing charismatic personality and healing powers—was a well-known trope easily transferable to their own personas.

The content of their teachings is congruent with larger themes in Russian thought. Idealism was dominant and was typically projected onto an organic and cosmic stage in which messianic Christianity was a powerful force. For example, fuelled by a series of mystical experiences from 1872, Vladimir Sergeyevich Solovyov (1853-1900) developed an idealistic system which called for a ‘universal synthesis of science, philosophy, and religion’ based on concepts of *tsel’nost’* (wholeness) and *sobornost’* (collective unity). These ideas underpinned his goal of mystical unity and had considerable influence on the Symbolist poets Alexander Blok and Andrei Bely. The philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev (1874-1948)—who, like Gurdjieff, later found himself in exile in Paris—described in *The End of Our Time* (1924) a new religious renaissance in which ‘man is not a unit in the universe, forming part of an unrational machine, but a living member of an organic hierarchy, belonging to a real and living whole’ (cited in Webb 1976: 178).

At the same time we have seen that the content of ‘the Work’ had affinities with a pan-European esotericism, and its dissemination quickly became international, by force of circumstance if not by design, through its emerging centres of operation in Paris, London and New York in the 1920s and 1930s. In contrast, there was and is no official Russian society or lineage. Nevertheless both Gurdjieff and Ouspensky were (imperial) Russians by formation and their enforced exile (in Gurdjieff’s case, accompanied by his family entourage) evidently strengthened their identification with

their homeland (*narod*). Ouspensky wrote and published in Russian, and later in English, while Gurdjieff was more fluent in Armenian and Greek. Russia remained a potent imaginary. J. G. Bennett recalls a remark by Gurdjieff during their last conversation: ‘He spoke about the work he had started in Turkestan and said: “Remember what I now say. Begin in Russia, finish in Russia” ’ (Bennett 1973b: 108). Bennett interprets this to mean that the *fons et origo* of the teachings lay deep in central Russia, but Gurdjieff’s words can also be read as a nostalgic valedictory by a dying émigré. Ouspensky was also sentimental for Russia, especially for pre-1917 Moscow, and Hunter (2006: 154-155) describes the group he began in London in 1932 especially for ‘Russian emigres’. It is no surprise that Russian Orthodox requiem masses were held for both men.

Despite the main uptake of ‘the Work’ to date being in northern and western Europe, in the Americas, and in Australia, interest in the teachings could be found in Soviet Russia. Birgit Menzel describes several individuals who effectively ‘repatriated’ the teachings in the cultural underground of the 1960s and 1970s. For example, the linguist Mikhail Meilakh (b. 1945) adopted a ‘shock’ tactic to reach out beyond the iron curtain: ‘[Meilakh] would stand on his head in the breakfast-room of the Leningrad Interhotel for foreign guests and after a while would ... ask the puzzled or amused foreign businessmen or diplomats ... if they could bring in any information or material about Gurdjieff on subsequent trips’ (Menzel 2011b: 157). Another practitioner, Arkady Rovner (b. 1940), pursued a university career in New York in the 1970s. There he made personal contact with Gurdjieffian elders, including John Bennett, and helped to send *samizdat* material about Gurdjieff back into the Soviet Union. Rovner returned to Russia in 1994 and founded the Institute for the Cultivation of Inner States in Moscow in 2001 (Menzel 2011b: 157-8; see also Rovner 2009, Stephens 1997).

CONCLUSION

It is difficult to do justice in short compass to the teachings of Gurdjieff and Ouspensky and their place in Russian culture and religion. We might describe ‘the Work’ reasonably accurately as a practical teaching of imperial Russian extraction and synthesis which combines modernist themes of self-realization with traditional values of organic order. Although still young, its teachings have developed a dense

family tree of descendants which has generated sometimes contentious questions concerning who is and who is not a legitimate authority. The primary sources are voluminous, if unsystematic, but the main problem at the time of writing is the relative lack of scholarly research which makes it difficult to develop specific questions. Amongst these questions, the ‘Russian-ness’ of a set of teachings first presented in Moscow and St. Petersburg during the ‘Silver Age’ by two imperial Russians – one provincial, one metropolitan - remains especially under-examined. We have made a case here for exploring it further.

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