



G. I.
Gurdjieff
The War
Against
Sleep

Colin Wilson

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For Cyril Tilburn, whose help was invaluable.

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Introductory Note

IT WAS in 1951, a year after the publication of *In Search of the Miraculous* and *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*, that I first came across the ideas of Gurdjieff. I was instantly aware of being in touch with one of the great minds of this century. I wrote about him for the first time in 1955, in the concluding chapter of *The Outsider*, where he figures (with Ramakrishna and T. E. Hulme) as one of the few men who have glimpsed a solution to the 'sickness of man in the twentieth century'. Since then I have written about him in several books — notably *The Occult* and *Mysteries*.

When the publishers of the present book suggested that I should write about Gurdjieff, I experienced misgivings; it would involve repeating a great deal that I have already written. But then, my own views on Gurdjieff have changed and evolved over the years, and the idea of getting them between two covers was an interesting challenge. So I brushed aside my doubts, decided to repeat myself where necessary, and wrote the book. And in repeating myself I discovered an entirely new set of meanings and implications in Gurdjieff.

It was an interesting lesson in the difference between 'grasping' and merely 'knowing' — a distinction that lies at the heart of Gurdjieff's thought.

Which is why I make no apology to those who have read me on Gurdjieff before. His ideas will bear repetition.

One The Magician

ON A BRIGHT summer morning in 1917, an attractive Russian woman in her late twenties sat in Phillipov's café, in St Petersburg's Nevsky Prospect, waiting for the arrival of her friend Peter Demianovitch Ouspensky. Uncharacteristically, Ouspensky was late. When he finally hurried in, he was in a state of unusual excitement. His first words were: 'I think this time we've really found what we need.' And he reminded her that in Moscow, in 1915, he had met a remarkable teacher, who spoke of the fundamental problems of human existence with an air of knowledge and authority. His name was George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff. Now, said Ouspensky, Gurdjieff had come to St Petersburg — and was, at that very moment, waiting for them in another branch of Phillipov's across the road. The lady, Anna Butkovsky, says:

When I entered the other Phillipov's I saw a man sitting at a table in the far corner, wearing an ordinary black coat and the high astrakhan cap that Russian men wear in winter. Signs of Greek ancestry could be discerned in his fine, virile features and in the look that pierced right through you (though not in an unpleasant way). He had an oval-shaped head, black eyes and an olive complexion, and wore a black moustache. His manner was very calm and relaxed, and he spoke without any gesticulation. Even to be sitting with him was very agreeable. Though it was not his native language, he could speak Russian fluently, in a manner not quite like ours, more exact and very picturesque. Sometimes he would speak in a 'lazy' voice, and you felt that each phrase was being carefully and specially

put together, for that particular occasion, not at all like the ready-made phrases which we would normally use in conversation, devoid of creative power or individuality. You quickly grasped that he had a gift of assembling words expressively. And here I sat, and I felt that I was at last in the presence of a Guru.

Gurdjieff made the same kind of impression on everyone who met him. We have, perhaps, a dozen records by pupils describing their first meeting. Almost without exception, they mention that 'look that pierced right through you'. A young army officer named Thomas de Hartmann met Gurdjieff at about the same time. When two men wearing black coats and black moustaches approached him in the café, he wondered which was Gurdjieff. 'But my uncertainty was quickly dispelled by the eyes of one of the men'. J. G. Bennett, who met Gurdjieff in Constantinople in 1920, wrote: 'I met the strangest pair of eyes I have ever seen. The two eyes were so different that I wondered if the light had played some trick on me.' And all these different impressions are summarized in a remark made by the wife of the physician Kenneth Walker after she met Gurdjieff in Paris in 1948: 'The chief impression he gave me was the impression of immense vigour and of concentrated strength. I had the feeling that he was not really a man but a magician.'

Gurdjieff was, in fact, a kind of magician. There can be no doubt that he possessed certain magical or psychic powers. But he seems to have regarded these as irrelevant or unimportant. Gurdjieff's central concern was with the *potentialities* of human beings — or, more specifically, of human consciousness. Ouspensky expressed it clearly in a little book called *The Psychology of Man's Possible Evolution*, where he remarks that ordinary psychology is concerned with man as he actually exists. But there is another kind, that studies man 'not from the point of view of what he is, or what he seems to be, but from the point of view of what he may become; that is, from the point of view of his possible evolution.'

Expressed in this way, the idea sounds vague and general. But Gurdjieff's approach was precise and particular. The writings of his pupils — or disciples — contains many accounts of the operation of his own remarkable powers. Fritz Peters, an American who had known Gurdjieff since childhood, describes what happened when he visited Gurdjieff in Paris immediately after the Second World War. His war experiences had brought Peters to the verge of a nervous breakdown. The moment Gurdjieff saw him, he realized that he was sick.

When we reached his apartment, he led me down a long hall to a dark bedroom, indicated the bed, told me to lie down, and said: This is your room, for as long as you need it.' I laid down on the bed and he left the room but did not close the door. I felt such enormous relief and such excitement at seeing him that I began to cry uncontrollably and then my head began to pound. I could not rest and got up and walked to the kitchen where I found him sitting at the table. He looked alarmed when he saw me, and asked me what was wrong. I said I needed some aspirin or something for my headache, but he shook his head, stood up, and pointed to the other chair by the kitchen table. 'No medicine,' he said firmly. 'I give you coffee. Drink as hot as you can.' I sat at the table while he heated the coffee and then served it to me. He then walked across the small room to stand in front of the refrigerator and watch me. I could not take my eyes off him and realized that he looked incredibly weary — I have never seen anyone look so tired. I remembered being slumped over the table, sipping at my coffee, when I began to feel a strange uprising of energy within myself — I stared at him, automatically straightened up, and it was as if a violent electric blue light emanated from him and entered into me. As this happened, I could feel

the tiredness drain out of me, but at the same moment his body slumped and his face turned grey as if it was being drained of life. I looked at him, amazed, and when he saw me sitting erect, smiling and full of energy, he said quickly: 'You all right now — watch food on stove — I must go.' There was something very urgent in his voice and I leaped to my feet to help him but he waved me away and limped slowly out of the room.

What had happened, apparently, was that Gurdjieff had somehow *poured* vital energy into Peters by some psychic discipline — either that, or somehow touched the source of vitality in Peters himself; at all events, it drained Gurdjieff. Peters says: 'I was convinced... that he knew how to transmit energy from himself to others; I was also convinced that it could only be done at great cost to himself.'

What happened next is equally significant.

It also became obvious within the next few minutes that he knew how to renew his own energy quickly, for I was amazed when he returned to the kitchen to see the change in him; he looked like a young man again, alert, smiling, sly and full of good spirits. He said that this was a very fortunate meeting, and that while I had forced him to make an almost impossible effort, it had been — as I had witnessed — a very good thing for both of us.

Gurdjieff's comment is of considerable importance. When Peters first came to the apartment, he looked tired — 'I have never seen anyone look so tired.' He made an effort that drained him even further, transmitting vitality to Peters. And then, within fifteen minutes, was completely renewed and refreshed. The implication seems clear. Gurdjieff himself had *forgotten* that he had the power to renew his own energies, until the exhaustion of Fritz

Peters forced him to make an enormous effort. Before Peters came, Gurdjieff had been taking his own fatigue for granted, as something inevitable. Pouring energy into Peters reminded him that he had the power to somehow call upon vital energy. This is why he told Peters that this was a fortunate meeting for both of them.

This story enables us to see precisely why Kenneth Walker's wife thought Gurdjieff a magician. It also makes it clear that his 'magical' powers were not of the kind that we normally associate with notorious 'occultists' or magicians, like Madame Blavatsky or Aleister Crowley. There are stories of Madame Blavatsky causing raps to resound from all over the room, of Crowley somehow causing men to go on all fours and howl like dogs; but never of their producing this wholly tonic effect on someone. It is not even necessary to assume that Gurdjieff revitalized Peters by some form of telepathic transfer of energy; a psychologist would probably argue that he did it by some form of suggestion.

As to Gurdjieff's power to renew his own energies, its essence had been understood by psychologists of the nineteenth century, decades before the age of Freud and Jung. William James speaks about it in an important essay called 'The Energies of Man'.

Everyone is familiar with the phenomenon of feeling more or less alive on different days. Everyone knows on any given day that there are energies slumbering in him which the incitements of that day do not call forth, but which he might display if these were greater. Most of us feel as if a sort of cloud weighed upon us, keeping us below our highest notch of clearness in discernment, sureness in reasoning, or firmness in deciding. Compared with what we ought to be, we are only half awake. Our fires are damped, our drafts are checked. We are making use of only a small part of our possible mental and

physical resources. In some persons this sense of being cut off from their rightful resources is extreme, and we then get the formidable neurasthenic and psychasthenic conditions, with life grown into one tissue of impossibilities, that so many medical books describe.

Stating the thing broadly, the human individual thus lives far within his limits; he possesses powers of various sorts which he habitually fails to use. He energizes below his *maximum*, and he behaves below his *optimum*. In elementary faculty, in co-ordination, in power of *inhibition* and control, in every conceivable way, his life is contracted like the field of vision of an hysteric subject — but with less excuse, for the poor hysteric is diseased, while in the rest of us, it is only an inveterate *habit* — the habit of inferiority to our full self — that is bad.

James cites the well-known phenomenon of 'second wind' as an example of this power to draw upon vital reserves. When we are completing some task, he says, we make a practice of stopping once we feel tired — once we encounter the first layer of fatigue. If we *force ourselves* to press on, a surprising thing happens. The fatigue gets worse, up to a point, then suddenly vanishes, and we feel better than before. He mentions that one of the standard methods of treating 'neurasthenic' patients in the nineteenth century was to bully patients into making a greater effort than usual. 'First comes the very extremity of distress, then follows unexpected relief.' And he adds: 'We live subject to arrest by degrees of fatigue which we have come only from habit to obey.'

In this sentence, James has defined the essence of Gurdjieff's lifework. It is true that the ideas of Gurdjieff cover an immense range — of psychology, philosophy, cosmology, even alchemy. But at the core of his work lies this notion that we possess

greater powers than we realize, and that our apparent limitations are due to a peculiar form of laziness — a laziness that has become so habitual that it has developed into a *mechanism*.

And how can this mechanism be controlled or de-activated?

In his essay on vital reserves, William James points out that we call upon these deeper powers when we are stimulated either by crisis, or by some deep sense of urgency — of purpose. He quotes Colonel Baird-Smith, who was in charge of the defence of Delhi during its six week siege by Indian mutineers in 1857. His mouth was filled with sores and his body covered with them; a wounded ankle was a black, festering mess; diarrhoea had worn him to a shadow. Unable to eat, he lived almost entirely on brandy. Yet it seemed to have no effect on him. The crisis — the need to protect the lives of women and children — kept him in such a state of concentrated determination that he remained alert and energetic during the whole siege. Clearly, *he* did precisely what Gurdjieff did when he left Fritz Peters sitting in the kitchen: reached down inside himself, and summoned vital reserves.

In fact, this method — of deliberately seeking out stimulation, excitement, even crisis — is one of our favourite human devices for escaping that sense of 'a cloud weighing upon us'. A depressed housewife goes and buys herself a new hat. A bored man gets drunk. A discontented teenager steals a car or takes his knuckledusters to a football match. Generally speaking, the greater a person's potentiality for achievement, the greater his or her objection to that feeling of being 'cut off from one's rightful resources'. Shaw's Captain Shotover tells Ellie Dunne, 'At your age, I looked for hardship, danger, horror and death, that I might feel the life in me more intensely.' And this is clearly the motivation that drove Ernest Hemingway, for example, to spend so much of his time big game hunting, bullfighting, working as a war correspondent.

This desire to break the bonds of their own laziness may even lead men to behave in ways that are obviously contrary to their

best interests. Van Gogh threw up a comfortable job as an art dealer to become a lay preacher among the miners in Belgium. Lawrence of Arabia refused comfortable government appointments to become an ordinary aircraftman in the R.A.F. The philosopher Wittgenstein gave away an inherited fortune to become a badly paid schoolmaster. These 'outsiders' were driven by a need to escape a feeling of enstifflement, of stagnation. The aim was to throw off the 'habit neurosis' — the 'habit of inferiority to one's full self'.

But then, there is obviously an element of absurdity in deliberately seeking out danger or discomfort, since we otherwise spend so much of our lives trying to avoid them. There *must* be other ways of breaking through to our vital reserves, apart from risking our necks or sleeping on a bed of nails. For example, it is plain that it is not the crisis itself that creates the flow of vital energy; it is our response to it. It is as if some inner-voice gave an *order* that causes something inside us to snap to attention. Colonel Baird-Smith's response to the mutiny was to order himself to keep going, to ignore pain and starvation, until the crisis had been brought under control. The mutiny only instilled him with a sense of the seriousness of the situation, to which his 'vital reserves' responded. And if a man could generate that sense of seriousness, of the need for effort, then he ought to be able to summon the energies without the need for an Indian mutiny.

How is this to be done? According to Gurdjieff, the answer falls into two parts. First of all, a man must commit himself wholly and totally to the task of escaping his normal limitations; it requires the kind of commitment that made saints sit on top of pillars. Secondly, he must understand something of the workings of this complicated computer that houses the human spirit. (Gurdjieff died before the age of computers, so he used the word 'machine'; but he would undoubtedly have found 'computer' more convenient and accurate.) 'Understand the machine.' This body is a computer; so is this brain. Like all computers, they are capable of a far wider range of response than we ever demand

of them. But wider responses can only be obtained when they are thoroughly understood.

Gurdjieff's method of securing the first of these two objectives was simply to demand an unusual level of commitment. When the eleven-year-old Fritz Peters told him that he wanted to know 'everything about man', Gurdjieff asked him with great intensity: 'Can you promise to do something for me?' When Peters said yes, Gurdjieff gestured at the vast expanse of lawns of the Chateau du Prieuré, and told him that he must cut them all once a week.

'He struck the table with his fist for a second time. "You must promise on your God." His voice was deadly serious. "You must promise me that you will do this thing no matter what happens ... Must promise you will do no matter what happens, no matter who try to stop you.'" And Peters adds: 'I would have died, if necessary, in the act of mowing the lawns.'

In fact, Gurdjieff then made him work harder and harder, until he was mowing all the lawns in four days.

The principle here is similar to that of commando training: that is, the trainee is made to tackle more and more difficult obstacles, until he can cascade down cliffs on his back and eat barbed wire for breakfast. This was the basis of Gurdjieff's method. But it was not simply a matter of developing strength and alertness. Hard work can become a mere habit, like any other. Gurdjieff's aim was also to persuade his pupils *not* to develop habits. Habit arises from doing something mechanically, with the mind 'elsewhere'. Gurdjieff's pupils were made to work hard; but it was important that they should maintain 'mindfulness', intense awareness.

At some fairly early stage in his career — which we shall consider at greater length in the next chapter — Gurdjieff became acquainted with certain types of eastern dancing that demanded an extraordinary complexity of movements. Anyone

who tries patting the head with one hand and rubbing the stomach with the other will know how difficult it is. Gurdjieff devised dances in which the student had to do something not only with both hands, but with both feet and the head as well. Again, these dances became fundamental to training in 'the work'. Their aim was to widen and extend the range of the body's possibilities — what Gurdjieff called 'the moving centre'. It is true that these dances (or 'movements') could, in themselves, become habitual. But, under certain circumstances, they could also be amazingly effective in producing new modes of consciousness. One of the most striking examples is to be found in J. G. Bennett's autobiography *Witness*, describing Bennett's experiences with Gurdjieff at Fontainebleau (the Prieuré) in 1923.

Bennett was suffering from dysentery, contracted in the east.

Each morning, it was harder and harder to get out of bed, and my body shrank from the heavy work in the heat of the sun. The constant diarrhoea made me very weak, but somehow I kept going.

Finally, a day came when I simply could not stand up. I was shaking with fever and very wretched in myself; feeling that I had failed. Just as I was saying to myself: 'I will stay in bed today,' I felt my body rising. I dressed and went to work as usual, but this time with a queer sense of being held together by a superior Will that was not my own.

We worked as usual all the morning. I could not eat lunch that day, but lay on the ground, wondering if I was going to die. Gurdjieff had just introduced afternoon practices of the exercises out-of-doors under the lime grove. When the pupils began to collect under the lime trees, I

joined them.

We started by working on a new exercise of incredible complexity that even the most experienced Russian pupils could not master. The structure of the exercises was drawn on the board in symbols, and head, feet, arms and torso had to follow independent sequences. It was a torture for all of us.

Soon I ceased to be aware of anything but the music and my own weakness. I kept saying to myself: 'At the next change I will stop.' ... One by one, all the English pupils fell out, and most of the Russian women . . .

Gurdjieff stood watching intently. Time lost the quality of before and after. There was no past and no future, only the present agony of making my body move. Gradually I became aware that Gurdjieff was putting all his attention on me. There was an unspoken demand that was at the same time an encouragement and a promise. I must not give up — if it killed me.

Suddenly, I was filled with the influx of an immense power. My body seemed to have turned into light. I could not feel its presence in the usual ways. There was no effort, no pain, no weariness, not even any sense of weight... My own state was blissful beyond anything I had ever known. It was quite different from the ecstasy of sexual union, for it was altogether free and detached from the body. It was exultation in the faith that can move mountains.

All had gone into the house for tea, but I went in the opposite direction towards the kitchen

garden, where I took a spade and began to dig. Digging in the earth is a searching test of our capacity for physical effort. A strong man can dig fast for a short time or slowly for a long time, but no one can force his body to dig fast for a long time even if he has exceptional training. I felt the need to test the power that had entered me, and I began to dig in the fierce afternoon heat for more than an hour at a rate that I ordinarily could not sustain for two minutes. My weak, rebellious, suffering body had become strong and obedient. The diarrhoea had ceased and I no longer felt the gnawing abdominal pains that had been with me for days. Moreover, I experienced a clarity of thought that I had only known involuntarily and at rare moments . . . The phrase 'in my mind's eye' took on a new meaning as I 'saw' the eternal pattern of each thing I looked at, the trees, the water flowing in the canal and even the spade, and lastly my own body... I remember saying aloud: 'Now I see why God hides Himself from us.' But even now I cannot recall the intuition behind this exclamation.

Bennett went for a walk in the forest, and encountered Gurdjieff, who began to speak about man's need for 'higher emotional energy' if he is to transform himself. He went on: 'There are some people in the world, but they are very rare, who are connected to a Great Reservoir or Accumulator of this energy... Those who can draw upon it can be a means of helping others.' The implication was clearly that Gurdjieff himself was such a person, and that he had 'supplied' Bennett with the necessary energy for his mystical experience. He added: 'What you have received today is a taste of what is possible for you. Until now you have only known about these things theoretically, but now you have experience.'

Bennett walked on into the forest; the most important part of his

experience was still to come.

A lecture of Ouspensky came into my mind. He had spoken about the very narrow limits within which we can control our functions and added: 'It is easy to verify that we have no control over our emotions. Some people imagine that they can be angry or pleased as they will, but anyone can verify that he cannot be astonished at will.' As I recalled these words, I said to myself: 'I will be astonished.' Instantly, I was overwhelmed with amazement, not only at my own state, but at everything that I looked at or thought of. Each tree was so uniquely itself that I felt that I could walk in the forest for ever and never cease from wonderment. Then the thought of 'fear' came to me. At once I was shaking with terror. Unnamed horrors were menacing me on every side. I thought of 'joy', and I felt that my heart would burst from rapture. The word 'love' came to me, and I was pervaded with such fine shades of tenderness and compassion that I saw that I had not the remotest idea of the depth and the range of love. Love was everywhere and in everything. It was infinitely adaptable to every shade of need. After a time, it became too much for me, it seemed that if I plunged any more deeply into the mystery of love, I would cease to exist. I wanted to be free from this power to feel whatever I chose, and at once it left me.

Bennett obviously attached great importance to Gurdjieff's remarks on 'the Great Reservoir or Accumulator'. But to someone trying to understand the essence of Gurdjieff's ideas, this is less important than the simple fact that Bennett had achieved such total control over his emotions. For *this* is our central human problem: that we are almost constantly the victims of our emotions, always being swept up and down on a kind of

inner-switchback. We possess a certain control over them; we *can* 'direct our thoughts' — or feelings — in such a way as to intensify them. This is certainly our most remarkable human characteristic: imagination. Animals require actual physical stimuli to trigger their experience. A man can retreat into a book — or a daydream — and live through certain experiences quite independent of the physical world. He can even, for example, imagine a sexual encounter, and not only experience all the appropriate physical responses, but even the sexual climax. Such a curious ability is far beyond the power of any animal.

Yet our experience of imagination convinces us that it is bound, by its very nature, to be no more than a dim carbon copy of 'real' experience. And the consequences of this unconscious assumption are far greater than we realize. It means that we assume that the world of mind is very much a second best when compared with the world of physical actuality, a kind of sham, a make-believe. So when confronted by some painful emotion, or some physical problem, our natural tendency is to retreat and surrender. We are subject to arrest, not only from degrees of fatigue that we have come to obey by habit, but from degrees of self-pity and boredom. Bennett's experience suggests that, if only we made the effort, we could achieve a degree of control over our feelings that would at present strike us as miraculous. The novelist Proust experienced, for a few seconds, an intense consciousness of the reality of his own past — he describes it in *Swann's Way* — and he spent the remainder of his life trying to rediscover that curious power. Yet such a glimpse would have been a mere by-product of the kind of control that Bennett experienced. To actually *know* this consciously, to realize that we were not intended to reach breaking point so quickly and easily, would obviously alter a man's whole approach to his life and its problems.

To effect such an alteration in human consciousness was Gurdjieff's central aim.