

Gurdjieff and C. G. Jung: *Life Is Real Only Then, When I Am*’ and the Question of Individuation

Vrasidas Karalis

vrasidas.karalis@sydney.edu.au

Abstract

The third part of Gurdjieff’s trilogy *All and Everything* has not been studied sufficiently or earned any considerable attention by scholars. Its structure seems rather incoherent and circumstantial and its overall message diffused and centerless. However, in the last book Gurdjieff illustrates *metonymically* the transition from self-consciousness to what he called *objective knowledge*, a cogitation on the self and the world around it without any psychological projections or emotional transferences. An analogous approach to the question of the personal and collective identities can be found in C.G. Jung’s principle of individuation according to which the individual has to not only appropriate the collective myths of its society but also to see them “objectively” which means as “social objects.” The present paper discusses the process of psychological projection as advocated by Jung—in order to individuate collective representations and experience the objectivity of the real—while delineating Gurdjieff’s response to one of the central principles of depth psychology. Can we individuate reality and yet see it without our own projections? Gurdjieff’s answer is more practical than Jung’s but raises complex questions about the ability of human consciousness to reach beyond its own cognitive limitations. Although Gurdjieff’s last book remained unfinished, certain challenging insights into the meaning of “a veritable, nonfantastic representation of the world as it is” are elaborated by P.D. Ouspensky’s *The Psychology of Man’s Possible Evolution* (1950) which essentially attempts to construct a Gurdjieffian theory of the psyche.

Keywords: G. I. Gurdjieff; C. G. Jung; individuation; *Life is Real Only Then, When I Am*’; objectivity; psychoanalysis; psychosynthesis; P.D. Ouspensky; self-consciousness; objective consciousness

1. Gurdjieff Amongst the Psychoanalysts

Life Is Real Only Then, When I Am’, the third part of G. I. Gurdjieff’s trilogy *All and Everything*, has not been studied sufficiently or earned any considerable attention by scholars. Its structure seems, and probably is, rather incoherent and fragmented, while its overall message diffused and centreless. Any comparison

between this and his other two main books, *Beelzebub's Tales to his Grandson* and *Meetings with Remarkable Men*, would also show that despite the fact that it was planned to be the final and culminating part of the trilogy, the book is simply a collection of fragments and *ad hoc* “talks” made under different circumstances, especially during his visit to the United States during which Gurdjieff was trying hard to understand the different “groups” within his own school and their different perspectives. The cultural tensions and misunderstandings are obvious throughout the book and somewhat account for the lack of a coherent argument.

Consequently, not many scholars have dealt with it because of this fractured composition which in part frames its rather peculiar central idea to explore what Gurdjieff called “the abnormal psychic factor, which in the last centuries has generally become an imperceptible inherency of contemporary people.”¹ Jeanne de Salzmann wrote that “The Third Series, incomplete and unfinished as it is, reveals the action of the master—of the one who, simply by his presence, obliges you to come to a decision, to know what you want.”² As in everything written by Gurdjieff, it is the voice of the master that matters and the signifying practices of his actual presence that make the sentences, so long-winded and serpentine, ultimately converge not on the written page but on the embodied reality of their speaker. The master *is* the message and not simply the messenger. This is emphasised by the strong oral character of the text: Gurdjieff primarily articulates a narrative about the speaking subject and only secondarily talks about what the speaking subject wants to reveal about life, experience and knowledge. As de Salzmann states in the foreword: “Gurdjieff had an indirect way of making people feel the truth.”³

The indirect way focused on his personality to a considerable degree and later P.D. Ouspensky declared that, “[when] I ceased to understand him, or his views had changed, . . . I found it necessary to separate G. and the system of which I

1. Gurdjieff, *Life is Real*, 74.

2. de Salzmann, “Foreword” in Gurdjieff, *Life is Real*, x.

3. de Salzmann, “Foreword,” xi.

had no doubts.”⁴ Ouspensky was one of the few disciples who knew how to dissociate the personality of the master from the essence of his teaching—and although these are to a large degree interconnected, he managed to present the teaching as an implied critique of the master himself.

The truth is that in the five talks and the final chapter which constitute the book, Gurdjieff manages only peripherally to create the same narrative atmosphere that we find in his other two books, or to stay true to his own project as formulated with previous two books: “to assist the arising, in the mentation and in the feelings of the reader, of a veritable, nonfantastic representation not of that illusory world which he now perceives, but of the world existing in reality.”⁵ Furthermore, it is obvious that fragmentation and the rather impromptu form of delivery go beyond the oral character of the text. Being “talks” and lectures and not essays or diatribes, these chapters try to grapple not only with what is “abnormal” in contemporary social reality, but more than anything else try to address through discursive interaction between teacher and student the question of what constitutes *psyche* in contemporary human beings. The underlying question in this book is not if “there is life on this planet” but if “there is a psyche in human beings” and how it is manifested, or more pertinently how it could be manifested within the given conditions of the surrounding world.

In order to be clearly understood therefore the book must be seen in its contextual perspective of being composed in different periods and circumstances, but overall during the period when psychoanalysis was gaining momentum after World War I with the proliferation of different schools of psychoanalytic thought in the wake of Sigmund Freud. The “talks” are in an implicit dialogue with various dominant psychoanalytic ideas, especially one would claim with Alfred Adler’s “individual psychology,” but even beyond this to the various tendencies of psychological debates. Viktor E. Frankl later juxtaposed three different forms of psychoanalysis which came out of Vienna:

4. Ouspensky, *The Psychology of Man’s Possible Evolution*, 126–127.

5. Gurdjieff, *Life is Real*, 3.

According to logotherapy, the striving to find a meaning in one's life is the primary motivational force in man. That is why I speak of a *will to meaning* in contrast to the “pleasure principle” (or, as we could also term it, the *will to pleasure*) on which Freudian psychoanalysis is centred, as well as in contrast to *the will to power* stressed by Adlerian psychology.⁶

Between the will to meaning, the will to pleasure and the will to power, Gurdjieff's own approach to the question of the human psyche is more complex and less theoretical, more open-ended and less structured. His project, as set out in this lecture, is about the will to have will in order to be able to act: the will is not directed towards abstract concepts but towards material activity and the constructive ability of the mind. The purpose of psychological reflection is the intensification of action, not simply the affirmation of the old Socratic idea of knowing thyself.

Amongst psychoanalysts, Alfred Adler throughout his professional life always tried, in the detached manner of biological sciences, to organise basic modes of human behaviour not as psychic forms of manifesting intentionality but as expressions of organic and corporeal foundational structures. His famous inferiority complex for example is part of his wider project of “teleological psychology” in which Freud's notion of libido has been replaced by Adler's concept of striving for superiority. But for Adler self-knowledge is the ultimate outcome of a persistent “re-tracing,” as it were, of all stages of development since birth (childhood, education and maturation), as he states in the end of his most famous book, and still worth reading, *Understanding Human Nature*:

This law of psychic development seems to us to be irrefutable. It is the most important indicator to any human being who wishes to build up his destiny consciously and openly, rather than to allow himself to be the victim of dark and mysterious tendencies. These researches are experiments in the science of human nature, a science which cannot otherwise be taught or cultivated. The understanding of human nature seems to us indispensable to every man, and the study of its science, the most important activity of the human mind.⁷

6. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 12.

7. Adler, *Understanding Human Nature*, 286.

If we could persist on this exploration, we could find many parallels between the thought of Adler and Gurdjieff. The parallels however could be attributed mostly to the *zeitgeist* and the common questions of the same period and less to a common “professional” understanding of psychology. In the 30s, psychoanalysis was also very much of a novelty and was seen as subversive and revolutionary, something that it cannot claim today anymore after its normalised canonisation and institutional medicalisation, especially in the United States.

Gurdjieff’s questions in this book still reflect the realities of the inter-war period regarding the validity of psychological research amid the rise of totalitarian regimes in the 30s and the articulation of a psychology “of the masses and for the masses”; a time when, as José Ortega Y Gasset observes,

the mass crushes beneath it everything that is different, everything that is excellent, individual, qualified and select. Anybody who is not like everybody, who does not think like everybody, runs the risk of being eliminated. And it is clear, of course, that this “everybody” is not “everybody.” “Everybody” was normally the complex unity of the mass and the divergent, specialized minorities. Nowadays, “everybody” is the mass alone.⁸

The self-perception of the “masses” was manufactured and imposed on them by the dominant ideologies of fascism and communism. For Gasset, the surrender of the individual will to such “ideological” abstractions is probably the most dangerous element of societal morality and the self-perception of the individual. As Gasset concludes: “The mass-man is simply without morality, which is always, in essence, a sentiment of submission to something, a consciousness of service and obligation.”⁹ Close to Gasset, from the opposite side, stands Wilhelm Reich, who in his *Mass Psychology of Fascism*, makes some analogous claims: “By moulding human psychological structure, social ideology not only reproduces itself in the people. More importantly, it becomes a material force in the form of the altered human structure, with its contradictory thinking and acting.”¹⁰

8. Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses*, 8.

9. *Ibid.*, 143.

10. Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, 14.

Generally speaking, scholars tend to underestimate or disregard the historical and intellectual context of Gurdjieff's work by de-temporalizing him as a timeless guru or presenting his work as not being directly associated or related to the dominant intellectual conversations of its time. However, being close to some of the most educated intellectuals, artists and thinkers of the period, P. D. Ouspensky and most crucially, Alfred Richard Orage (whose death looms large in the background of *Life is Real*), Gurdjieff must have had ample information about the psychoanalytic movement, its various manifestations and the debates about its legitimacy as creative engagement with the human mind and status as scientific discipline of mental processes.

Most importantly he would have known the impact of the then dominant philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, which privileged “the will to power”¹¹ and the cult of the charismatic individual, in all forms of the radical modernism of the period from art to politics. The connection between such cultural conversations and Gurdjieff may be rather indirect but, in *Life is Real* the references to Russia and his experiences in Essentuki and later in France indicate the cultural agendas of the time in the most eloquent but somehow indirect manner. Indeed, in this little book, Gurdjieff tries hard to elucidate the contextual realities of his own teachings by indirectly reviving the knowledge of psychology, which as Ouspensky later wrote: “Psychology is sometimes called a new science. This is quite wrong. Psychology is, perhaps, the *oldest science*, and, unfortunately in its most essential features *a forgotten science*.”¹²

Ouspensky's small book, *The Psychology of Man's Possible Evolution*, published after Gurdjieff's death, tries to bring the focus back to the psychological dimensions of his teachings not in the form of a systematic doctrine or theory prescribing practices and therapeutic regimes but as living interaction within active communities through projects of communal work and ultimately as

11. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*.

12. Ouspensky, *The Psychology of Man's Possible Evolution*, 3.

instigation to purposeful activity. Ouspensky insisted that “men who want to change their state of consciousness need a school.”¹³ Ultimately he stressed—and this is what permeates the Gurdjieffian way of thinking—that in their school’s approach there is a difference between “knowledge” and “being,” and the confusion we have in psychoanalysis today is precisely because of the conflation of these two categories: “What people do not understand in most cases is the idea of being as quite separate from knowledge; and further, the idea of the relativity of being, the possibility of different levels of being and the necessity for the development of being, [are] separate from the development of knowledge.”¹⁴ This statement, although written after Gurdjieff’s passing, expresses and frames the core questions in the structure of their common psychological projects.

Gurdjieff had to work, as he states, with “the esoteric schools of being and comprehension”¹⁵ in order to practically and pragmatically implement his school-making project and its various groups. He wanted to establish in the Institute “three independent groups,” the exoteric, the mesoteric, and the esoteric, from which the members of the last one would have “a real possibility of self-perfecting ... after having been for a long time experimentally tried and verified in quite exceptionally planned circumstances.”¹⁶ However, in his book Gurdjieff illustrates *metonymically* the transition from self-consciousness to what he called *objective knowledge*, a knowledge of the self and the world around it without any psychological projections or emotional transferences, as he claimed. Throughout his talks, he would stress that the initiates want to know themselves not for the sake of knowledge but for the sake of *being*, of actualising their existence within “a world as existing in reality.”

The context is very important and indicates the analogies between Gurdjieff and the cultures around his work; but, as is obvious from his own pronouncements,

13. *Ibid.*, 53.

14. *Ibid.*, 78.

15. Gurdjieff, *Life is Real*, 75.

16. *Ibid.*, 77.

objective knowledge and self-remembering could become real only if each individual exited their comfort zone and entered “quite exceptionally planned circumstances.” This indicates the wide gap between the Viennese mainstream bourgeois perception of the individual as pathologized patient and Gurdjieff’s idea of a “domestic animal” capable of “self-remembering,”¹⁷ a psychic nomad deceived and de-centred by the competing idols of each age which impose mechanical sensations and the state of sleep that dominates human minds. Gurdjieff did not isolate or separate the individual from the community of practices and intentions around it; on the contrary, he intended to maintain a constant connection, indeed a constant friction, between them by pointing out spaces of simultaneous divergence and convergence. Individuals like, desire, or strive to see and be seen: the act of being a *visible event* in the public sphere of face-to-face encounters, and not an isolated human on the couch of someone who has superior knowledge over your own self, is at the foundations of Gurdjieff’s psychology.

Essentially, in these lectures Gurdjieff simply reiterates the primacy of the individual vis-à-vis the professional analysts who supposedly know more about the soul than the individual itself. It is a completely different approach to the relationship between them, given in forms of common exercises and not as medical prescriptions or the so-called talking cure that prevail to this day in the practice of the psychological profession. Gurdjieff calls himself a “diagnostician” of common place truths like “when it rains, the pavements are wet.”¹⁸ Self-observation is also observation of the surrounding actual world which underlines the continuum between the inner and the outer realities of human corporeality. The idea that Gurdjieff suggests of self-observation in a communal project is extremely significant in the framework of his psychology as it leads to “the manifestation of subjectivity,”¹⁹ as the expression of being which by then was displaced by the automatised, mechanistic practices of everyday life.

17. *Ibid.*, 83.

18. *Ibid.*, 76.

19. *Ibid.*, 87.

The idea of *displacement* is different and quite opposite from what we find in Freud's perception as transference of desires, wishes, or emotions onto something concrete like objects, other humans, or even our body.²⁰ Such displacement always has an element of aggression or more pervasively a constant anxiety. In Gurdjieff's system the manifestation of displacement comes out or is "crystallised" in concrete forms of activities within a community and not as emotional outpouring or even creative endeavours. In a sense, Gurdjieff's psychology is *kenotic*, as it aspires through such communal activities to empty the mind of all impositions from the outside world, essentially forcing the individual to remember itself and then finally bring out through the various tasks the actual *level of your being*, as Ouspensky would say.²¹ Examination of the self and self-remembering are not things in themselves: they are only ways of understanding the totality of one's being, and so such minds "have consciously perfected themselves to the so-called 'all-centres-awake-state,' that is the state of being able in their waking state to think and feel on their own initiative."²²

It is true that the book remains unfinished, but some challenging insights into the meaning of "a veritable, nonfantastic representation" of the world can be extracted in many different ways. Through concrete activities, the movements, exercises or menial tasks, the negative energy of aggression and anxiety is displaced onto external objects as projects of self-remembering. Gurdjieff gives detailed descriptions of how this might happen,²³ although he points out that this cannot happen as individual ascesis or as distancing from the community but on the contrary as "manifestation of *reciprocal action* between themselves in complete accordance with the fundamental law of the World, the sacred Heptaparaparshinokh."²⁴ In describing these seven stages it is interesting

20. Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 322.

21. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, 86.

22. Gurdjieff, *Life is Real*, 145.

23. *Ibid.*, 108.

24. *Ibid.*, 109.

that Gurdjieff also raises the linguistic aspects of such manifestation, as the conceptualisation of what he calls “the entire sensing of the whole of oneself.”²⁵

Discussing the linguistic semantics of the verbs “can” and “wish” Gurdjieff articulates the following cryptic statement: “I wish—I feel with my whole body that I wish. I wish—because I can wish.”²⁶ The difference can be attributed to the degree of conscious understanding of what we really want and focus our energies on; it is a difference also based on the impulse of “feeling” and that of “sensing,” according to him, and the various ways that different centres in our body remain “dispersed,” which means uncoordinated. The seven exercises given here by Gurdjieff towards “the acquisition of one’s own individuality”²⁷ pave the way towards the complete actualisation and realisation of the psychic reality in all humans (especially in the community of his disciples, as the talk is addressed primarily to them) with the awakening of being. Individuality means to be aware of being aware of your being: in a sense, it is both a rational and mystical vision of self-knowledge which makes Gurdjieff’s approach so intriguing as a bridge between esoteric experience and demonstrable realism.

In a way, this was probably the central point of his psychology, indeed, using another term by Robert Assagioli, of his *psychosynthesis* because after the four stages of consciousness have been completed, through the exercises, only then is the individual psyche complete. As Assagioli, obviously influenced by Gurdjieff, later wrote: “Let us examine whether and how it is possible to solve this central problem of human life, to heal this fundamental infirmity of man. Let us see how he may free himself from this enslavement and achieve an harmonious inner integration, true Self-realization, and right relationships with others.”²⁸ When “objective knowledge” is achieved, only then the psyche becomes objective, namely understood, and the being becomes actualised as harmonious inner integration.

25. *Ibid.*, 111.

26. *Ibid.*

27. *Ibid.*, 115.

28. Assagioli, *Psychosynthesis*, 21.

This of course is a complex and somehow contradictory question to be “rationally” analysed and conceptually articulated. Gurdjieff avoided the deep and complex theorisation of human psychology and orientated himself and his disciples towards activity and engagement, to what he called “conscious labour and intentional suffering.” As Kenneth Walker aptly articulates it: “The highest that a man can attain is to be able to *do*.”²⁹ Indeed, Gurdjieff consciously and deliberately tried to disconnect psychology, in the sense of the language we use to talk about the human soul, from any form of abstraction and dematerialization. He expressed this primarily with the Movements, especially dance and what Fritz Peters called “senseless activity” that he almost imposed upon his students at the Prieuré.³⁰ It is clear that what seemed like senseless activity was his conscious effort, as the centre of the community, to organise time around short-term projects that gave focus and shared structures to otherwise dispersed and somehow contradictory efforts for self-realisation.

His psychology and potential *psychosynthesis* was always more corporeal and volitional. The persons involved were surrendering their will, their corporeal agency and most importantly their sense of controlling time: Gurdjieff’s idea about “self-remembering” is not simply about recollecting the past or reconstructing its possible narratives. On the contrary, self-remembering is about precisely the gradual and somehow incomplete awareness of the temporal structures of *being*. Memory becomes the most important catalyst in this process, which Gurdjieff expressed in his “fantastic soliloquy” which precedes the talks, stating: “According to all past events I must still be. I wish! . . . and will be!! . . . I wish still to be . . . I still am!”³¹

The most significant aspect of Gurdjieff’s initial statement is that with the third book, he wants to “share the possibilities which I had discovered of touching reality and, if so desired, even merging with it.”³² The idea of *merging* with

29. Walker, *A Study of Gurdjieff’s Teaching*, 211.

30. Peters, *My Journey with a Mystic*, 11.

31. Gurdjieff, *Life is Real*, 9.

32. *Ibid.*, 12.

reality as two distinct entities merge or two bodies copulate is one of the most interesting aspects of his prologue to the actual talks. What distinguishes this book is the persistent attempt to bring all forms of experience, from drinking, eating, having sex or dreaming, into the sphere of pure rational understanding with an absolute and determined focus on the comprehensibility of the most trivial and insignificant actions. On this theme he builds the main body of his talks which is about his own “subconscious mentation.”³³

The fact that Gurdjieff persistently and consciously avoids all philosophical conceptualisation of the human psyche, especially as the locus of ultimate self-consciousness, can be easily detected in the Fourth Talk when Gurdjieff addresses the Orage group. In this talk, there is a consistent attempt not to define any “aspect of objective truth,”³⁴ or any other element that could be considered the “chief actualizing factor” in the process of finding truth. It is also obvious that Gurdjieff exhibits a rather ironic attitude towards the intellectual curiosity and the philosophical approach that Orage is constantly exhibiting by demanding for definitions and principles. In the metaphoric language of Gurdjieff the substantial food of existence “is nothing other than the ‘air’ we breathe,”³⁵ which also points to the different approach that both of them had towards the projects that the “group” was implementing. In this we can simply state that while Gurdjieff wanted a practical elucidation of what evokes “abnormality and disharmony,” Orage pursued philosophical formulations and abstract definitions, even in his most “Gurdjieffian Psychological Exercises.” Such difference of approach was also a difference in the goal of their pursuit and by extension in the nature of the pursuit itself.

In the last talk, Gurdjieff tries to recapitulate and almost synthesise what he calls “the ‘assisting means’ for acquiring one’s own real I.”³⁶ He insists on the

33. *Ibid.*, 57.

34. *Ibid.*, 129.

35. *Ibid.*

36. *Ibid.*, 132.

need and the practice of “exercises” because for him the psyche gains self-awareness as interaction in transpersonal circumstances. It is not the individualised form of self-understanding that we find from Freud to Michel Foucault, and in much of Western philosophy, but a gradual emergence in self-perception which takes place through and during the four exercises that he defined for the members of the group, the initiates as he calls them, reminding us of forms of Eastern Buddhism, in particular meditation with the repetition of the cosmic sound *aum*.

Gurdjieff describes how the repetition of the simple verb “I am” causes a certain form of reverberation “that is something like a vibration, a feeling, or something of the sort.”³⁷ This exercise in verbal repetition is also close to the Orthodox Jesus Prayer which, by suspending the influence of the external world, leads to “the presence of the spiritual and inaccessible divine essence [which] can be imagined in the mind and recognised in the heart entirely without images.”³⁸ The mystical idea of Orthodox Christianity about the formlessness of the soul in its pure essence and self-understanding is also lurking in Gurdjieff’s psychological project. It is interesting from a historical point of view that Ouspensky mentions *The Philokalia*, which he considers as an “excellent work on psychology ... especially for the instruction of monks.”³⁹

Gurdjieff’s exploration focuses on the various forms for self-actualisation and self-remembering and how they lead to the “solar nexus” as breathing exercises, through a characteristic reversal of grammatical structure. The repetition of the expression changes its meaning and creates an atmosphere of self-differentiation and self-othering. “I am, I can, I am can. I am, I wish, I am wish.”⁴⁰ Only when they realise the power of I am, can initiates awaken in themselves the “Divine impulses ... based for humanity the entire sense of everything existing in the

37. Ibid., 134.

38. Anonymous, *The Pilgrim’s Tale*, 209.

39. Ouspensky, *The Psychology of Man’s Possible Evolution*, 5.

40. Gurdjieff, *Life is Real*, 135.

Universe.”⁴¹ Gurdjieff insists that such emergence or assimilation happens only through collective work; the individual gains its individuality only through practical activities and interactive projects, not through the analysis of subconscious or dreams, like we find in Freud’s idea about “dream-work” in his *Interpretation of Dreams*⁴² and his other clinical writings. There is no solid essence in the human psyche: it is the product of a perpetual re-working of various potentialities as energised in common projects and activities.

Furthermore, Gurdjieff tries persistently although in an unsystematic manner to dismantle the Freudian, psychoanalytic understanding of the psyche as inherited and localised cerebral activity, but most importantly also as a conceptualizable and comprehensible mental structure. The autobiographical I, the author within the author, offers examples of what he achieved and the practical ways he performed his task to proceed from the abnormal and fragmented world to the actual reality of “remembering the whole of myself.” Gurdjieff adds: “I want this something arising in my head brain to flow directly into my solar nexus, I feel how it flows. I no longer notice any automatic associations proceeding in me.”⁴³

Gurdjieff’s monologue is extremely interesting, even from a psychological perspective, because it stands against the tradition of the West going back to Socrates’ idea that there is a distinct self to be known, an idea which defined the existential cognitive limits of classical thinking and later of the Christian belief expressed in Augustine’s *Confessions* that the self exists only in relation to God.⁴⁴ Both approaches, despite having different centres of gravity, advocate the existence of a substantial self to be knowable, which also presupposes the possibility that we can know the knowing subject, or, in Augustine’s case, that the knowing subject can relate to something that is presupposed and which can be understood as its own creator. The question therefore is not simply

41. *Ibid.*, 136.

42. Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 295–493.

43. Gurdjieff, *Life is Real*, 141.

44. Augustine, *Confessions*, 121.

psychological, but above all ontological, addressing the problem of on what foundational *urgrund* we can base the human desire for knowing itself and knowing its *originary* grounding. The positioning of Gurdjieff *vis-à-vis* this dual tradition is extremely ambivalent and somehow evasive. The talk ends in a rather inconclusive—not to say dismissive—manner: “Now, without philosophizing and without your, for you, maleficent discussion, try first of all to understand the totality of all that I have said today, and then do the exercise for yourself, but without any hope or expectation of any definite results.”⁴⁵

The absence of “definite results” can be seen in the many misunderstandings between Gurdjieff and his students, from Orage to Ouspensky. Of course, Gurdjieff does not exclude the possibility of knowing, but he surmises that this comes out in the process of harmonizing our centers—and proposes different ways to achieve this. Yet in his overall project there is an element of deliberate inconclusiveness. Not simply because there is no easy way to know or achieve the state of objective consciousness; more than that there is no reason to know and we must remain in constant friction with our self. “If a man lives without inner struggle,” he said to Ouspensky, “if everything happens to him without opposition, if he goes wherever he is drawn or wherever the wind blows, he will remain such as he is.”⁴⁶ Self-knowledge comes through self-observation, which has its own “technical side” and if practiced leads to “. . . remembering about different states of consciousness, about our sleep, and about the many ‘I’s’ in us.”⁴⁷ Through self-observation we manage to distinguish the central I in us and the deep structure in us that establishes the certainty and the reality of a distinct and demonstrable form of “I am” in self-consciousness and in objective terms. This is very close to another psychoanalytic theory which bears resemblance to Gurdjieff’s project.

45. Gurdjieff, *Life is Real*, 142.

46. Ouspensky, *The Psychology of Man’s Possible Evolution*, 32.

47. *Ibid.*, 46.

2. Jung and the Process of Individuation

Historically, part of the exploration of Gurdjieff's psychological insights is to point out how they are associated with similar tendencies and currents in Western and probably Eastern thinking. Given the fact that Gurdjieff's third book tries to put forward a new psychological understanding of the human psyche, his work both bears close resemblance but also radically differs from the dominant ideas of his day. The closest that his insights can approach the mainstream ideas and practices of psychoanalysis is with C. G. Jung's "individuation."

Certainly, any comparison between their ideas would seem rather forced and absurd. The scope and most importantly the purpose of their psychological "projects" were different and quite hostile to each other. Jung's prodigious multidimensionality of thinking in terms of interpreting cultural symbols is far above Gurdjieff's much more mundane enterprise of establishing "a veritable, nonfantastic representation not of that illusory world . . . but of the world existing in reality." Jung's multilayered enterprise on the unconscious, the structure of the psyche, dreams, symbolic life, the question of psychic opposites, creativity, and ultimately the individuation process is completely different from anything that Gurdjieff ever attempted. If we also add Jung's study of alchemy, Eastern practices, and especially the question of evil, we can safely claim that Gurdjieff structured his exploration of the psyche against everything that Jung ever articulated.

However, the question of individuation stands close to both of them as an analogous, or probably homologous, approach to the question of the personal and collective psychology. Jung's principle of individuation—according to which the individual not only has to appropriate the collective myths of its society but also must see them "objectively"—is quite close to Gurdjieff's ideas of creating the conditions for the emergence of the "nonfantastic representation" he professed in his work. Individuation, of course, is a very ambiguous term. Jung wrote that the individuation process consists "in integrating the unconscious, in bringing

together ‘conscious’ and ‘unconscious.’”⁴⁸ For him, “it is a process...of development arising out of the conflict between the two fundamental psychic facts,”⁴⁹ the conscious and the unconscious of each individual. Through this constant friction the “indestructible whole which we call the individual is forged,” he adds. Elsewhere he clarified: “In general, it [individuation] is the process by which individual beings are formed and differentiated; in particular, it is the development of the psychological individual as a being distinct from the general, collective psychology.”⁵⁰

Later in his intellectual development and after he became heavily involved in deciphering the gnostic and alchemical symbolism, Jung tried to shake off the idea that the process leads to isolation and indeed particularisation of psychic and mental realities: “Individuation,” he writes, “does not shut one out from the world but gathers the world to oneself.”⁵¹ In *Man and His Symbols* he also stresses emphatically: “The individual is the only reality.”⁵² In his earlier thinking, for example “The Relations between the Ego and the Unconscious” (originally published 1921), he had almost advocated a rather solipsistic model about the structure of the individual: “Individuation means becoming an ‘individual’, and, in so far as ‘individuality’ embraces our innermost, last, and incomparable uniqueness, it also implies becoming one’s own self. We could therefore translate individuation as ‘coming to selfhood’ or ‘self-realization.’”⁵³ In one of his discussions of Eastern traditions he even suggested that: “The instinct of individuation is found everywhere in life, for there is no life on earth that is not individual. Each form of life is manifested in a differentiated being naturally, otherwise life could not exist. An innate urge of life is to

48. Jung, *Symbols of Transformation*, 459.

49. Jung, *Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, 275.

50. Jung, *Psychological Types*, 757.

51. Jung, *On the Nature of the Psyche*, 432.

52. Jung, *Man and His Symbols*, 58.

53. Jung, *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology*, 266.

produce an individual as complete as possible.”⁵⁴ The idea there is an instinct for individuation, the way that there is an instinct for survival and reproduction, shows how fundamental this belief became for Jung as he was distancing himself from the Freudian idea of libido or even Freud’s meta-psychological insights.

There is a marked and considerable ambiguity in the way Jung employs a concept that he himself strongly advocated throughout his whole life. Jung seems to be rather ambivalent about how this process can be achieved and what its results will be for the individual person itself. Furthermore, it seems that his conceptual vocabulary is not psychoanalytic but philosophical, drawn from German romantic philosophy and its educational projects of self-invention. This can be also seen in the references to the process in his presumed “autobiography” and other writings, such as his *Answer to Job*. In the latter, in which Jung tries to give an answer to the question of evil, we find one of his most interesting and confusing statements. Jung says:

the metaphysical process is known to the psychology of the unconscious as the individuation process. In so far as this process, as a rule, runs its course unconsciously as it has from time immemorial, it means no more than the acorn becomes an oak, the calf a cow, and the child an adult. But if the individuation process is made conscious, consciousness must confront the unconscious and a balance between the opposites must be found. As this is not possible through logic, one is dependent on *symbols* which make the irrational union of opposites possible. They are produced spontaneously by the unconscious and are amplified by the conscious mind.⁵⁵

His suggestion that the process of individuation is a “metaphysical process” is highly problematic, together with the idea that only symbols can become the space in which reconciliation of the conscious and the unconscious can happen so that the individuation process can be achieved because of and within these symbols. Following Jung, when Edward Edinger addresses the idea of the “individuated ego” he states that “the individuation urge promotes a state in

54. Jung, *The Psychology of Kundalini Yoga*, 4.

55. Jung, *Answer to Job*, 755.

which the ego is related to the Self without being identified with it.”⁵⁶ Edinger asserts that the gap between ego and Self is bridged by symbols, dreams and images, which “re-establish meaningful contact with the primitive layer of the psyche.”⁵⁷ Individuation, as urge and realisation, means returning to an archetypal condition of being immersed into symbols and patterns of collective imagination.

This became the goal of Jung’s life as, after the publication of *The Red Book: Liber Novus* in 2009, it seems that a new and extremely complicated picture about his personality and work started to emerge. This strange book, the ultimate example of the individuation as a creative process, expressed a new understanding of what he called “active imagination” and articulated new practices about the realisation of the self through the individualisation of symbols. In the book the self is configured around images and imaginary patterns framing a “wounded” existence and its painful attempts to achieve its cathartic fulfillment through the reconciliation of opposites. Despite its pictorial and imaginary exuberance, *The Red Book* is the product of a deeply traumatized being unable to define itself through its surrounding realities and symbolic order; the trauma of being forced to re-imagine and re-articulate who one is becomes the central theme of this book as its writer becomes the recipient of a profound revelation; the revelation is about what makes the self become aware of its own self-awareness. As he confided in his autobiography:

It was only after the illness that I understood how important it is to affirm one’s destiny. In this way we forge an ego that does not break down when incomprehensible things happen; an ego that endures, that endures the truth, and that is capable of coping with the world and with fate. Then, to experience defeat is also to experience victory.⁵⁸

In this process Jung “individuated” practically the language of romanticism, and to a certain degree of the ancient gnostic gospels, by re-signifying them through his own personal inner conflicts and experiences. *The Red Book* itself as

56. Edinger, *Ego and Archetype*, 96.

57. *Ibid.*, 100.

58. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, 297.

an artifact, a surreal medieval illustrated manuscript, and then as narrative, is the result of the individuation process. Only in this sense can we find some points of convergence with Gurdjieff's anti-psychoanalytic approach to psychology. Yet, following his famous commentary on the Chinese alchemical treatise the *Secret of the Golden Flower*, which is the definitive turning point in his thinking, Jung posited new foundations for a hermeneutics of the self, constructed around para-linguistic or meta-linguistic strategies. *The Red Book* is probably the most complex articulation of the self's *structural unknowability*. The book addresses the fundamental question of Jung's psychology: how a traumatized and fragmented self regains its completeness. The answer is not in the book, but is the book itself. The actual writing and illustrating of it, like the work of Tibetan monks and their mandalas, becomes the process itself of experiencing the work as the *topos* of reconciliation and convergence of opposites.

Sonu Shamdasani writes that: "*Liber Novus* depicts Jung's reappraisal of his previous values, and his attempt to develop the neglected aspects of his personality. Thus, it formed the basis of his understanding how the midlife transition could be successfully navigated."⁵⁹ Through this process individuation becomes ultimately self-realisation and self-manifestation, which is perhaps problematic, and in the context of our discussion quite opposite to Gurdjieff's ultimate quote, as he claims, from "a very old Persian song" that "soul is for the lazy fantasy, / luxury for the indulger in suffering; / it is the determiner of personality. The way and the link to the Maker and Creator. / Leader of the will, / its presence as 'I am' / It is a part of the All-Being, / It was so and always will be."⁶⁰

It is rather obvious that Gurdjieff's "I am" is completely different from Jung's individuation process. Jung suggests that the process of individuation takes place through the mediation of symbols and images. Gurdjieff's "I am" happens through bodily exercises. Jung deals with individuation as personal creativity. Gurdjieff

59. Shamdasani, "*Liber Novus*: The 'Red Book' of C.G. Jung," 81.

60. Gurdjieff, *Life is Real*, 160.

deals with “I am” as interpersonal activity. For Jung, the writing itself of the process becomes essential for its own realisation whereas for Gurdjieff it is only a fragmented commentary of mnemonic reconstruction. Ultimately, individuation is a self-healing process for Jung whereas it is mostly a self-revelatory activity for Gurdjieff. In this sense, individuation for Jung is icon-making, but for Gurdjieff is icon-breaking. The difference between an iconophile and an iconoclast is probably the best foundation for understanding their grounding ontologies about the self.

3. Beyond Symbols and Symbolism

Ultimately, Jung’s question if we can individuate the real and yet see it without our own projections remains unanswered. Gurdjieff on the contrary transposed the answer onto projects of de-automatising, or de-mechanising, activities. In both of them, the old Aristotelian and Kantian question about a core self as refracted historically through the concepts of psychoanalysis is addressed in different ways. Gurdjieff’s approach is much more fluid and definitely less systematic; it is indeed explicitly undefined, to the degree that one thinks his idea of the psyche is only a heuristic tool indicating the specificity of the corporeal presence of each individual and not an essential idea or a transcendental emanation from God. For Jung and especially for the Jungians, the individuation process became one of the most important themes of depth psychology, yet it remained always an exercise in symbolism and symbology, and not a transcendence of the symbol-making practices from within specific cultural eras.

In a famous critique, Marshall McLuhan observes that, “archetypes are not universal or primordial figures or ideas which mystically appear from time to time, but are accumulated collections of particular, historically specific clichés,”⁶¹ and the clichés become an archetype through a process that he calls *retrieval*. Through retrieval takes place “the nostalgic ‘archetypalizing’ ... to see recent developments as instances of a universal archetype, rather than as the retrieval

61. McLuhan and Watson, *From Cliché to Archetype*, 19.

of earlier environments, i.e. clichés.”⁶² For Gurdjieff retrieval would have been the mechanical repetition of practices and everyday addictions. What Jung would have considered as the revelation of archetypal essence, Gurdjieff would have thought as the encrypted messages of “legonomism,” which the modern mind must decode and yet use as tools for their own transformation, although as he quipped “try first to understand the totality of all that I said today, and then do the exercise for yourself, but without any hope or expectation for any definite results.”⁶³

Overall, Gurdjieff’s answer is more *praxial* than Jung’s; yet, it raises certain profound questions about the ability of human consciousness to see beyond its own limitations. Jung suggested that we individuate reality through the non-verbal connection with its archetypal, or more accurately, *originary* symbols. Gurdjieff obviously rejected such an approach and privileged the immediate perception of individual existence in an active community of co-workers. He stands in opposition to other sages, like Rudolf Steiner for example and the work that his disciples performed in the first Goetheanum, when the construction of the building itself was transformed into a “gesture language” so that ultimately “the building becomes man.”⁶⁴ Gurdjieff struggled to maintain a sense of practical immediacy and conscious engagement with the community of participants irrespective of the results of their work. For him, creativity was an endless process of reinvention and not of materialisation, and in an interesting way, creativity was the most significant process of self-revelation and indeed self-materialisation.

Fritz Peters writes in his memorable recollections about his work: “Gurdjieff, while remaking the lawns, would march up and down among all the workers, criticising them individually, goading them on, and helping to contribute a feeling of furious, senseless activity to the whole proceedings.”⁶⁵ In the introduction of the American edition of Peters’ book, Henry Miller made the following

62. *Ibid.*, 180.

63. Gurdjieff, *Life is Real*, 142.

64. Turgeniev, *Reminiscences of Rudolf Steiner*, 61.

65. Peters, *My Journey with a Mystic*, 56.

statement: “In a sense, he was like a cross between the Gnostics of old and the latter day Dadaists”⁶⁶—and probably this is an apt description of Gurdjieff’s overall approach to psychology and psychoanalysis. Indeed, he approached psychoanalysis as a grand metaphysical cosmic drama while maintaining a jocular and whimsical attitude towards its practice. Maurice Nicoll was one of the first psychoanalysts who migrated from Jung’s “archetypalism” to Gurdjieff’s “psycho-synthesis,” as his monumental psychological commentaries show. Working on something is much more crucial than thinking about something:

The work, he wrote, is not a place, the work is not a thing that you can touch or handle, the Work is not in France or England or America, or in any place in the world. The work is in your hearts and in your own understanding, and wherever a man has to go, the work can always go with him, if he maintains the right attitude towards it.⁶⁷

Gurdjieff’s psycho-synthesis had more long-term intellectual effects and probably demands much more discussion and attention. In his project he tried to empty the mind of its preconceived ideas about itself, indeed, to liberate it from its own tendency to be deceived. But as Orage observes: “Something in us is never self-deceived; and such an effort as we have just described is a means of arriving at our own conscious self-realisation of the truth that is in us.”⁶⁸

Gurdjieff’s indirect effort was intense and not always understood. Probably Osho approached closer to his understanding of the human psyche when he wrote:

The innermost being is just like a mirror. Whatsoever comes before it, it mirrors, it simply becomes a witness. Disease comes or health, hunger or satiety, summer or winter, childhood or old age, birth or death—whatsoever happens, happens before the mirror. It never happens TO the mirror. This is non-identification, this is cutting the root, the very root—to become a mirror.⁶⁹

Gurdjieff’s project had already started with his other two books, when in *Meetings* he wrote:

66. Miller, Preface to Peters, *My Journey with a Mystic*, 3.

67. Nicoll, *Psychological Commentaries on the Teaching of Gurdjieff and Ouspensky*, 15.

68. Orage, *Psychological Exercises and Essays*, 103.

69. Osho, *Meetings With Remarkable People*, 76–77.

I have written down for the second series, in the hope that these ideas may serve as preparatory constructive material for setting up in the consciousness of creatures similar to myself a new world—a world in my opinion real, or at least one that can be perceived as real by all degrees of human thinking without the slightest impulse of doubt, instead of the illusory world which contemporary people picture to themselves.⁷⁰

He indicates precisely the gradual “psycho-associative” analysis in order for the mind to become the all-seeing and yet all-transcending mirror that Osho points out.⁷¹

4. Epilogue

Gurdjieff's difference from the psychoanalytic movement is therefore profound, diverse and challenging. In fact, it is rather plausible that he considers psychoanalysis as part of the self-deception mechanisms that the fragmentation of modernity erects in order to distract the mind's attention from its own centre. Gurdjieff's psychology is encapsulated in the following statement: “Man is a being who can do, and ‘to do’ means to act consciously and by one's own nature,”⁷² a statement that challenges the established practices of psychoanalysis through its different medicalised approaches to the human psyche. Such a subversive humanistic and humanising project set up by Gurdjieff still constitutes a major challenge to the dominant orthodoxies of our time. It also raises questions however about the role of the “master” in the process of attaining self-awareness. It seems that Gurdjieff considered himself as the instigator and the catalyst for such a process, something which his own disciple Ouspensky seemed to dispute and rather challenge. The fact that the most accomplished and complete articulation of his psychology comes to us through Ouspensky makes everything more complex and therefore raises the questions of psychodynamics in their relationship, which would be interesting to explore further.

70. Gurdjieff, *Meetings with Remarkable Men*, 3–4.

71. *Ibid.*, 6.

72. Gurdjieff, *Beelzebub's Tales*, 1101.

Bibliography

- Adler, Alfred. *Understanding Human Nature*. Translated by Walter Beran Wolfe. New York: Garden City Publishing, 1927.
- Anonymous. *The Pilgrim's Tale*. Edited by Aleksei Pentkovsky. New York: Paulist Press, 1999.
- Assagioli, Roberto. *Psychosynthesis: A Collection of Basic Writings*. New York: Hobbs Dorman, 1965.
- Augustine. *Confessions*. Translated by Henry Chadwick. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- Edinger, Edward F. *Ego and Archetype, Individuation and the Religious Function of the Psyche*. New York: Putnam, 1972.
- Frankl, Viktor E. *Man's Search for Meaning*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1959.
- Freud, Sigmund. *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Translated and edited by James Strachey. New York: Basic Books, 1955.
- Gasset, José Ortega y. *The Revolt of the Masses*. New York: W. W. Norton Publications, 1932.
- Gurdjieff, G. I. *Meetings with Remarkable Men*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963.
- . *Life is Real Only then, When 'I Am.'* *All and Everything Third Series*. New York: E.P. Dutton/Triangle Editions, 1975.
- . *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*. London and New York: Viking Arkana, 1992.
- Jung, C. G. *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*. Recorded and edited by Aniela Jaffe, translated by Richard and Clara Winston. New York: Pantheon Books, 1962.
- . *Man and his Symbols*. New York: Doubleday, 1964.
- . *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology*. Vol. 7 of *Collected Works of C. G. Jung*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966.
- . *Symbols of Transformation*. Vol. 5 of *Collected Works of C. G. Jung*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967.
- . *Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*. Vol. 9, part 1 of *Collected Works of C. G. Jung*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968.
- . *On the Nature of the Psyche*. Vol. 8 of *Collected Works of C. G. Jung*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969.

- . *Psychological Types*. Vol. 6 of *Collected Works of C. G. Jung*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976.
- . *The Psychology of Kundalini Yoga. Notes of the Seminar Given in 1932*. Edited by Sonu Shamdasani. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996.
- . *The Red Book: Liber Novus*. Edited by Sonu Shamdasani. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009.
- McLuhan, M. and Wilfred Watson. *From Cliché to Archetype*. New York: Viking, 1970.
- Nicoll, Maurice. *Psychological Commentaries on the Teaching of Gurdjieff and Ouspensky*. Vol. 1. London: Watkins Publications, 1996.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Will to Power, Selections from the Notebooks of the 1880s*. Translated by R. Kevin Hill and Michael A. Scarpitti. London: Penguin Books, 2017.
- Orage, A. R. *Psychological Exercises and Essays*. London: The Janus Press, 1965.
- Osho, *Meetings With Remarkable People*. London: Watkins Publishing, 2008.
- Ouspensky, P. D. *In Search of the Miraculous*. London: Routledge Kegan Paul, 1951.
- . *The Psychology of Man's Possible Evolution*. New York: Vintage Books, 1973.
- Peters, Fritz. *My Journey with A Mystic*. Preface by Henry Miller. Laguna Niguel, CA: Tale Weaver Publishing, 1980.
- Turgenev, Assya. *Reminiscences of Rudolf Steiner and Work on the First Goetheanum*. London: Temple Lodge Publishing, 2003.
- Walker, Kenneth. *A Study of Gurdjieff's Teaching*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1978.