

Understanding What is Esoteric

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Abstract

Intrinsic to the teachings of G. I. Gurdjieff is the notion of the esoteric—his Fourth Way forms an essential part of the current of Western esotericism, and his teachings affirm the fundamental aspects of *philosophia perennis*, the concept of a universal, timeless, but hidden wisdom only accessible to an elite few. This study examines how the attendant notions of knowledge, learning, reading, and transmission operate in Gurdjieff’s work, and embeds these motifs in a broader context of the esoteric literature of both historical religions and the modern era. It demonstrates that Gurdjieff is both the revealer of knowledge and the cause of its obfuscation, requiring seekers to undergo various methods of exertion and personal transformation in order to become recipients of gnosis. Thus, the search for esoteric knowledge, as well as the knowledge itself, is presented as a path of danger and strife but also great reward.

Keywords: G.I. Gurdjieff; esoteric literature; gnosis; hidden wisdom; transformative practices; ontological practices.

Introduction

This article will explore the transmission of esoteric knowledge within the system developed by George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff (c.1866–1949), often called the “Work” or “Fourth Way.” As a complex web of mystical beliefs and practices, the present discussion can only make reference to a fragment of the relevant ideas produced by Gurdjieff and his disciples, but it aims to bring to light some of the key modes of understanding according to Gurdjieffian thought. With a focus on esoteric literature, we will see how Gurdjieff’s writings and methods position him as part of a rich history of the “occult” or “hidden wisdom” tradition wherein only an elite calibre of individuals can gain true understanding. Guy Stroumsa outlines two sides to esoteric doctrines:

The first side is of course the secret itself, the hidden knowledge about the divinity, which is revealed only to a few . . . The other side relates to the partakers of the secrets. Here the emphasis is not on the secrets themselves, but rather on those who are privileged to know them, on the community of the elect.¹

To this end, there are many ways in which texts can be considered esoteric materials, and the processes of writing, reading, and interpreting, a spiritual experience wherein the creator or receiver becomes part of this “community of the elect.” According to George Steiner in *Real Presences*, there can be an esoteric reading of all literature in the sense of understanding them as revelation.² The Italian novelist Roberto Calasso claims, in *Literature and the Gods*, that literature has moved from stories about the gods and higher things to incorporating them in the very body of writing itself.³ It is often argued that the difficulty of esoteric texts is put there deliberately to aid the reader by making him work on decoding them. It is even hinted that it is the working through the obscurities that actually yields the hidden message. Indeed, as a spiritual master Gurdjieff was notoriously arcane, often intentionally so, known to say, “I bury the bone so that the dog, if he smells it, must scratch for it . . . and deep, so that with much scratching, understanding comes.”⁴

The techniques of parsing esoteric knowledge are many. We will discuss the notion of “influences” that may help or hinder a seeker and the practice of self-consciousness that Gurdjieff promotes as a way to achieve clarity and preparedness for receiving esoteric wisdom. This is presented as a challenging route only suited to some; the seeker needs to know a great deal, be able to remember and hold in mind a great deal, and find connections between

1. Stroumsa, *Hidden Wisdom*, xv.

2. Steiner, *Real Presences*.

3. Calasso, *Literature and the Gods*.

4. Interestingly, Sophia Wellbeloved suggests that Gurdjieff in fact said he “buried the dog” rather than the “bone” in his texts: “his pupils, believing that Gurdjieff’s lack of fluency in the English language had caused him to make a mistake, tried to convince him he meant that he had ‘buried a bone,’ he said ‘No,’ he had buried the whole dog.” See: Wellbeloved, “A Note on the Dog Gurdjieff Buried.”

apparently dissimilar things. To enter the realm of the esoteric, we have to work hard, we have to suffer. In the extreme formulation, we have to die. We cannot simply “add on” to what we know and perceive and believe; our foundation, our being has to change, and this will cost us. But, as we will find toward the end of this article, those capable of true esoteric “reading” may learn truths that span time and space, defying even these foundational concepts.

The Esoteric

The word “esoteric” is from the Greek, meaning “of the inner circle,” signalling some kind of information that only an elite few can access.⁵ The esoteric can look sublime or ridiculous, and has a diversity of interpretations. It has taken on, broadly speaking, three kinds of meaning. First, as the knowledge of a privileged minority. Second, as knowledge, or *gnosis*, inaccessible to the majority because it demands special, rare abilities as, for example, clairvoyance or spirit channelling.⁶ Third, the esoteric is knowledge of a spiritual reality hidden from “fallen” or “sleeping” humans.⁷ There are many more possible associations, and we should remember that any view of the esoteric and its various meanings is always seen from a particular point of view: ideological, religious, or political. It is generally accepted that the esoteric will look differently from the “inside” or the “outside.” The esoteric- and the exoteric-minded may regard each other as dysfunctional or irrational, but, as Antoine Faivre reminds us, the two approaches are a necessary juxtaposition: “there exists an esotericism of exotericism and an exotericism of esotericism, as if each of them were understood only as a function of the other or represented the other side of the same medal.”⁸

5. We note that the word in this sense first appeared in the second century CE in a satire by Greek writer Lucian of Samosata, “Philosophers for Sale.”

6. See Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism* on the fundamentals of esotericism as practice, 10–15, and on gnosis, 20.

7. The theme of the sleep of ignorance and awakening to truth can also be found in the gnostic texts of the ancient world. See Broek, *Gnostic Religion in Antiquity*, 49.

8. Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, 33.

The idea of an inner circle may have great antiquity: it reaches back through speculations of the existence of “superior beings” involved in the first appearance and evolution of the human species. Nearly all early cultures have stories that speak of gifts of higher knowledge from higher agencies. In the relatively modern times in which monotheistic religions arose, such ideas have been transposed into images of angels or, more recently, extra-terrestrials.⁹ We distinguish an inner circle from the operations of lone mystics or seers. An essential feature of an inner circle is that its members communicate with and know each other and share an understanding. It is important to note that spiritual “inner circles” are said to extend over long periods of time, even for thousands of years stretching back to prehistory, or at least these elite groups inherit the same gnosis, often called *philosophia perennis*, a secret wisdom “known by the wise of all nations since the dawn of civilization, but kept hidden.”¹⁰

The form of language used is pertinent to understanding the esoteric. This can be seen in the case of Plato. It appears to have been one of his tasks to develop a form of writing distinct from the rhapsody of previous times, exemplified in the works of Homer, where recitation, rhythm, imagery and so on manifested only one world of meaning.¹¹ But the idea that a text alone could enlighten someone has typically been disregarded (at least, outside Abrahamic contexts). As Gurdjieff himself asserts, to truly ascertain knowledge one must be subject to “ordeals of understanding,” that is, struggling with things that do not seem to make sense because one does not understand by being told, only through a kind of work. In ancient traditions, as far as we know, an essential practice was to recite the scriptures or enact them exactly in pilgrimage and ceremony, as in Sumerian, Homeric, or Vedic times.¹² A commonly received idea is that,

9. Hanegraaff, “Intermediary Beings IV,” 628–31.

10. Stroumsa, *Hidden Wisdom*, 52.

11. *Ibid.*, 25.

12. For example, of the six classical Hindu schools the *Mimamsa* was based on the exact repetition of texts and ceremonies.

concomitant with the rise of literacy, what were once the Mysteries—forms of collective action involving ritual and initiation, shared through word and gesture—assumed a more outward form, no longer so secret, that became taken up in religions. Religion can be seen as exoteric mysteries. Esoteric groups practiced an inner process of initiation in contrast with the outer process of public rituals, entailing often their persecution thereby.

Most descriptions of the esoteric accord with belief in the existence of the perennial philosophy, an unchanging, fully-realised gnostic explanation of the universe and humanity that has been understood by elite few in the civilisations of our past and present.¹³ Whatever we think of the last two thousand years or so, it is arguable that the emergence of new ideas, discoveries, and ways of thinking have necessitated the destruction, or at least neglect, of early certainties. In the history of science, it is fairly obvious that uncertainty and hazard are integral to the discoveries that have been made, established, and put to use.¹⁴ Pioneers are typically neglected or scorned by the entrenched establishment. Disagreements flare up with considerable rancour, and I have even gone so far as to suggest that polemics are at the heart of science.¹⁵ Scientists can denounce each other as fools or madmen (as happened to nineteenth-century German mathematician Georg Cantor) or even obscene (as was the case with physicist Erwin Schrödinger). Science ventures into new territory, whereas traditional esotericism claims it already has in its grasp the very nature of things. As a spiritual maverick Gurdjieff comes closest to combining the two in his dramatic portrayal of scientists on Saturn, for example, or of angels involved in improving the technology of spaceships, and ancient brotherhoods described as research bodies.¹⁶

13. For more on the *philosophia perennis* see Stroumsa, *Hidden Wisdom*, see also Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*.

14. See Blake, “Hazard in Scientific Advance.”

15. See Blake, “A Critical Essay on the History of Science.”

16. See Gurdjieff, *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*, 292–300 for a description of one of these societies, the Akhaldan. This society is cited as an example of “objective science” and has no factual evidence to support its historical existence.

Mentioning of science, philosophy, and the development of composition in writing suggest that the esoteric, in a broad sense, is a matter of intelligence. However, intelligence is more than knowledge because it can discover and use new knowledge, and is far more than a repetition of information. For example, Idries Shah, concerning the use of Middle Eastern teaching stories, explains that this literature was not designed to convey a moral or provide rational explanation, but to enable the reader to reflect on his own reactions to the story as material for understanding. One tale tells of a pointing statue indicating where ancient treasure of the Egyptians was buried. A Sufi discovered that this meant he had to dig where the shadow of the pointing finger fell at a certain time. This is interpreted as an indication that the student should “dig where the ground is moist,” meaning he should investigate deeper into what is evoked by such stories in himself.¹⁷

Thus we might say that the role of the esoteric is not just preservation of past insight, but has the possibility of pointing people towards where they can dig and discover it for themselves. In yet a deeper sense, the esoteric is a matter of higher intelligence; that is to say, an active source of new insight. William James in his masterly *Varieties of Religious Experience* abstracts the general foundation of religions in two propositions: 1) we are defective in some way, and 2) we can overcome these defects, but only with help from a higher source.¹⁸ The quest is on, so to speak, to find an actual way of communicating with higher intelligence.

Esoteric Writing, Esoteric Reading, Esoteric Understanding

Throughout history we find both writings blatantly presented as esoteric, and those which may be “ordinary” but contain esoteric content for those who can see beyond the surface. Besides the unsurpassed masterpieces we know as the *Dialogues*, Plato is said to have had various “hidden teachings” which never became available to the general public and, it seems, have vanished from

17. Shah, *Tales of The Dervishes*, 54.

18. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.

history.¹⁹ Why were these writings—if they ever existed—to be kept hidden? One explanation is that they challenged the establishment and authorities, as Socrates found to his cost. Another is that they demanded a level of intellect that was rare. Plato says explicitly that we have to create myths for the general public because they cannot understand the truth directly.²⁰ This was echoed in the Gospels of the New Testament: Jesus explains that he has to teach in parables to the laity and can only be direct to his disciples.²¹ The synoptic Gospels, we should remember, were written in a context influenced by gnosticism with its multitude of alternative visions and explanations of the human predicament and salvation. So, while the Bible is supposed by many Christians to be accessible to everyone, it has also been regarded as an esoteric text whose true meaning is only available through an especially intelligent or inspired reading.²²

But we want to begin with a generic feature of written text which is implicit in a root meaning of the word intelligence as “reading between the lines.” This has been literally true. A blatant example is that of coded messages in Elizabethan times, in which secret information was written in invisible ink between the lines. Another kind of example is the writing of indications of pronunciation (particularly the vowels which are not usually written in Arabic and Semitic texts). In Arabic, for example, this is done mostly for religious texts and children’s books using the system called *tashkeil*, in which diacritical marks are made above and below the letters. Pronunciation is an aspect of meaning. The use of *tashkeil* and other systems reflect the tension between the said or evident and the unsaid or tacit. In theatre, we find the structure of text and subtext. The subtext is all-important but is not actually spoken: the audience is led to understand that it underlies and supplements what is said without being told what it is.

19. Stroumsa, *Hidden Wisdom*, 18, 28, 37.

20. Plato, *The Republic*, 2.377.

21. For example, in Matthew 13: 10–11.

22. For example, the Early Church father Origen believed the Bible should be read allegorically. On this and the esoteric content of various ancient texts see Stroumsa, *Hidden Wisdom*.

In another example, we find in Jewish mysticism a Kabbalistic tradition of seeking deeper meanings not only in the letters of words—which are the basis for common “esoteric” analyses—but in the spaces that are formed between the letters. It is said that from these spaces the angels appear.²³ This is an example of second-order esotericism: the letters can be treated esoterically, but understanding the gaps between them indicates a higher order of esotericism. As is known from efforts to understand even ordinary documents, what is not said can mean more than what is said. Perhaps the idea that there are explicit texts spelling out esoteric knowledge should be regarded as an oxymoron.

In regard to reading, it is important to consider two alternative methods to the standard procedure of going from beginning to end. Firstly, there is the meaning of the text read in inverse order, backwards. Secondly, there is the reading of the text as a whole, not in sequence. The two are connected. Behind this is the generic understanding of structure. An esoteric reading begins with becoming aware of the significance of the structure of the text as more than just one thing after another. In the field of understanding, the structure of a message is also content. One might call it second order information: the way the elements are put together is at least as significant as the elements themselves. In a fully-fledged message there are, so to say, two channels, roughly corresponding to form and content. The capacity to see or read form can be seen as of a higher order than reading sequential content. Most of us will have had the experience of reading something where, though we understand every word, we know we are not getting what it means. Strangely, this is little commented on. It is generally presumed that, if one is capable of reading a text, that means one is “getting” it. This is not true. The functionality of reading needs a holistic awareness if we are to understand what we read.

A useful pair of terms that can be found in Sufic lore are *hal*, which means “state,” and *ilm* which means “knowledge.”²⁴ It is recognised in some schools

23. Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, 52.

24. Ernst, *Words of Ecstasy in Sufism*, 18–20, 25; see also Renard, *Knowledge of God in Classical Sufism*.

that both are necessary for understanding. It is even hinted that the two must correspond to each other in order to produce some required result. This idea stands in contrast with usual behaviour in which we see people studying and acquiring knowledge on the one hand, and people employing practices to bring them into different states on the other, but very little of their meaningful fusion. This may parallel the uncertainty of connection and mutual meaning between the left and right sides of the brain. Though we are using vague terminology it is important to suggest that there is a capacity beyond the “holistic.” Here we adopt the convention that the left brain is linear and analytic, while the right brain is holistic and synthetic. What is crucial, we believe, is represented in the brain by the *corpus callosum*, the realm of interchange between the two sides. In the end, the dichotomy of esoteric and exoteric continues to operate and divide. Many people would accept the significant role that feelings play in understanding subtle matters; but many would also reject having to undergo any special what we might call “ontological practices,” practices that enhance *being* rather than mind. For example, very few people—these days—would take it upon themselves to become aware of their breathing or fast while they are reading an important text. One of the values of the Gurdjieffian approach usually labelled as “The Fourth Way” is that it turns matters back to the individual: it is up to each one of us to discover a way of unfolding what is esoteric or hidden in us.

Gaining Knowledge

Many “ordinary” people, even without any particular affiliation to a proclaimed “esoteric school” or spiritual practice, feel that there is more than ordinary life, and that influences come into the world which cannot be explained by ordinary means. Up until recent times this was taken for granted by the majority. To a large extent, such beliefs were fostered, and taken care of, by what we call “religion” or may think of as superstition. There is a diversity of descriptions for this class

of “sensitive” persons or “inner circle” of initiates of special knowledge.²⁵ To cite just a few: in Christianity, the communion of saints; in Theosophy, the Masters in the Himalayas; and in the Fourth Way of Gurdjieff, the Sarmoung Brotherhood. Gurdjieff’s Work is aimed at awakening the sleepers amongst the human populace to the possibility of equipping oneself with the skills required to parse esoteric knowledge.

In discussing how human understanding is influenced by differing factors, Gurdjieff uses a relatively abstract scheme of “A,” “B,” and “C” “influences.”²⁶ Gurdjieff speaks of “A influences” as those which are this-worldly and can be taught, but have no intelligent direction. B influences can bridge this world and the beyond—for example, books or works of art that carry within them the seeds of esoteric truths. C influences come from an otherworldly community that is not confined by the laws of the ordinary and has a mission concerning the evolution of humanity (some commentators take this to mean extra-terrestrial intelligence).²⁷ The knowledge shared by these sources, P. D. Ouspensky tells us, “can be transferred only by word of mouth, by direct instruction, explanation and demonstration.”²⁸ Gurdjieff seems to assume that these higher influences are beneficial and want to help. He also emphasises that the help given is towards what is truly needed, and thus differs from the pseudo-solutions that people come up with that tend to cancel each other out or produce more harm than benefit.

To adopt a rather sweeping generalisation, most esoteric sources portray human existence as having to play the role of the middle in the cosmic scheme. In the Gurdjieffian Triad of A, B, and C influences, we can attend to the middle

25. Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, 12, 20–21.

26. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, 20.

27. Denis Saurat in *Gods of the People* (1947) expressed the thought that Gurdjieff’s book *Beelzebub’s Tales to His Grandson* contained a new mythology that seemed extra-terrestrial in origin. Writers such as Stuart Holroyd in such books as *The Council of Nine: Briefing from Deep Space* (2006) spoke of extra-terrestrial influences on humanity. Perhaps the most striking example of “cosmic thinking” is in Doris Lessing’s “Canopus in Argos” series of novels.

28. Ouspensky, *The Psychology of Man’s Possible Evolution*, 69.

term, B, as most representative of the human essence. Gurdjieff puts it in his inimitable and insightful way: “Blessed is he that hath a soul, blessed be also that hath none, but grief and sorrow are to him that hath in himself its conception.”²⁹ To which we can add that the ambiguity of B influences cannot be considered merely as a deficit but might well be regarded as the real crux of the situation.

A tripartite cosmic motif such as Heaven above, Humanity in the middle, and Earth below plays out in many myths,³⁰ but also in some logical schemes. Again, to cite Gurdjieff, a cosmos (or meaningful whole) is to be understood by the threefold relation of its meaning in regard to: 1) what is above; 2) what is below; and 3) what is itself. In terms of the relation with itself, we have reflexivity and the emergence of self-knowledge, concepts crucial to the approach of the Fourth Way. In this middle element, we must strive to be conscious while this very consciousness can create a barrier to what is higher. Confronting, going into, abandoning oneself to the realisation of the self, understanding the self, and so on can be seen in various guises: in the first, it is to hold together higher and lower; in the second it is to begin again, to create something entirely new (as it says in Revelation: “a new heaven and a new earth”).³¹

A proposal here is that any genuine act of immediate investigation—that is, without splitting oneself in any way or following any explicit method—carries within it both the exoteric and esoteric, and may be called upon to articulate what either of these two mean. We said, “without splitting oneself” in the spirit of Franz Brentano, who was so influential on pioneers in many fields in the early twentieth century. He argued that in thinking, there was not only the thinking as an experience, but also awareness of the thinking.³² This had

29. Gurdjieff, *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*, 246.

30. An interesting comparison of such cosmic arrangements can be found in Masterton, “A Critical Comparison of Cosmic Hierarchies in the Development of Christian and Islamic Mystical Theology,” 401–422.

31. Revelation 21:1 (NIV).

32. Brentano, *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*.

considerable influence on the emergence and evolution of phenomenology. It contrasts greatly with the postulates of Gurdjieff to the effect that we do many things, inwardly as well as outwardly, but are often, and indeed perhaps mainly, not aware or conscious of them. His practical method of self-observation is directed towards the realisation of just that.

In his book on Gurdjieff's teaching, *In Search of the Miraculous*, Ouspensky talks about the significance for him of encountering Gurdjieff's idea of self-consciousness which he spoke of as self-remembering. Gurdjieff asserted that most people do not recognise it or grasp it, and Ouspensky verified that his intellectual friends assumed that they had it as a matter of course. Gurdjieff went on to explain that people do not work to develop true consciousness because they assume they already possess it.³³ Gurdjieff's idea of true self-consciousness or self-remembering is one of the most esoteric of the modern era, but addresses a deep-rooted question concerning understanding. Gurdjieff made much of the phenomenon of our fragmentation whereby we have myriad personalities, each with their own thoughts and feelings and sensations largely unaware of each other. He claimed that if they could meet, the experience would be unbearable for most people; but that the state of feeling everything we could feel all at once would give us true consciousness.³⁴

It is taken for granted that any intelligent man or woman can understand what they read or hear, even if they have to take some time to do so; for example, they may have to look up the meaning of some words or gather some other information. Rarely is it observed that it is necessary to undergo some inner change, to engage a special ontological psycho-spiritual component, and not just apply memory and reasoning. Mystical work, however, often requires what we will call "ontological practices." Faivre describes this "mystic's way" as a three-phase process of purgation, illumination, and finally unification,

33. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, 142.

34. *Ibid.*, 155.

“allowing no separation between knowledge (gnosis) and inner experience.”³⁵ One must undergo change in order to become receptive to the truths of arcane knowledge: a transmutation necessary for transmission.³⁶ The great Sufi master Rumi describes this as developing new “organs of perception” in his poetry, exhorting that transformation comes out of necessity: “Therefore, O man, increase your necessity, so that you may increase your perception.”³⁷

Germane ontological practices may include fasting, breath control, meditation, personal sacrifices, and other forms of asceticism. Fasting is the most widely known.³⁸ Its relevance to deepening perception derives from the principle that suspending automatic expenditure of energy in some function such as digestion can make it available for an intentional experience. The great icon painters—to give an allied example—would fast before they began their work.³⁹ It is not uncommon for suffering to be used in conscious and creative work. Gurdjieff himself talks of this in his “confessions” that composed his Third Series of writings, *Life is Real Only Then, When I Am*.⁴⁰ His grief over the sufferings of his wife and mother became “fuel” for producing his writings. In this regard, we speculate that the esoteric might possibly appear in what is created—the icon, the poem, the music—and so be made manifest.

Likewise, understanding comes from work or an action: effort has to be applied for a serious period of time. The etymological meaning of the word suffering includes that of “allowing” as in the Gospel line “Suffer little

35. Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, 13.

36. *Ibid.*, 13–14.

37. Shah, *Tales of The Dervishes*, 197.

38. Fasting like other ascetic practices can be found in mystic and monastic branches of many religions—Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam—often as a purificatory preparation or ordeal designed to better prepare oneself as a recipient of divine love, knowledge, or power. For more on the social and spiritual role of fasting in the lives of female mystics of medieval Europe, for example, see Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*.

39. This is still in practice today, although fasting can be interpreted as not just giving up meat and wine or food entirely, but “fasting from self-centred and self-serving ideas.” See Pearson, *A Brush with God*, 11–12.

40. Gurdjieff, *Life is Real Only Then, When I Am*.

children to come unto me.”⁴¹ As applied to a person seeking to come into an understanding it can mean allowing something to be done to or in oneself. Yet, however strenuous and demanding the action may be, it still can be undertaken as a task outside of oneself, as something external, as a calculation. Perhaps the most interesting instance of the principle we invoke is the practice of *epoché* that Edmund Husserl introduced as a basis of phenomenology: by putting habitual judgments embodied in experience “into brackets” so a new gestalt can emerge.⁴² Then one can see the world in a new way.

Knowledge through Time and Space

According to Gurdjieff, for a reader lacking in analytic or holistic awareness the effect of esoteric messages in texts will remain in what he called the subconsciousness. He claims, in the first chapter of his book *Beelzebub's Tales*, that the book is designed to operate in the reader's subconsciousness and will lead to his/her awakening. In his Second Series of writings, *Meetings with Remarkable Men*, in the chapter on Father Giovanni, Gurdjieff states that faith is a matter of understanding, and that understanding requires real knowledge of events in the past.⁴³ His account of historical events in the First Series is mythological rather than factual. It includes stories of interventions by messengers from above, or the supernatural, and also the destruction of their work. Gurdjieff portrays an ongoing struggle to awaken humanity from being in thrall to defects in its nature that arose long in the past. In doing so, he involves the reader personally, and evokes a sense of a concerned higher intelligence that is not omnipotent but compassionate and inventive. His writings express the possibility of a higher logic and mode of action than is usually the case.

41. Matthew 19:14.

42. Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology*.

43. Gurdjieff, “Professor Skridlov.”

Gurdjieff's reference to true knowledge of past events implies a vision of the world in which there are superior people who know how to influence the future in unusual ways. An evident feature of such higher actions is that they are portrayed as stemming from someone who is close to God. In the exoteric world the equivalent is the performing of miracles. A person is sanctified as a saint if he or she has wrought miracles, typically those of healing. The supposed cases of higher action, in contrast, demonstrate meta-theatre: there is an intervention in real events which not only changes the future, but expresses a higher meaning that entails non-linear time.

If there has been such a higher order of events, then a seeker can hope to *participate* in them. This is possible because such events transcend space and time, and “true consciousness” connects events of different times. But the connection is not passive and demands something of the individual. Such an esoteric idea is found not only in the writings of Gurdjieff's pupils but in the science-fiction world, for example in the novels of Philip K. Dick who himself believed he was living not in twentieth-century America, but in the time of the apostles.⁴⁴

The esoteric or C influence is the converse of the entropic and inertial character of the exoteric or A influences. In the terms of this cosmological scheme, John G. Bennett proposes that C influences came from what he called the “hyparchic future,” capable of overcoming the decays of time.⁴⁵ This is a more sophisticated way of describing “where” the inner circle operates from, locating it in a higher condition of *future time*. In doing this, Bennett was concerned with his vision of a dramatic and uncertain universe requiring creativity and redemption going beyond any timeless pattern.

This leads to a way of expressing C influences as “future influencing past,” which is an idea that has been discussed in modern physics and literature alike. In speaking of someone capable of strong mental images, we can bring to

44. Arnold, *The Divine Madness of Philip K. Dick*, 130–31.

45. Bennett, *History*.

mind both a modern example such as physicist Paul Dirac, who conceived of anti-matter after three years of intense “meditation,” and also a quite different exemplification in the poet William Blake, for whom imagination was the supreme divine gift in us.⁴⁶ We suspect that, in Blake’s world, imagination would concretely involve past and future, giving a different order of perception; hence his prophetic books. In one of his many and varied speculations in the 1960s, John Bennett proposed that amongst the children to be born at the end of the twentieth century would be those gifted with “an expanded present moment” and that, possibly, they would help humanity overcome its short-sightedness.⁴⁷

Bennett makes a distinction between the “psychostatic” (the vast majority, some of whom appear to be awake and purposeful but are not) and the “psychokinetic” (those who “work on themselves” and seek to change within more than effect changes without) classes of society, and labels the inner circle “psychoteleios” (those who have arrived and have no need of search).⁴⁸ The role of the psychokinetic person in Bennett’s model seems to echo archaic myths of the Hero’s Quest as discussed by Joseph Campbell.⁴⁹ Like the hero, psychokinetic man has to undergo ordeals or disintegration in order to be able to assimilate something new in which knowledge and being are as one (a Gurdjieff ideal), and he is therefore able to *truly help* the society in which he lives. It seems apparent that efforts by “sleeping man” to improve things inevitably lead to some other problem—as has been endlessly portrayed in ancient teachings about such things as karma and samsara, and features in its typically intense way in Greek drama. In

46. See the discussion of the mystical dimensions of Blake, Dirac and other such creative thinkers in Gerhart, “Notes Toward Understanding the Mystical Dimension of Divine-Human Interaction.” Faivre notes that in the esoteric mindset, imagination “is the tool for knowledge of self, world, myth,” *Access to Western Esotericism*, 13.

47. This idea resonates with the proposal of Nancy Ann Tappe, Lee Carroll and Jan Tober that a new generation of psychically aware children are being born. See Whedon, “The Wisdom of Indigo Children.”

48. Bennett, *Man and his Nature*. The scheme is similar to that of the second century gnostic Valentinus on hylic, psychic, and pneumatic humanity respectively.

49. Campbell, *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*.

one of its most abstract forms, we find the idea that the person who can respond to or communicate with higher intelligence is able to act in a “triadic” way instead of in a “dyadic” way. Gurdjieff says in his mythological book *Beelzebub's Tales* that one of the most disastrous ideas that arose on earth was that of Good and Evil.

Portrayed as a receiver and transmitter of esoteric knowledge, Gurdjieff weaves past, present and future into his texts, philosophies and practices. In his interpretation of Judas Iscariot in *Beelzebub's Tales* as a great supporter of Jesus and a heroic figure whose sacrifice enables Christianity to flourish, Gurdjieff prophesies what would be revealed decades later by the recent translation of the early gnostic tract, the Gospel of Judas. In orthodox thinking, Judas is regarded as a traitor, a wretch who takes money to betray Jesus and then hangs himself in despair. In Gurdjieff's vision, though he did these things, Judas was the disciple most beloved by Jesus and given a special role to play—a task that only he was capable of understanding and carrying out. This was to involve the authorities in a distracting sequence of events, allowing Jesus to complete the process of connecting his inner body with those of his disciples. Bennett, in his further explanation of this version of events, went so far as to identify the “lamb who takes away the sins of the world” with Judas and not with Christ. Bennett saw the vilification heaped upon Judas as part of his supreme sacrifice: he took away the contamination of human motives from the action of the Last Supper, leaving it free from sin.⁵⁰ The Gurdjieff/Bennett story of the Last Supper is evidently an example of esotericism. It gives a totally different account than prevails in the church, and describes an action made by highly conscious people in achieving a higher purpose.

Gurdjieff identified some religious rituals as acts of remembrance, with the implication that they could be made into a means of actually taking part in the events they express. This was the original sense people had of the Christian liturgy,⁵¹ and even today there remains a feeling of taking part in an enactment of

50. Bennett, *Masters of Wisdom*, 67–68.

51. Dix, “Eucharist and the Lord's Supper.”

the Last Supper which prefigured the crucifixion. In *Beelzebub's Tales*, Gurdjieff gives an esoteric interpretation of this event, vitally important for the Christian religion. He is said to have emphasised the importance of this interpretation in conversation with his pupils, particularly Bennett, whom he instructed to spread this “gospel.”

The explanation incorporates something that is blatantly esoteric, namely: a man can have bodies finer than his physical one. In Gurdjieff's teaching, operations concerning the finer bodies matter very much more than those of the physical body. Clearly such operations will not be conditioned by time and space as are those of the organism. The “body of Christ” referred to in the mass, and identified with the holy wafer eaten by the congregation, is not his physical flesh and blood, but the very substance of His inner body. Gurdjieff goes on to say that it is through this body and its substance that Christ made a connection with the disciples that was maintained after his physical death.⁵² The making of this connection required a special process, and the completion of this process was being threatened by forces in the environment at that moment. The authorities needed to be distracted.

The portrayal is dramatic and, possibly, the main inspiration for the title of Bennett's own magnum opus *The Dramatic Universe*. It is theatrical. It expresses the miraculous intersection of inner and outer actions, and, as we shall see, highlights the significance of playing a role, which became an essential part of Gurdjieff-inspired work. Incidentally, esoteric material such as this example, portraying the time of Christ, shatters the boundary between fact and fiction: what is true is more than what is actual. The recent discovery of a Gospel of Judas was astonishing. Like many other alternative Gospels, it portrays Jesus in deep conversation with his disciples, but in this one, as Bart D. Ehrman reads it, Judas appears as the wisest and most compassionate of them all, “his closest friend and truest disciple.”⁵³ The appearance of this gospel can be taken as miraculous in the sense that it must have been near impossible for it to survive.

52. Gurdjieff, *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*, 335ff.

53. Ehrman, *The Lost Gospel of Judas Iscariot*, 11.

Gurdjieff's and Bennett's writings and the Gospel of Judas itself are stories, pieces of writing. This fact points not only to special, imagined, or alternative events, but also to writing itself. There is a further layer to uncover to our topic of the esoteric; it is possible that esoteric ideas in writing can elicit an awareness of the esoteric that is implicated in all writing. It is writing itself that is esoteric *and* transformative.

To further support the view that esoteric writing centres on an alternative view of past events, we can cite Gurdjieff's elusive concept of "legomonism." A legomonism, as he defined it, is a means of transmitting a message "about certain events of long-past ages" to future generations, devised by the inhabitants of Atlantis and only decipherable or understood by what he called "meritorious beings" or "initiates." René Guénon speaks of much the same thing:

When a traditional form is on the point of becoming extinct, its last representatives may well deliberately entrust to this aforesaid collective memory the things that would otherwise be lost beyond recall; that is in point of fact the sole means of saving what can in a certain measure be saved. At the same time, the lack of understanding that is one of the natural characteristics of the masses is a sure enough guarantee that what was esoteric will be none the less undivulged, remaining merely as a sort of witness of the past for such as, in later times, shall be capable of understanding it.⁵⁴

An additional component in the ways ancient wisdom might be transmitted to future generations is called, in Theosophy, the "akashic" records, and, in Gurdjieff's *Beelzebub's Tales*, "korkaptilnian thought tapes." These "memories" are said to be carried in the atmosphere or air of the planet; which means they belong to the second "subtle world." They rather correspond to the saying in the Gospels to lay up one's treasures in heaven where they will not be corrupted.

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.⁵⁵

54. Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols*, 26.

55. Matthew 6:19-21 (NIV).

There is a significant step from simply “storing up treasures” to intentionally communicating to future generations. Usually, we do not think of people in the past as wanting to communicate with us in their future. We regard the past as fixed and done with. Yet, in an esoteric view, ancient people can contact us. In the language of John Bennett, wise or enlightened people live in “hyparchic” time where they are able to be more free than us.⁵⁶

The ancient man and the modern can make contact though a kind of “bridge” or device. In Tibetan Buddhism this is called a *tetra* or “treasure” which can store a meaning for hundreds of years until discovered by someone capable of recognising and reading it and making use of it. The transmission we are considering here is a twofold one: there is both some material artefact that endures over time (including a text and its copies) and also a direct contact. Perhaps the example of light can help us understand this. On the one hand, light travels at a specific velocity and we measure distances in units such as light years; however, in relativity theory where space and time are treated as one space-time, the interval between an emission and absorption of light is zero. We might say that besides what is speculated to be “remote viewing” there could be a “non-temporal remembering.” Such a possibility is enfolded in Bennett’s idea of a “greater present moment” such that there could be a “now” that to us lasts for a thousand years.

Our picture of transmission and communication through time can be enriched by the idea that there are “underground streams” flowing through humanity largely unperceived in self-conscious external culture. This was depicted in Doris Lessing’s novel *The Four-Gated City* (1969), but most clearly expressed in Denis Saurat’s *Gods of the People*.⁵⁷ Saurat, an admirer of Gurdjieff’s *Beelzebub’s Tales to his Grandson*, claimed there was a coherent metaphysical stream quite different to what appeared in any theology or philosophy, but which surfaced like little springs in the works of poets such as William Blake. This has

56. Hyparchic time is similar to what Maurice Nicoll called “living time.” See Nicoll, *Living Time and the Integration of the Life*.

57. Saurat, *Gods of the People*.

parallels in the history of the emergence of gnostic texts and even in archaeology when unexpected new finds can revolutionise our ideas of the past.

According to Alberto Manguel, in *A History of Reading*, over the 4,000-year course of reading's history the hero has been the reader.⁵⁸ An important development in the twentieth century, particularly with the rise of experimental writing and searches for new forms and media of expression, has been the realisation of new ways of reading. A startling implication of Gurdjieff's idea of legomonism—at least in our view—that he himself never articulated because of his basis being largely in nineteenth-century thought (linear and authoritarian), but much more easily apparent to us now in the twenty-first century—is that esoteric reading must be a two-way process, even a synergy.⁵⁹ Let us put it thus: the ancient and the modern person meet. It is the meeting that counts—a *remarkable meeting*—which constitutes a transcending of time.

Conclusion

One might well equate apparent esoteric knowledge with dream work, imagination and fiction, or as valuable in creative work as points of departure but ones which do not give any explicit information beyond what is already known. To put it simplistically, the esoteric seems to be no more than a suggestion of connections between things which are not currently established or believed to be connected in the mainstream. This presumption, however, is beneficial for keeping the mind open and exploring. In true esoteric style, Gurdjieff deliberately obfuscated any attempt to clarify what arcane knowledge might consist of or exactly how to access it in his teachings. He was known to tell his students that his books contained plenty of keys “but I never put a key near the lock.”⁶⁰ The work required by Gurdjieff entailed a change in being, a

58. Manguel, *A History of Reading*.

59. Blake, “Gurdjieff and the Legomonism of ‘Objective Reason’.”

60. Raue, “An Intersection of Interests,” 49.

transformational shift. Something needs to happen in the seeker or reader that will enable him or her to grasp the message.

Gurdjieff is clearly an inheritor of the Western esoteric tradition characterised, as Faivre says, by “the search for the transmutation of what was originally interior and exterior to our own being by virtue of vital, living interconnections, and [the] neverending and eclectic curiosity and search for knowledge.”⁶¹ In the search embedded in the esoteric is the idea that we can access the source of wisdom or insight that is not conditioned entirely by habits of thought and belief. One of the haunting questions behind the idea of the esoteric, especially as formulated by Gurdjieffians, is: if there is some real, effective knowledge accessible from somewhere (the prehistoric past, aliens, angels or any other possible sources), how can it be identified, utilised, and understood? Such questions have inspired artists, authors, poets, and spiritualists well before, and long after, Gurdjieff. While only a few of the multitudes of examples that exist have been touched on here, at the very least we can say with certainty that the esoteric search for and transmission of knowledge is a theme threading through a variety of worlds within human culture. In general terms it is something liberating but dangerous, reserved for the relatively few, to be seen as both profound and absurd. But no generalities should obscure the rich diversity of meaning it has gathered.

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61. Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, 61.

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