

The Old Man and His Movements

Pierre Schaeffer

Pierre Schaeffer (1910-1995) was a man of varied and outstanding accomplishments – an engineer, theorist, researcher, telecommunications pioneer, critic, essayist, musician and composer who developed Concrete Music. His impressions of Gurdjieff offer an exceptional convergence of heartfelt experience and literary merit.

Every Time I Lose Sight of Myself

I go on long journeys. I am away for months at a time. In Scandinavian hotels, and in Pacific towns, on floating airfields, in the middle of African market places or Aztec churches, I sit as I have been told to sit. I try to discover peace in myself, and, knowing only too well that it is useless to look for it in my head, I try humbly to find it in the tranquility of the body, through the relaxation of my muscles. I sometimes succeed, especially if I do the exercise daily.

But if I neglect it, even for a few days, on the grounds that my general condition doesn't require it, or that my journeys, professional duties, social responsibilities or legitimate pleasures excuse it, then I go adrift at once. Meanwhile, they continue their meetings in Paris, that distant metropolis. They go on obstinately with the same thing when you would think they would be far better employed in some proved branch of instruction, or in going to Church. They had made me promise to force myself to "self-remember" for a quarter of an hour every day. I don't often manage it.

Back in Paris again, and the months of forgetfulness over, I know where to go to re-discover the self that, vainly, I have been trailing over the surface of the globe, only to lose it more completely. I go then, or, rather, I went, for in a sense all this is already over. Though I went, it was unwillingly; one doesn't go with alacrity to have one's blood tested or one's teeth examined. I felt that my soul, or whatever one likes to call it,

is an organ, too, and deserves to be properly looked after. And so I went to see Gurdjieff.

I had passed the stage of questions aside, absurd requests and interminable waits. I knew beforehand that he would be kindly but ironical, looking at me with his weighty brown look, so concentrated that it was not Gurdjieff I saw at all, but a mirror reflecting life. But whereas a mirror demands nothing and sends back merely a harmless image, the intensity of this look I knew would demand nothing less than myself, which was more than I would be able to give. He would wait for me to speak and I would have nothing to say. It was not to Gurdjieff that I would describe my journeys: he had done them all himself; nor my adventures: as an adventurer he beat all records. My successes then, my merits, my faults? Neither merits nor faults concerned him, but only a state, a weight. Like the weighing-machines in airports, Gurdjieff, the precision instrument, would unmercifully calculate the rate of my energy, the tension of my potential. But the instrument was sensitive in all meanings of the word. How disappoint him again?

Not having enriched myself by a single extra spiritual atom, I would refrain from meeting him face to face; I should see him, but buried in the usual Wednesday evening crowd. I would hardly be noticed. The others, who had persevered and remained at home, had no need of India or Tibet; I should soon be able to tell, by imperceptible signs, whether they had made any progress and if I had lost much ground.

Dinner with Gurdjieff

Once the intolerable silences and interminable readings were over and the cramped limbs completely petrified, the Wednesday-night company was allowed to relax. In spite of aches and pains, it invaded the dining-room. There were places for twenty people seated and forty standing up, including those in the corridor. But, as we have already seen, space creates itself and if there is room for thirty there is room for sixty. A chain of plates linked the kitchen to the dining-room and M. Gurdjieff himself served out the food. Special helpings were destined for special people—for the Platinum Blonde, for the Director, for Misunderstanding, for Sewer, for Alfred. Then, as soon as M. Gurdjieff came back from the kitchen, glasses were filled with peppered vodka and a master of ceremonies proposed a toast to a certain category of idiot (the first, or ordinary category) to which I had the honour to belong. I never troubled to find out exactly how one was promoted from the different categories (round, square, polyhedral, psychopathic or hopeless); like Napoleon snatching his crown from the Pope, I had shamelessly appropriated the category I liked best, the lowest, that of

ordinary idiot, and this for two reasons. The first, that as the hierarchy appeared to be upside down the ordinary idiots seemed less foolish than the others (I thought, and still think, that I was right). The second was, that as most people had a tendency to raise themselves in the hierarchy of foolishness, I thought it more classy and also more in keeping with my exceptional humility, to include myself with the lowest grade. So the first toast, drunk to the idiots of my category, put me in the lime-light. However, I had fallen into the trap: having been informed, everyone chose well and truly the category that pleased him. I had examined myself, and received the right answer.

To M. Gurdjieff, these toasts to idiots were a never-failing source of amusement, (and how I agreed with him)! He used to turn to the category of fool in question, and raising his glass in their direction, give them a broad smile. This smile showed his affection both for their wretched selves and for their indescribable idiocy. As far as I was concerned, I must admit that I always thought I caught an appropriately ironic glint in the eye of my host. Where does that fool come from, with his pretensions to being an ordinary idiot? The sudden spark moved on to damp some other fire. From this simple setting sprang the most improbable incidents. What is more, those who were scared of alcohol were forced to drink large quantities of vodka; those who relished sweet things were made to eat the hottest paprika, and vice versa. Sickened either by onions or halva, we were all both spectators and victims, and could only properly appreciate the situation as illustrated by our neighbours. A tenth glass of vodka was irrevocably poured out for the non-drinkers, causing a rosy glow to spread over normally abstemious faces, while the gay dogs, unfortunately all too rare, who would willingly have indulged themselves, were, of course, strictly brought to heel. The unworthiness of their habits was pointed out to them, and the vast expense in which their excessive appetites were involving their host! “How much you think this cost?” M. Gurdjieff would ask, holding out the smallest radish. “Special radish specially sent for me from Caucasus.” It actually came straight from the Neuilly market.

It has been said that the comic is essentially a phenomenon of liberation in which two paradoxical elements are at work: terror and ease, privation and abundance, the solemn and the grotesque. The meals with Gurdjieff were a good example. For while these outlandish skirmishes were taking place in an atmosphere of the greatest solemnity, the web of silence that had accumulated during the last two hours was not so easily broken; it could still be felt through the smiles and the jokes. If anyone should put a foot wrong, and behave in a manner either too formal or too ribald, he would immediately be crushed under a weight of ridicule and contempt. An atmosphere at once pious and Rabelaisian, exotic and monastic, bantering and contemplative, was created by the obligation we were under to eat and drink more than was reasonable, to

be on the look out for so many traps, to take part in complicated rites and at the same time to pursue the “inner work” which, though nothing had been said, was quite evidently expected. (It was popularly held, and even verified, that a meal with Gurdjieff could always be digested.) I was in my element at these dinners, which were dreaded by many, I came away light-hearted, rejuvenated, restored in the real sense of the word, and greatly helped in my struggles against sleep and pessimism, “idées fixes” and stomach troubles.

Not least among the comic elements of the situation was the extraordinary submissiveness of the guests and their fanatical determination to find instruction and significance in Gurdjieff’s slightest word. As for me, I said nothing and blasphemed inwardly. Though I was touched by the old man’s truculent lavishness, by the enormous burden he saddled himself with, by the immense trouble he took with us all, by a kind of prosaic goodness that turned the offer of a piece of halva, a small gherkin, or a spoonful of sauce, into a gesture full of significance and of special meaning for such or such a one, I could not but be aware of his great fatigue and of the tragedy that was playing itself out in these obscure surroundings.

Why did he accumulate so many contradictions? What over-subtle rules were hidden by these rules altogether too crude? Sometimes, owing to fatigue and the lateness of the hour and also, no doubt, to the vodka, he would stumble over his words and I, for one, was far from expecting a dead shot every time, as some of the other guests did. On the contrary, what I admired were the sudden changes of atmosphere, the quickness of his repartee and the liberation of the emotions when, after three quarters of an hour in which nothing much had happened (without, however, my being able to relax my attention, which was constantly held by many different things) he would suddenly, and with no warning, violently attack one of the guests, either in a most personal or purely impersonal manner. No one ever left without feeling, in one way or another, stirred, moved, fascinated.

Whereas, when “working” in solitude there was nothing to control the degree of objectivity and seriousness that we put into the “work,” on the other hand, during these love-feasts a chain reaction took place in which nothing any longer made ordinary sense. Eating and speaking became momentous acts and remarks exchanged across the table seemed like the stabs of a knife. Everyone, picked out by a search-light, was caught in the very act of desertion and had to be brought back between bayonets. Failing trial by red-hot iron or poison, the glass of alcohol became a kind of judgment from heaven. What spiritual progress can be claimed by one who hasn’t even the grace to allow himself to be made drunk?

This great feast—can I say it without shocking?—reminded me of another. It was impossible not to think of the Last Supper. Bludgeoned into life, we were taking part in tragic agapes. We dipped our hands in the dish with a Master. The figure of Judas or of the favourite disciple was enough to give one a fit. Our indomitable friend, the Banker, whose face was aglow with the vodka that he detested (“you drink another toast, Director, you not drink anything!”) was Peter. There were swooning Mary Magdalens, incorrigible Marthas and Nicodemuses painfully full of goodwill. Was Gurdjieff himself aware of these resemblances? The very act of eating, if surrounded by rites, however incongruous, could not fail to make us think of Holy Communion.

I need hardly say that everyone of us kept this experience to himself. Just as communicants never exchange confidences about their participation in the Sacrament, so, as far as I know, none of the guests ever spoke about the meals, and although I am doing it now, it goes against the grain. But how could I conceal such an important aspect of my testimony? So long as the secular controversy goes on about Holy Communion, I feel obliged to state that anything (gherkin or pimento) can, with the necessary concentration and human tension, become the way to communion, without recourse to magic or collective hypnosis. When I say communion I mean to emphasize that it is the pattern of a sacrament, not outward and by analogy but inward, by the equivalency of spiritual and sensual experience.

Any other man would have exploited this result, but Gurdjieff let it speak for itself. Everything is food, but all depends on how much of the food that one eats one is capable of assimilating. This universal mastication is either destructive or creative according as to whether it conforms to the World’s laws or to God’s Will.

Money, about which Gurdjieff so often spoke, (I need not repeat what has been said a hundred times about the rather dubious analogy between the role that money plays in Gurdjieff’s eyes and in those of psychoanalysts), the money spent on all this food and the fact that it was distributed indifferently amongst the worthy and the unworthy, signified, on the part of the Father a kind of wound inflicted continually on his Treasure. The lavishness of the Host, the frenzied wastefulness of which he was capable (as a young man, he burnt his roubles every evening so as to plunge himself and his group into difficulties which had somehow to be overcome) placed side by side the value and the contempt that he attached to money. The false notes of meanness and haggling grated against his inexhaustible generosity.

Thus, communion is achieved in spite of everything, through our senses, thanks to the law of supply and demand and to the relationships between host and guests.

Gurdjieff's meals, though cooked in an oriental way and garnished with aromatic herbs, had no especial virtue, as some people said. The cucumbers, certainly, were Russian, the sweets Greek and the water-melon Spanish. It was significant that the whole world should have been ransacked to provide food for the feast, heavily supplemented from the back room. The fact that Gurdjieff took the place of my grandfather and, at the same time, of Christ, did not offend me at all. On the contrary, the idea that one needs Christ in order to reach the Father had often been drummed into me, but though I felt I knew a little about Christ, I had never really understood the need for the Father, nor His strangely passionate nature. Christ had been tortured, but only once, however often it may be repeated in the Mass. But the Father suffers eternally and at every moment. He sustains His world and offers it the fruits of its soil. He does it like an old moustachioed Caucasian, like an old-fashioned school-master of the days when a school-master was as good as a priest. The real, moustachioed, if not bearded, God then became comprehensible to me. Communion in the world could take place in all kinds, provided the communicant was worthy, that is attentive. The rabbit had suffered before it was cooked, and child though I was, I was right to be horror-stricken by its agony. Gurdjieff did not teach us to do without meat but, on the contrary, he bared his big teeth and accepted the human situation and his proper, not very elevated, position on the ladder of creation. But if the rabbit suffered, and if the Father suffers, and all his treasures are put on sale or return through the lack of understanding and stupidity of his guests, it is because it is a matter of the accomplishment of the greatest mystery in the world, of universal manducation. We were a long way from the carefully whitened and purified unleavened bread. For us there were sauces, such of which it is written: he who dips his hand in the dish with me will betray me.

I never think of the Last Supper without being reminded of these times with Gurdjieff. Leonardo's picture is much damaged and the paint is peeling off, leaving horribly deformed silhouettes, but the mystery of the picture remains. A few traces of paint, even mouldy paint, and the presence of Christ and His companions shines forth as the painter first conceived them. Anyone who wishes can take part in the Last Supper if he will but open his eyes. Last Suppers, alas, are always among the last moments of the Masters, they will be their Memorials.

Though I mocked at the feasts with Gurdjieff, knowing all the time that those moments vouchsafed me were an inestimable blessing, now I never go to Mass without thinking of him. Had he not invited me to the last hours in the Upper Room? Had he not taught me not to despise any of the earth's sacrifices?

A Session of “Movements”

For those who get no more answers because they ask no more questions there are still the “movements.” These “movements” brought together the groups of different standards into a larger and in some ways more open group, and the necessary qualifications of the members also seemed rather different. The large number of new arrivals necessitated the continual division of the classes and the formation of more and more courses for beginners. Here again there were two opposite streams, like those I tried to describe with regard to the “work.” The fact was that the “movements” satisfied so well these cravers after inner stability (some of them at first did not even suspect the existence of Gurdjieff and had no idea that the “movements” formed part of a wider teaching) that they would come flocking to take part, and were strangely punctual and strangely persevering for a time. They reminded me by their assiduity of two apparently quite dissimilar kinds of people, on the one hand of novices in a convent, and on the other, of members of a rigger team. But can this have been Gurdjieff’s aim? Did he really take all this trouble for the sake of the performers, arranging, manipulating, and, with his sharp eye, sorting out the best? The best for what?

Any description, however clever, would fail to convey these “movements.” All I can say is that thanks to them, work of an extraordinary precision took place in our moving centres, a skilful disconnection became apparent in the functioning of our muscles and we acquired an intimate insight into the workings of our bodies. The stricter the execution of a movement, the greater the possible control and supremacy over every aspect of co-ordination. Once the machine was wound up and running by itself the exercise was made complicated to a degree never dreamed of by the beginners, given up as they were entirely to the joys of an apparent harmony. With intense difficulty the intellectual centre was first of all brought into play, then the emotional centre, or possibly both together. How can I explain this to someone who has not experienced it? To the outsider, what significance can there be in the efforts of these people to make asymmetrical movements with arms and legs, at the same time doing more and more complicated mental arithmetic and, to crown all, being told to perform in a religious spirit? What a wonderfully conventional phrase! What religion? It didn’t matter in the least. It was not enough to emerge from the Metro, one also had to emerge from one’s own private tunnel. To those who were striving for the most intimate physical co-ordination while at the same time keeping to the rhythm and the steps and making mental calculations, the extra command to do it all “in a religious spirit” involved no misunderstanding. The difficulty lay not in grasping the meaning but in acting on it.

“You now say God have mercy” Gurdjieff would say. The docile ones at once cried out in a loud voice “God have mercy.” (“You not shout loud enough.”) Then there were the believers for whom the words did, after all, hold a meaning; they were astonished at the gymnastic prayers. It seemed that they were asked to perform a spiritual exercise the wrong way round, first to make a physical effort, then a mental one and lastly to bring in the emotions. Here were no comfortable hassocks, no glamour, no stained glass or soft music. To the strains of middle-Eastern music on a piano tuned to augmented seconds (not everybody’s taste), muscles stiffened as arms took up the required position, relaxed again for a skilful movement of the legs, while all the time the mental calculations were proceeding. Each one took his turn in a kind of gymnastic canon without losing his proper place in the row; no-one was able to imitate the one in front but the slightest mistake threw out the row, if not the block, or even the whole forty-two performers. On top of all this, at the word of command, all inhibitions and fear of ridicule had to be cast aside and the words “God have mercy” shouted out loud.

There were no down-cast eyes or false ecstasy. Sometimes, if the “movements” went well, if exercise No. 27 (there were no names, only numbers) reached the required standard, it became possible to catch a glimpse of the goal, that is, collective liberation from mechanicalness, and the running of a machine now under full control. The spirit, now served by the body, attained a higher sphere, but this was nothing like the feeling of being moved or exalted. Rather, it resembled one’s feeling on gaining a hard-won height that had to be quickly abandoned because of giddiness. This experience was like the super-effort of the man who, to save his skin, runs faster than ever he thought he could. It would come in a flash, especially if Gurdjieff wasn’t there. When he was there he was always complicating the exercises and inventing new ones, and never, never gave us time to draw breath or to take stock.

He would walk amongst the dancers, straightening a row here, bending a torso there, correcting the position of an arm or leg and then moving on to the following line, making it do the next figure so that when all were once more in motion the exercise moved on from line to line, like a wave. Never mind about your bodies, it’s your state that counts. You are nothing but the hieroglyphs of an inexhaustible language that I shall continue to speak through you and whose secret I shall guard with my life. Though you may be clumsy, slow and lifeless, go on, write, write in your muscles, in your heads and, if possible, in your hearts. These are texts to be deciphered inwardly; only those who transmit them can understand them. You are living ciphers.

Some of the instructors were outstanding; they were usually girls who were the most gifted. They would note the hieroglyphs on little diagrams, receipts for the exercises, a collective score. Occasionally there were public performances. Gurdjieff, in one of his irrepressible freaks, would dress everyone up in Turkish costume. This just had to be borne. Misunderstanding would reach its height. The idle curious, to whom the aesthetic side mattered most, would go away, outraged; the other, less snobbish spectators, might guess that something important was going on, in spite of the fancy dress, something incomplete but possibly prodigious. As for the corps de ballet, these Parisians in Turkish slippers, Gurdjieff would simply throw them handfuls of boiled sweets.

Farewell to the Old Man

The modern miracle-worker dies in his bed. Perhaps, for the period, that was rather inadequate. No hemlock, no hyssop, no gas. Possibly cirrhosis of the liver—in any case a natural death. A burial a bit more Russian than others. The Rue Daru is a small islet of Slav Atlantis in the middle of Paris, and much impaired by its separation. There followed flowers and wreaths at Fontainebleau-Avon. O Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man! O Katherine, who wrote in vain those little letters to her man of letters! Gurdjieff himself keeps her company now.

There was much weeping. I was interested to note how my own tears would taste. I know this crocodile, and tears seen through a microscope are not pretty. I contemplated the dead face that I had tried so hard to fix in my mind, that I knew so little, and had interrogated so poorly. I wept, and they were real tears.

To die like a dog. And you, George Ivanovich, have you saved your soul? Have you extracted it from gross matter, from mortal functions and the hindrance of the senses? Have you, by dint of attention, have you quickened the beat of energy? Has God inhaled you?

If there were those who awaited a strange event and hoped, on the fortieth day, for some Tibetan prodigy, then they were disappointed. Only a new Christ is resurrected. The modern miracle-worker is merely a man.

All the same, he didn't die like a dog. In death he made a difficult, indefinable movement with his extraordinarily contorted muscles. There was a force behind the mask, apparently so calm, a gaze behind those lids that would never open again. This gaze imprinted itself on our pupils. Every eye caught a gleam and we assimilated this food, too.

Once more the thread is broken, the track comes up against the future. “There you are, in a fine mess!” he had murmured, before departing. Already at his bedside I could see incurving the spiral that he used to draw for us to show us where the straight lines of our evolutions would begin to turn.

They will turn you into a scare-crow, an old fossil, a pope, an ordinary idiot, or perhaps even a philosopher.

I shall never again know a more brazen seeker after God, nor a heathen more ambitious for his soul. You were Pascal and Proust, Descartes and Rabelais, Lucretius and Gulliver, Tobias and the Angel, and I salute you! If Christ leads to the Father, it was you who led me back to Christ. Others drew signs and taught by words: you gave us yourself. You sketched out the symphony of creative Awareness, of unimaginable Attention.

Who has dared to live your life, and who will fulfil it? In the end you have drawn real tears from me, M. Gurdjieff. I must have loved you.

Postscript

That my insight and understanding, and even my good faith, should be in question is only fair. The testimony is worth no more than the witness. But being what I am this is what I saw, felt and understood, and my only obligation is to testify according to my own truth, the only living truth, which, like everything that lives, bears within it its own destruction and reparation, its own ferment and poison.

Am I for or against Gurdjieff? Both, of course, as one is for and against God, for and against oneself, for and against one’s life. Hagiography is a different thing. It matters not who is shocked. If everything was clear there would have been only one explanation, one moral code, one faith, for the last hundred thousand years. Or, more exactly, there would be no faith. Read Ouspensky and say whether you are for or against him. To my mind, those who swallow the Gurdjieffian cosmogony whole, and those who reject it out of hand, are equally wrong and, above all, equally superficial. Those who study Gurdjieff, alive or dead, without either fear or respect, are equally naïve. From such a man one takes and rejects, one is both wary and receptive. One struggles with him. To struggle with Gurdjieff (and not against him) is to understand him, to know him, and, in the end, to love him.

As for putting him on a pedestal, especially after his death, that is the most sinister trick that well-meaning Gurdjieffians could possibly play on him. That is to show true disrespect.

However, if, in this particularly confused age, in which no attitude seems to make sense any longer, one has to care about what people will think and, bearing in mind the words of the Evangelist, take notice, not of the scribes but of the lesser ones, then I must add the following:—

Those who want to get the most out of Gurdjieff's life and work must, first of all, rid their hearts and minds of the habits of a limited logic and of a morality based on fear. Questing souls fall into line too readily with their predecessors. Great examples from the past are always, for them, fatal mirages. With intellectual growth they inevitably become conformist philosophers; commitment in action leads them straight to heroism; and supremacy of the feelings, to religion. There is no mixing of kinds.

This is Gurdjieff. No blood or tears. A struggle with bare hands. No intellectual prestige, no commitment, no emotion or reverence. You come because of your craving and your terror, and you will not be comforted, reassured or illuminated. You will only find a man who will make you understand what it means to be a man, a man alone.

You are not asked if you are good or intelligent, or if you have faith. You might, perhaps, be asked if you are courageous. But you will be asked if you are, just that. You should be warned that this is the question that will give you vertigo and that unless this undertaking is absolutely indispensable to you, you had much better leave it alone. One can very well live as one is, and it is far better to be only half alive than not to exist at all because one's curiosity has led one to the terrifying point where one loses all sense of one's existence.

One can, of course, turn back and say, as one might of a mountain peak, that it was too high and without a good guide ... and even with a good guide? Or, again, one can persevere, knowing how much is at risk.

But to describe the experience of Gurdjieff without pointing out the dangers or giving any words of warning would be stupid and dishonest, and would also be treating Gurdjieff as though he were of no importance.

As for the comic parts and the occasional dirty word that my regard for truth has compelled me to quote, those who are offended by them lack, to my mind, the minimum of humour needed for getting on with Gurdjieff, and they will do well not to risk an encounter, even a posthumous one.

Lastly, if the thread of my gratitude and respect, discreet as it is permanent, that runs through this testimony cannot be detected, it is because I am nothing but a clumsy fool, which is quite possible.

One final remark. To my way of thinking this testimony would only make sense if completed and backed up by testimonies from others who had really worked with Gurdjieff (and if possible not writers or journalists). By definition these people would not write willingly or well, but they might, at least, have tried. Others, who were both writers and disciples, have died. In particular, Luc Dietrich and René Daumal. I knew Luc well enough to be certain that he would have become a writer, but I did not know Daumal and can say nothing about him. Now, Louis Pauwels loyally meant to include all testimonies in this book, and my own account of my clumsy and ridiculous experiences was not intended to be the only one from a “disciple.” What I left out, or distorted, or was unable to convey, should have been supplied by others. But they have abstained.

For the living, it is their own affair. For the dead it is more serious. The dead, as always, are gagged by those who think themselves their heirs. Which means that neither Daumal nor Dietrich are represented here by indispensable extracts from their notes. The most contemptuous refusal was made in their name.

I gladly take this contempt upon myself, with a lively feeling of apostolic satisfaction. Gurdjieff retaught me about Christ so effectively that I cannot but feel more at home with the publican, even if a journalist, or with the multitude, albeit uninitiated.

I do not want to heap coals of fire on anyone’s head, but I would like to advise those who keep the living thought of the dead hidden away in cardboard boxes, to pass on as quickly as possibly such explosive material, whose only legitimate heir is the whole world, that is to say, my neighbour.

And as for my neighbour, I beg him not to rest content with a testimony as unsatisfactory as mine. The dead will surely speak in the end and amongst them Gurdjieff himself, whose difficult book (already published in English) will at first disappoint but later, cruelly and grandly, give a new vision to any man willing to take part in the “work.”