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FIELDWORK ON G. I. GURDJIEFF AND THE “WORK”

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Introduction

George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff (c. 1866–1949), with Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891) and Rudolf Steiner (1851–1925), is one of the three core teachers of modern esotericism (Hunt 2003: 225–50), and is often credited as a seminal inspiration for New Age spirituality (Wellbeloved 2005). However, Gurdjieff’s teaching (the “Work” or the “Fourth Way”) is less well-researched than either Theosophy or Anthroposophy, and scholarly engagement with Gurdjieff has until recently been minimal, with the majority of publications being hagiographical treatments from “insiders” (Sutcliffe 2014). The secrecy surrounding the “inner” content of the Work and the model of teacher–pupil instruction practised after Gurdjieff’s death within “official” Foundation groups led by his successor Jeanne de Salzmann (1889–1990) is an important factor in researching Gurdjieff and, indeed, all esoteric teachings.

Yet Gurdjieff and the Work constitute an excellent field for research in Religious Studies, in that Gurdjieff’s biography is obscure and the public persona he crafted for pupils is mythologized (Petsche 2011), and the relationship between his teaching and other religious and spiritual traditions is contested (Christian,

Sufi, Western Esoteric and other sources have been proposed). This uncertainty creates space for archival research; field trips to countries in which Gurdjieff claimed to have learned esoteric secrets; participant observation in both the Work and “unofficial” groups; and a range of other relevant, and as yet unstudied, projects. This issue of *Fieldwork in Religion* features five articles focused on: the difficulties attendant upon biographical studies of Gurdjieff; the value of field research in countries that Gurdjieff resided in; participant observation in the study of Gurdjieff’s Movements; researching Maurice Nicoll in Britain; and doing research on the Work online.

Contents of the Special Issue

The first article, Joseph Azize’s “Biographical Studies of G. I. Gurdjieff,” reviews the contemporary evidence for Gurdjieff’s life in newspapers and magazines, and interrogates peculiar problems that beset the researcher seeking to write the life of the teacher of the Fourth Way.¹ Azize reviews four biographies of Gurdjieff, by John G. Bennett (1973), James Webb (1980), James Moore (1991), and Paul Beekman Taylor (2008). He brings these works into dialogue with Gurdjieff’s own quasi-autobiographical writings, chiefly, but not limited to, *Meetings with Remarkable Men* (1963). Azize identifies bias in existing biographies, asks hard questions about the context in which Gurdjieff operated, and offers strategies to move the study of Gurdjieff’s life and times forward in a more scholarly fashion.

The second article in the issue is Michael Pittman’s “Through the Lens of Gurdjieff: Glimpses of Contemporary Sufism in Turkey.” Pittman investigates possible influences of Sufism on the Work through field research in Turkey, among the community that formed around a teacher, Ahmet Kayhan (1898–1998), chiefly in Ankara, and in a branch of the Mevlevi order in Konya led by Jelaluddin Loras, head of the Mevlevi Order of America. Pittman’s fieldwork destinations included Rumi’s tomb (*türbe*) and museum, and encounters with dervishes and Work sympathizers. His article also reflects the importance of transnational contacts between Turkey and the United States, and interrogates the researcher’s situation in the field of research.

1. Perhaps the clearest example of disputed facts regarding Gurdjieff is the lack of agreement regarding his birthdate. He was accustomed to celebrate his birthday on January 13, but as this is Orthodox New Year, this is likely not his actual date of birth. His birth year is variously given as between 1866 and 1877, but Joseph Azize suggests December 28, 1865 would better fit with celebrating it on January 13, 1866 (Azize, this issue). Some contributors to this special issue accept different dates for Gurdjieff’s birth, which I have not attempted to standardize. For more on Gurdjieff’s destruction of relevant papers and deliberate construction of an auto-mythology, see Petsche (2011: 102–103).

The third article, Johanna J. M. Petsche’s “The Sacred Dance of the Enneagram: The History and Meanings behind G. I. Gurdjieff’s Enneagram Movements,” takes the issue of fieldwork into a discussion of participation. Petsche, whose PhD was published as *Gurdjieff and Music: The Gurdjieff/de Hartmann Piano Music and its Esoteric Significance* (2015), has participated in Dorine Tolley’s Movements class in Sydney, Australia, since 2009. Her article discusses the kinds of research outcomes that result from bodily immersion in the process of learning Gurdjieff’s sacred dances, with a specific focus on the mathematically-exacting Enneagram Movements.

The fourth contribution in the special issue is John Willmet and Steven J. Sutcliffe’s “Issues in Accessing a Gurdjieffian Tradition: Lessons from a Study of Maurice Nicoll (1884–1953),” which chronicles the difficulties of locating archival material relating to Maurice Nicoll’s version of the Gurdjieff teaching, and obstacles encountered when researching groups in the Nicoll lineage. Nicoll, a pupil of P. D. Ouspensky, author of *In Search of the Miraculous* (2001 [1949]), had two significant successors in Beryl Pogson and Ronald Oldham. Willmet and Sutcliffe use the framework of secrecy, as theorized by Hugh B. Urban (1998) to elucidate the issues encountered in this peculiarly difficult area of research, while providing valuable contemporary information regarding the Work in Scotland.

The last research article is David J. Pecotic and Carole M. Cusack’s “The (World Wide) Work 2.0: The Gurdjieff Tradition Online.” This is a pioneering study of the proliferation of Gurdjieff-related sites on the internet. Pecotic and Cusack discuss the secrecy of the Foundation, established by Jeanne de Salzmann, Gurdjieff’s nominated successor. This strategy was successful in the pre-internet era when personal transmission of esoteric traditions from teacher to pupil in real-world contexts was the norm. However, in the new online environment of deregulated spirituality and readily-available secrets, the *Gurdjieff Internet Guide* (GIG), which was founded by Reijo Oksanen (b. 1942) and is now managed by Kristina Turner, offers an interactive environment, with strong grassroots user-developed content, that realizes the possibility of Gurdjieffian esoteric Work taking place in cyberspace. This has significant implications for the future of the Work.

The five research articles are supplemented by Joseph Azize’s review article, “Review of Three Gurdjieff-Related Books,” which discusses Anon, *Gurdjieff and the Women of the Rope: Notes of Meetings in Paris and New York, 1935–1939 and 1948–1949* (2012), Jeanne de Salzmann’s *The Reality of Being: The Fourth Way of Gurdjieff* (2010), and Hugh Brockwill Ripman’s *Questions and Answers Along the Way* (2009). These books are carefully analysed to unpack the differences between the official teaching style of the Foundation, exemplified by de Salzmann, and the official publication of Gurdjieffian teaching, with more independent teachers and publications.

Azize concludes that these three books provide the scholar with a fuller picture of a crucial phase in the development of Gurdjieff's methodology, in which he devised the "Preparation" and the "inner exercises." These esoteric contemplative practices have been clarified by Azize in a number of recent articles (Azize 2013, 2015, forthcoming 2017).

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