

# *Gurdjieff: a Biographer Digresses*

James Moore

Moore's observations about prominent figures in the Gurdjieffian pantheon are interwoven with an account of meetings with Jesse Orage, and form a prelude to the undertaking of his 1991 biography *Gurdjieff: Anatomy of a Myth*.

My slight biographical study *Gurdjieff and Mansfield* was published in June 1980, and by Christmas both media notice and responses from my friends were substantially over: the juddering indignation of my critics had found other areas of indulgence, and my few unexpected bouquets had shrivelled away. My general feeling was one of relief: it had troubled me to find myself so reactive to newspaper reviews which (with one exception) lacked an appropriate experiential foundation or inner content. Through a spatter of sleet and retrospective Christmas cards the New Year was approaching, without the promise of any very cheerful perspectives. Then suddenly there arrived an unexpected note:

Telephone     Nettlebed 355

Nuttalls Farm  
Maidensgrove  
Henley-on-Thames  
Oxon.  
December 27, 1980

Dear Mr. Moore

Your book I found most interesting, and quite the most understanding about Gurdjieff which anyone has written so far. Having gone through many emotional changes in my many years of contact with him, no wonder I was intrigued.

I should like to have a talk with you sometime and I do have some facts of various characters in your book which might amuse you.

Sincerely yours,

Jessie Orage

I confess that I immediately experienced a moment of feverish excitement and self-reproach: how was it possible that never during my 25-year quest for the historical Gurdjieff had I sought out Jessie Orage? – a woman whose connection with him had been so lengthy and out of the ordinary. I of course seized the earliest opportunity to put matters right.

Jessie was 80, but despite our difference in age we felt an immediate rapport: our eyes met with the wary mutuality of fellow iconoclasts (full of flippant humour, counter-objections and sceptic bile) who yet against all odds had sometimes been responsive to an influence immeasurably above and beyond the range of our critique. As I initially understood Mrs Orage – and it was far from easy to understand her – her maiden name had been Jessie Richards Dwight and she was a first cousin to Dwight D. Eisenhower; and, though I suspect that here the vodka had somehow got into the genealogy, there were moments in the grey twilight when her facial resemblances to the general was quite disconcerting. I cannot say what she spoke of with others, but when with me a great scrimmage of inconsequential memories engaged her mercurial attention; they lay about her mind like the rich uncatalogued disorder of first editions and folios lay about Nuttall's Farm – books and memories both badly foxed but rarest collector's pieces. Jessie was small and piratical with a sudden high unsettling laugh. Her vowels and her library clearly identified an American intellectual; I wondered at the autographed productions of John O'Hara Cosgrave, Hart Crane, Waldo Frank, Daly King, Gorham Munson, and Jean Toomer incongruously hidden here, in this small English cottage, 10 crooked miles from Maidenhead. Of modern writings, and indeed of modern amenities, there was scant evidence at Nuttall's Farm: no proper roads reached it and it had no electricity. One would oversimplify to suggest that time had stopped for Mrs Orage in the 1930s – but in a way it had.

Devoted to her family, Jessie had lived otherwise alone for 45 years: a widow by conviction, who, as she confided to me, had turned aside at least three latterday suitors. Her husband Alfred Richard Orage had died from heart attack at the age of 61 on the night of 5 November 1934; and when he was buried in Old Hampstead Churchyard, the Dean of Canterbury had conducted the service, and the intellectual elite of Britain had congregated to pay their last respects. Their perception of Orage was of a slightly equivocal English literary figure (Bernard Shaw's 'desperado of genius' and T.S. Eliot's 'best literary critic . . . in London'); a polemicist and editor, whose significance harked back to his brilliant and erratic stewardship of his critical weekly the *New Age*. Nor was this judgement so much mistaken as deficient. Orage had indeed made the *New Age* an unparalleled arena of cultural and political debate between 1907 and 1922: its regular contributors included Shaw, Wells, Arnold Bennett, T.E. Hulme, Katherine Mansfield, Ezra Pound and Edwin Muir; it produced material from Gaudier-Brzeska, Wyndham Lewis, Epstein and Picasso; and it promoted, for better or worse, the introduction of psycho-analysis in England. This beyond question was a considerable memorial. Yet Jessie herself did not waste much breath on the *New Age*: the notion that the essential

Orage lay safely buried within its yellowing covers was too preposterous to merit discussion.

The tombstone of Orage lies near a magnolia tree, and is distinguished from its jejune neighbours by Eric Gill's carved inscription, which brilliantly elides stanzas 11, 12 and 16 of the second discourse of the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna's trumpet-call of conscious faith.

*You grieve for that which should not be grieved for.  
The wise grieve neither for the living nor the dead.  
Never at any time was I not.  
Nor thou, nor these princes of men.  
Nor shall we cease to be hereafter.  
The unreal has no being.  
The real never ceases to be.*

But Jessie, faithful to her husband's wishes, had caused to appear above these words a more intimate and cryptic clue to the hope in which he died: the nine-pointed symbol of Gurdjieff's *enneagram*.

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Gurdjieff too had been dead 30 years, but at Nuttall's Farm his name dropped into the pool of Jessie's mind, provoking ripple upon ripple of discrepant memories and feelings. How could this discrepancy not prevail? Strange events, incomprehensible from the mundane point of view, had guided the relationship of Gurdjieff and Orage, and swept Jessie – sometimes denying sometimes affirming, sometimes obtuse and sometimes understanding – in their wake: high points of sacrifice and counter-sacrifice; epochs of attraction and repulsion; spectacular *coups de théâtre*; and the passing of a great deal of money.

The bald facts are strange enough. When Orage, on first encounter in 1922, 'knew that Gurdjieff was the teacher,' he did not lack the courage of his conviction: to the consternation of his friends and his bank manager, he abandoned the *New Age*, left London, and went to Gurdjieff's Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man at Fontainebleau-Avon; here the regime's considerable physical demands overtook him as a sedentary intellectual in his 50<sup>th</sup> year; and his staunch perseverance earned him Gurdjieff's special trust. It was as Gurdjieff's chosen herald – eloquent, personable, charismatic – that Orage swept into New York in 1924 and into Jessie's heart and gave his opening lecture at her bookshop *The Sunwise Turn*; and as Gurdjieff's confirmed lieutenant and fundraiser, that he held sway in America for 7 years over groups in New York, Chicago, Wisconsin and New Jersey. The roof fell in in December 1930. Gurdjieff himself had arrived in New York and shockingly required Orage's pupils to sever their

relations with 'Mr Orage': each must sign to this effect - and so must Orage himself! Orage complied. Three months later the two men parted never to meet again; three years later Orage was dead; and three decades later his widow still struggled to understand it all.

If Jessie had been unique in her questioning . . . but she was far from unique! In fact she was one of thousands whose lives and self-interrogation turned on the fulcrum of Gurdjieff. They advance on the historian in a procession of tumultuous operatic confusion: countesses and prostitutes; dancers, artists, authors and composers; diplomats, able-seamen and confidence tricksters; lesbians and modistes; physicians and surgeons; experts on Sanskrit, mass-produced oil lamps, cardiac surgery, Chinese cloisonné, Basque customs, theatre lighting, sexual disorders and Armenian secret societies. Confronted with Gurdjieff the biographic mind reels:

*How many men and women, roubles and rupees, have passed through his hands? In vain - he is alone. He is the bearer of a radical and overwhelming message, ambitions, urgent and unrealizable?*

Beyond any debate, Gurdjieff's catalytic power was exceptional, transforming hundreds with whom he engaged in his long life. Nothing was added to them, nor anything subtracted; and yet, for a time at least, they were changed allotropically - their elements reconstituted, their attention reoriented, their latest talents liberated for creative action. Without Gurdjieff, Thomas de Hartmann would not have developed and scored an *oeuvre* of 300 piano pieces; without Gurdjieff, Kathryn Hulme would not have written *The Nun's Story*; without Gurdjieff Jeanne de Salzman would not have made 10 archival films of sacred dance; without Gurdjieff, René Daumal would not have created *Le Mont Analog*; without Gurdjieff, Ouspensky would never have written his masterpiece *In Search of the Miraculous*; without Gurdjieff, Katherine Mansfield would not have died a being 'transformed by love, absolutely secure in love' . . . No indeed, Mrs Orage was not alone.

I continued to visit Nuttall's Farm as spring and summer came on; sometimes we lazed in deckchairs and sometimes Jessie would coax her decrepit Landrover into flatulent life and drive me madly across the fields to drink double vodkas at *The Five Horseshoes* or *The Beehive*, where the wasps buzzed annoyingly about our glasses, and ambivalence hung in the stupefied summer air. Ambivalence could be sensed in our very situation; in the tension between the old lady's irrepressible celebration of today and her wistful retrospect towards an heroic epoch, which she had lost and I had never shared; above all ambivalence was concentrated in Jessie's perception of:

*He who in childhood was called "Tatakh;" in early youth "Darky" later the "Black Greek;" in middle age the "Tiger of Turkestan," and now, not just anybody but the*

*genuine "Monsieur" or "Mister" Gurdjieff, or the nephew of "Prince Mukransky," or finally, simply a "Teacher of Dancing."*

She felt she did not really know him.

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In August of my first summer as a confidant of Jessie, I received a letter from Malcolm Muggeridge (with whom I had been corresponding about Stalin's daughter Svetlana Peters). 'My own view of Gurdjieff,' he volunteered, 'is that he was a singularly unpleasant charlatan who managed to attract people like Orage...'. As I sat talking to Orage's widow, the contrast was bound to strike me as ironic. Here was Muggeridge, who had never met Gurdjieff, abundantly sure he had the measure of him: and here was Jessie, who had been with him again and again between 1924 and 1947, equally convinced she had not.

Nor was Jessie's bafflement unique or eccentric among the circle who had shared her experience. I thought of Margaret Anderson (co-editor of *The Little Review* and first to serialize Joyce's *Ulysses*), who had enviable contact, only to conclude, "But Gurdjieff is not only unknown. Perhaps he is unknowable:' or the American novelist Jean Toomer, Gurdjieff's follower on and off for 15 years, who confessed, "I do not know G. I have never known G. I never will;' or Sophia Grigorevna Ouspensky, an even more intimate pupil, who had left a powerful and touching disclaimer, not at all to be dismissed as mere obscurantism:

I do not pretend to understand Georgy Ivanovitch. For me he is X. . . . No one knows who is the real Georgy Ivanovitch, for he hides himself from all of us. It is useless for us to try to know him, and I refuse to enter any discussions about him.

Clearly Jessie's position was more defensible than Muggeridge's; and Gurdjieff as enigma more persuasive than Gurdjieff as 'charlatan,' or for that matter as immaculate icon.

Gurdjieff was a conscious actor. This is the first explanation of his 'unknowability,' and it makes good sense. The dichotomy he believed in was not between acting and sincerity but between acting and reacting: hence his admonition 'Outwardly play a role - inwardly remain free.' Acting was for him a developmental study, whose origins he set in the mystery schools of ancient Babylon. In any case, we have fascinating evidence of its contemporary possibility from Fritz Peters, who as a young boy stumbled on Gurdjieff berating Orage at the Prieure:

Although the raging was in English I was unable to listen to the words - the flow of anger was too enormous. Suddenly, in the space of an instant, Gurdjieff's

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voice stopped, his whole personality changed, he gave me a broad smile – looking incredibly peaceful and inwardly quiet – motioned me to leave, and resumed his tirade with undiminished force. This happened so quickly that I do not believe that Mr Orage even noticed the break in the rhythm.

Granted such extraordinary acting, any instant knowing of the essential Gurdjieff, any quick Muggerridge-like certitudes, seem built on sand.

The role of villain, of ‘Levantine psychic shark,’ was certainly not absent from Gurdjieff’s repertoire but should not be ignorantly torn from context. Nor too should one forget those moments when a Gurdjieff closer to his authentic benevolence revealed himself. The diary of Georgette Leblanc is eloquent here:

*Paris, 2 November 1936. A great emotion today. When I arrived at Gurdjieff’s apartment it was he himself who opened the door. I said immediately, ‘I am completely well, I am in a new body.’ The light that came from the little salon illuminated him fully. Instead of avoiding it, he stepped back and leaned against the wall. Then, for the first time, he let me see what he really is . . . as if he had torn off the masks behind which he is obliged to hide himself. His face was stamped with a charity that embraced the whole world. Transfixed, standing before him, I saw him with all my strength and I experienced a gratitude so deep, so sad, that he felt a need to calm me. With an unforgettable look he said, ‘God helps me.’*

With this problematical question of Gurdjieff’s ‘being,’ we have arrived at the second – and more fundamental – theory of his ‘unknowability.’

Simply expressed the suggestion is that Gurdjieff utterly transcended those around him; that he was not just bigger, like Gulliver in Lilliput, but of a different and incomprehensible order like the Houyhnhnms. Certainly Gurdjieff’s general phenomenology of being offered scope for such an idea, differentiating among men without the smallest compromise: ‘. . . the being of two people can differ from one another more than the being of mineral and of an animal.’ This is exactly what people do not understand. Gurdjieff himself alluded only rarely and obliquely to his personal being, but others – even some of his detractors – were more generous. At Nuttall’s Farm an example lay close to hand: among the rarest of Jessie’s books was *The Oragean Version*, Daly King’s wildly subjective exegesis of Orage’s exegesis of Gurdjieff’s teaching. King did not particularly like Gurdjieff and found him to possess only one exceptional characteristic:

*This quality he possesses to a degree not merely superior to that of any other man whom I have ever encountered but to a degree greater than it would ever have occurred to me*

*could exist, had I not met M. Gurdjieff. It is the quality, not of mind or of feeling or of successful accomplishment, but simply of being.*

Could this passage and this modality indeed hold some clue to the invisible ramparts which separate us from the essential Gurdjieff?

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Late one Sunday evening in mid-May 1980, I received a telephone call which registered as a desolate full stop: James Webb had killed himself with his own shotgun.

Only in mid-March I had written to James about his massive study of Gurdjieff and his followers:

*Dear James Webb,*

*Today I actually held in my hand a copy of your book *The Harmonious Circle*. Accept my sincere congratulations on your attainment: the intricate research, the scrupulous drafting, the exciting new perspectives, your patient struggle against unprecedented delays. Following hard on your heels with my little book *Gurdjieff and Mansfield*, I do not suppose there is anyone better qualified to salute your pioneer achievement.*

*I'm sure we shall agree amicably enough to differ slightly in critical standpoint; what has more weight is the experience we share – that strenuous effort to write a book on Gurdjieff and see it into print. Perhaps when you are next down in this direction, we could have a drink or a meal together?*

*Again my sincere congratulations.*

*James Moore*

For years I had wanted to meet him; there were so many curious questions of Gurdjieffian history which excited us both. But I was in London and he in Dumfriesshire, and while I endlessly procrastinated he had lost his grip on sanity. Now I would never meet him.

Conventional wisdom would have taken James Webb as the last person to fall prey to an morbid imagination. Was he not cheerful and energetic? Did he not enjoy, at 34, a well-deserved niche in the pantheon of British intelligentsia? Had he not displayed in his treatment of Gurdjieff (and of comparable themes in his earlier books *The Flight From Reason* and *The Occult Establishment*) a detached and ironical spirit, moulded by an education which overlaid the robust certainties of Harrow, with the suavities of Trinity College, Cambridge, and the positivist spirit of Vienna? So it seemed. And yet by 1978 this unfortunate man was suffering a 'vastation,' with classic

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symptoms of schizophrenia, persecution mania, and paranoid hallucination; he had slipped through the looking-glass into a realm where the very concepts which he had once anatomised with such hygienic nicety, assumed a horrible new life and came snarling at him with existential relevance. His keen but finely balanced mind, which had so judiciously discussed and invalidated P.D. Ouspensky's version of Eternal Recurrence, received 'a shattering vision of the "Wheel of Life" - the sight of my previous incarnations set up like a great silver wheel,' and experienced the 'sheer horror of discovering that one is imprisoned in the coils of cyclical time.' Plainly there neither can, or should, be any ignoble and tendentious debating points coaxed from James Webb's private suffering; he himself chose silence on Thursday 8 May 1980, leaving on the door a note which simply read, 'I'm asleep, come and wake me.'

Webb will not quickly be forgotten: in the field of biography he stands secure as the first author to stalk Gurdjieff with the weapons of modern scholarship, ambitious (we might honestly conclude over-ambitious) to entangle 'The Tiger of Turkestan' in the net of historical context, and impale him with the donnish lance of a trustworthy date or two. Yet Gurdjieff himself? Was he illuminated? Did Webb finally put salt on his tail? No, says Paul Zweig starkly in *The New York Times Book Review*: 'Mr. Webb . . . bludgeons us with alternative readings of Gurdjieff's actions, but we never quite see the man, or hear him: he is an empty space surrounded by evidence.' An empty space surrounded by evidence! - it is difficult to dissent.

It had been France, where Gurdjieff lived and worked for 27 years, which in 1954 repaid him with the pioneer work *Monsieur Gurdjieff Documents, Temoignages, Textes et Commentaires sur une Société Initiatique Contemporaine*. The book's begetter was Louis Pauwels a journalist of French and Flemish descent, successively editor of *Arts, Planete*, and *Question de*; a man who never met Gurdjieff, but who, in the late nineteen-forties had been fugitively associated with some beginners' study groups in Paris. It might have worked - Pauwel's idea of a composite biography, marshalling from primary sources the lengthy depositions of Gurdjieff's chief critics and disciples. It might have worked, given in its editor an authentic search and an intelligence concerned enough for truth to discriminate among sources so diverse in provenance, quality, and credibility. Such might-have-beens are the melancholy counterpoint to history. But Pauwels (like Webb) was 34, and less in quest of Gurdjieff than of fame; his book's callow sensationalism and accusatorial under-tone ironically guaranteed both its immediate success and ultimate failure.

Unreferenced, unindexed, biased and textually corrupt, *Monsieur Gurdjieff* is destined to be discarded by latter-day scholars as an aberration, and has already been disavowed by Pauwels himself as a 'sin of youth.' Yet, in France it had devastating impact; as a bestseller and the first major critique to appear, it stamped upon French sensibilities a negative impression of Gurdjieff, which has proved peculiarly stubborn. By 1958 the shock wave had reached England, and Pauwels' reckless misconstructions



linking Gurdjieff with Stalin, the Dalai Lama, and Karl Haushofer the Nazi ideologue, were trustingly paraphrased by Sir Richard Rees in *The Twentieth Century* magazine. By the early 1960s with their aura of meretricious spirituality, Pauwels' entire book, titillatingly embellished with surrealist paintings by Felix Labisse, was serialized in *Fate* magazine and published in the Isle of Man. How much one could wish that Pauwels, when he fell to his typewriter, had been older, better related to Gurdjieff, and imbued with a genuine and fervent search. But poignantly enough just such a biographer did appear, and threw into the task all his volcanic energies – and failed.

John Godolphin Bennett seemed indeed far better qualified to undertake 'the definitive book' on Gurdjieff: he had met him in Constantinople as early as January 1921; could speak with him in Russian, Greek, or fluent Turkish; and had attended him at Fontainebleau (albeit briefly) and at Rue des Colones Renards. He had entered, by dint of long experience, into the psychology of oriental peoples and the vast canon of Gurdjieffian literature; above all his quest for the essential Gurdjieff was a psychological hunger, far transcending academic curiosity. Nor was he callow when he came to his task, but a vigorous 70 and the practised author of 15 books; he enjoyed the friendship and confidence of Gurdjieff's family, access to his passport with its vital clues, and the support of many sincere well-wishers . . . What could possibly go wrong?

I remember Bennett well. I have only to close my eyes to see him again on the platform of Conway Hall or holding a candle in the Russian Church in Ennismore Gardens. His face was half modern and half medieval, and showed very well in candlelight: the lips – full and sensual beneath a trim moustache, were opposed by high ascetic cheekbones; the Grecian nose suggested an impetuous masculine force, the blue eyes were widely spaced and intensely penetrating, as though they could find out all a man's secret levers and delinquencies. He never looked very comfortable to me. He was born under the sign of Gemini, and in his remarkable nature so well revealed in his autobiography *Witness*, self-denial was twinned with egoism, probity with imposture, and an impeccable dedication to the inner search with a dangerous susceptibility to the limelight. His surface existence, in the distinguished scientific and establishment circles congenial to him, was sufficiently conformist; he evidently passed for normal in the Boardroom of Powell Duffryn and Company, and took care not to disturb the boiled-shirt somnambulism of the Athenaeum Club. But his subterranean life – the only life which mattered to him – moved under the stress of an exorbitant wish to convert the Gentiles, to compose Epistles, to appoint *episcopi*, in brief to play Paul the Apostle to his latest Saviour (whom he variously identified in a bewildering succession of Damascene conversions and tormented recantations). Gurdjieff had been for him the outstanding event; thereafter, however, in episodes of breathtaking indiscretion, he made a spiritual *tour d'horizon*, which entitles him to a niche in the history of ideas as an archetypal 'esotourist' and syncretist.

For all Bennett's frailties, his biographical contribution *Gurdjieff: Making a New World* is a noble failure: it's geographical, historical, and linguistic allusions are exciting; it is unsurpassed in differentiating epochs in Gurdjieff's life; and it conveys a strong and restless interest in his purpose and evolving methods and paradigms. Bennett takes Gurdjieff's stature and crucial importance for granted, and develops his exegesis fearlessly – as though with an eye to a 21<sup>st</sup> century which has set Gurdjieff high in the pantheon of innovative thinkers. Unfortunately Bennett's personality is simply too powerful. His messianic and millenarian syndrome guarantees a big scale but licenses within it a delirious subjectivity. The Gurdjieff of common assent is handled with insight and historical decency, but Bennett favours other 'Gurdjieffs' who are the purest creatures of his moonstruck partiality (notably Gurdjieff as lineal successor to the 11<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century Sufi 'Masters of Wisdom'). In the final analysis Bennett is a biographer with an axe to grind; even a biographer with a nest to feather: "Only you," says Bennett's Gurdjieff, "only you can repay for all my labours."

Gurdjieff has been gone fifty years. "I leave you," he reputedly murmured on his deathbed, "in a fine mess." Apocryphal though this anecdote may well be, the 'in-your-face' messiness of today's Work scene must trouble any caring and informed commentator. The master – so little exposed during his lifetime – is now advertised in an ever-burgeoning literature: academics, practitioners, critics, syncretists, extrapolators, journalists, encyclopaedists, and conference conveners . . . all jostly keenly for attention; Gurdjieffian groupings of every inflexion and lineal credibility raise their heads; a hundred Web-sites entangle the brain and ten thousand emails are downloaded into the trash-box of history. Just supposing the protagonist of this curious phenomenon were appraising it through 'his telescope on the planet Mars', we might guesstimate his "Bravos!" as hugely outnumbered by his anathemas. But (given that chalk claims its confident justification and so does cheese) what is to be done?

Already one thing seems pretty clear. Never in a hundred years, a thousand years, will the 'definitive book' on Gurdjieff appear; never will it be 'definitively' reviewed, and the subject chloroformed forever. The enigma of Gurdjieff will never be fully resolved: it will refresh, generation by generation, those profound questions and existential constants which he dramatized through his life and work; each man, each woman, each writer, in their lawful and forgivable subjectivity, will testify by their response to the quality of their understanding. A thousand flowers will bloom.

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Jessie Orage, after a short illness, died peacefully on 14 April 1985 aged 84. Her final years of life were darkened by a personal tragedy which she faced with redemptive courage. She was laid to rest with her husband at last in Hampstead under the sign of the *enneagram*. We said goodbye to her on a mild sunny day, and the landlords of *The Five Horseshoes* and *The Beehive* joined with her family and friends to sing the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm.

Standing there I felt I must do my best, against all resistance, to create a book on Gurdjieff.

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[james.moore@easynet.co.uk](mailto:james.moore@easynet.co.uk)