

On the Death of Gurdjieff: October 29, 1949

Solita Solano

Solano's open letters—describing the events of the few days leading up to Gurdjieff's death and until the funeral—were circulated to her friends, particularly Lib (Elizabeth Jenks Clark) Dorothy Caruso, Margaret (Martie) Anderson, Alice Rohrer and Kathryn (Katie) Hulme. They were members of Jane Heap's group that Gurdjieff dubbed 'The Rope' while he met regularly with them between 1935 and 1938. Solano's first set of letters appears to have been written under the immediate duress of Gurdjieff's death; the second, chronological series appears to have been compiled later. There is some repetition in the latter account.

J. W. D.

[SET 1]

Sunday, October 30, 1949

FOR EVERYONE

He's lying on a divan, covered to the throat with a pale brocade *couverture* which is piled with red roses, pink orchids, white flowers; on either side of his head are two enormous bouquets of violets. The chapel is lighted with candles. He is dressed in his best gray suit. His face is like a statue's. Yesterday he looked alive still, a slight smile made him seem so; his skin had a most curious lavender tinge. Today he is darker, the smile has gone, he's already far away, the eyes have begun to sink, the lips are in a grave line, though not quite stern. Perhaps it was the taking of the death mask that changed him, but I think not. He looks as if he had just said "Now I go away with all my secrets and my mystery. My work is finished here." All day for two days and all night last night and still tonight, the people stream to the hospital, stand in line to go in to see him. They stand in the most complete silence I have ever known and just stare at him. Nearly all are crying; yesterday when Bennett came, he burst into such sobbing that he had to leave and go outside, where we could still hear him in the distance.

He died at half past ten in the morning yesterday; I had just been telephoning for his news at ten and was told that he was the same. (I had been out at the hospital

Wednesday and Thursday afternoons, sitting for hours in the salon). I was in the hotel with Janet yesterday, Katie having gone shopping, when Russell rang up to say he was dead. As soon as I could move, I went up to Neuilly. Vera, Mme. de Salzmann, Gabo, Valya and many others were there. Vera then told me that he was in the process of being embalmed, and that we could see him as soon as he had been taken to the chapel. While waiting, she disclosed that the cause of his death was cancer of the liver; that although he had seemed to be sleeping for hours before he died, the doctor had raised his eyelids and had said G. looked back at him and was conscious. A most curious phenomenon: four hours after his death, his forehead and neck were still very warm; the doctor said he couldn't understand it.

On Friday Mme. De Salzmann had spoken to him in Russian. He did not reply but lifted his hand and held it out to her to take. She has been absolutely superb. At the service yesterday, she sat near his head with white face, closed eyes from which the tears slowly flowed. Her son Michel stood by her side. She wasn't there today at the service. A Russian priest intones the prayers, his assistant sings the responses, we all hold a lighted taper in our right hands and just gaze and gaze. The chapel is too small to hold all the people; we crowd together to make room until we are touching the funeral couch. Those who cannot enter stand outside and listen. Then when the service is finished and we go out, the crowds who are waiting pass in. Of course he is never alone, several people volunteer each night to watch; Katie has gone with Russell tonight; I shall go tomorrow or Tuesday night. On Wednesday afternoon, he will be taken to the Russian church and at eleven on Thursday will be the high requiem mass. At twelve we all go to Fontainebleau for the interment. In the meantime, there will be a mass every afternoon, for the people who heard late of his death, especially for the English who will come. Louise March flew from Vienna, where she was editing his German edition. I hear Jane Heap is ill, so perhaps she will not be able to travel. I think he would be proud of the behavior of all his people. The grief's terrible, silent (except Bennett) and has a really objective quality of dignity. Janet was so moved that she took a taxicab out to the hospital after I left and went into the chapel to join me—and Russell and Katie, who fortunately came in from her shopping and rushed out in time for the mass. It is very painful for her to leave tomorrow night for Germany and not attend his funeral and burial. But impossible to arrange, as she's now responsible—since four days ago—for all the German sector. Of my own grief, I shall not speak; it is a small part of the common catastrophe. The cable from Martie and Dorothy was perfect. I shall always be grateful for those powers that allowed me to be here to see him before he went away from the planet Earth.

Thank you Lib for telephoning. It was a comfort. All future details will be written as they occur and I will tell even more when I return. But I shall never be able to describe the noble beauty of his dead face.

Midnight, November 3, 1949

For All:

This is Thursday night, midnight, and at six o'clock we left him six feet deep in the cold, cold ground at sunset, the coffin still uncovered; the last of him I saw, and it was not he, was a long, pale brown box, with a golden cross at the head, a few roses some desperate person had thrown in with the handful of earth each of the hundreds had dropped, in accordance with the Russian custom.

MONDAY [October 31]

The previous notes I had sent to Lib, to be copied by Margaret. In the meantime, Lib had gone to Boston for her son's operation and the letter is waiting at Morristown to be sent to Margaret to copy, as I was too overwhelmed to remember the carbon.

So Monday, at the chapel of the American Hospital. He had turned to gray stone and looked even more "at peace." His suit was navy blue, not gray, as I thought. His tie was blue and crooked. Carnations had replaced the violets and roses. The brown and gray icon of St. George (his saint) and the Dragon which Gabo had brought from his (G.'s) apartment was placed at his feet. As Katie and I were sitting, with many others, at his side (the conditions were *intimate*) waiting for the priest to come, we looked up and saw Jane Heap standing at the door. Gabo rose and gave her his place next to us for the service which began in a few minutes. Katie had "watched" (*fait la veille*) the night before until half-past four in the morning. She saw the English group arrive in the night, direct from the *gare* with their little rugs and bags; they sat along the walk outside between the chapel and the hospital, on the ground "like Mexicans." Alfred also came from London, looking like alabaster. At four A.M., the French delegation took over. Streams of people came and went all night, as they did all day. Can't imagine what the American Hospital thought of all this, the hundreds of peculiar pilgrims who came and stayed and went away, all through the icy, frosty night....(one day he said to Russell, "I wish I were a REAL man, who needed to sleep only one hour each night..."). Forgive incoherency, must put things down as I think of them, or you'll never hear them. Lillian Whitcomb was in N.Y.C. when she heard the news, as was Lord Pentland. Both flew at once. Where am I? Still Monday. I waited for Jane in the hospital salon. She looked pale, but well; beige cape, good English hat, since discarded, sad to say. She kissed me tenderly and said, "And Martie went away!" I said no one

could have imagined a fatal termination, no one believed it until it happened. I couldn't really talk with her, nor have I been able to since, as individuals of her group constantly engage her attention more than I, and call her from me. We are still in the salon, as of Monday afternoon. Katie went back to the chapel to say goodbye to him again. She told me she knelt by him in prayer and then she dared to kiss him on the forehead, "cold as marble," she said. I tried to dare, but could not. She left that same night in tears for Germany. During the days she was here, she waited in vain for some word of sorrow or sympathy from Alice, as I have; not one word has come from her, so I suppose her cable was not delivered; nor has anyone in the Gurdjieff family had a message from Alice. Of course she must have sent something, so tell her that she must reproach the Western Union. What Katie really hoped was that Alice would fly to be with her—us—and go to the funeral. Mme. De Salzmann, who has been a marvel of behavior through all this, is going to America in November, she says.

Now for TUESDAY [November 1]

I'm just back from the chapel. I sat by his side, near his face (by the way, I've ordered a photograph of his dead face for all of you) for two hours. His sister, Sonya, sat beside me. Luba came from England, where she has a job with one of Jane's pupils, repeat *pupils*. Russell and G.'s nephew, Valya, spent the day in Fontainebleau in the cemetery, cleaning up the family plot, which has of course been neglected for years. Jane unfortunately did not wear her chic hat, but appeared nearly shaved. Today is her birthday, and Russell's too. A small choir came from the Russian church and sang the responses. The chief priest in the old tradition—robes, silver cross and chain, long black hair and beard, liquid black eyes and honey-voice. There were new flowers over the *tilleul* silk brocade. Someone had made tiny bouquets of red roses and lake yellow daisies. G.'s face today is grayer and the skin is tighter over the immense intelligence of his skull. Vera said, "Today is his birthday, where he has gone." (You know that three days are needed to shed the body and today they were completed. Saturday to Tuesday.) How I want to kiss him goodbye like Katie and the Russians but I didn't quite have the courage....Jane said, "He doesn't look dead." But indeed he does, since two days. Martie: When Jane and I left the chapel together, we clasped hands desperately and walked like that, exchanging memories in silence for five minutes—no need for words. All her great gift for emotions was in her hand.

WEDNESDAY [November 2]

Un froid de loup, repeat *loup*. Went in the morning to order our flowers. I thought one enormous piece would be better than six oddments. I spent ten dollars apiece for us—Dorothy, Martie, Alice, Katie, Lib, and S.S. "*De la part de ses amies américaines*—then Dorothy's name first. Hope everyone agrees. I had no instructions, so acted on my own responsibility. Oh, God, never to see that smile again, hear him say—well, no

matter what—especially for me—“Kanari.” Janet wrote about him in her *New Yorker* article; will they print it? She finished working at midnight, just as Katie telephoned she had arrived in Germany....

Now for the last day. No, Wednesday [November 2]. So worn out I don't know what I'm writing. Wednesday, yesterday, the *mise en bière*. I couldn't quite go to hospital to see him put into box, and as I found out later, I wouldn't have been allowed to—only the men of the family. I went to the Russian church at four and waited there, *debout*, till nearly six before he was brought. Six men carried him in—Russell, Valya, Gabo, Michel (Mme. de Salzmann's son), etc. Dim lovely lights, many flowers which had arrived early, vested priests and small choir for the service. Church was crowded even for that small ceremony, all golden under the incense-smoky high dome. The catafalque was covered with large black cloth, embroidered with silver. Not a sound ever issues from any gathering of his people—neither a footstep, a cough, a rustle or a breath. A remarkable quality of silence which is so rare as to be noted as unique. (Martie, thanks for the clippings and don't believe in those “last word” records, as no one thought he would die until he was so weak that he never spoke again, only held out his hand to Jeanne when she spoke to him. But shall inquire when I see her in two days, as she has asked me to).

LAST DAY [Thursday, November 3]

Janet went with me this morning at 11:30 to the high requiem mass at the Russian cathedral. There had been no *veille* permitted last night, so he had been alone till the church opened. Entirely candles, flowers, the voices of five white-and-gold robed priests, a cantor with a divine breaking voice. How beautiful is the Russian language! The church was packed—not only with those we know, but by hundreds of his followers whom we never saw, whom I had never seen in all my years near him. After all the chanting and prayers and singing were finished, for an hour everyone passed by his coffin, one by one, from the right. Each mourner, streaming with tears, made a genuflection at his head, stepped up to the icon at his feet, kissed it, and walked to the left. Each, unselfconscious, took his and her private and sorrowful farewell to him with a ceremonious simplicity that tore one's heart open even wider than before, if possible. Then everyone went away to breathe, have a drink or coffee and at two o'clock, we came back to the church. The crowds stood along the street to watch HIM brought out and put in the great funeral carriage, his flowers placed on the top. The family rode with him. The hundreds of others rode behind in the cortege in many private cars and four enormous autobuses. The streets were jammed, closed to traffic for blocks, around the Russian church and other crowds gathered to watch the spectacle. The drive to Fontainebleau took an hour and a half. I went with Lillian and some very rich silent chic tiresome English, old followers of Ouspensky. Through the old familiar roads, streets, towns, turnings, forest, to Avon. In a cruel sunny icy wind, we walked by the

hundreds through the cemetery gates, following HIM to the family plot. I saw the grave torn open in the rocky watery ground, deep, deep, horribly deep.... The porters let him down into it. A great sigh came from the people—the only sound they had made since he died, when they were together. The priest came to the rescue with his chanting. Later everyone passed by the terrible hole, cast a pinch of earth down onto the box, knelt, made the sign of the cross, passed on. It was over. He had disappeared from us forever.

Back in Paris—I don't remember coming back—we were all asked to come to the *rue des Colonels Renard* for supper, as usual after a Russian funeral. The family received us, gave us—what? I don't know. You will all know how impossible it was to walk up those stairs and enter that sacred place. But it was done. Then I came here to write you, as is my duty. Done now.

Will send or bring a photograph of him as he looked in death—and if I can, a death mask (copy, of course.)

Your loving, more dead than alive,

KANARI.

FOR EVERYONE:

Here are some addenda to the former notes which I must put down as quickly as possible, before Janet drives me away from her typewriter.

It's evident that some "highly placed" person has decided not to tell that Mr. G. had cancer. Even Lillian Whitcomb, near him from Prieuré days, did not know last night. I now have the complete medical report: Besides the tumor, his heart was dilated and his lungs were "raddled" from the bouts of coughing, bronchitis, from which he had suffered for thirty years. Only to Gabo did he speak of his pain; made him bend down one day so the others could not hear, and said, "Very, very bad pain" in Russian (*Ochen, ochen*). The night they punctured him for the 12 liters of water, he sat up in bed, accepted the local anesthetic, smoked a cigarette while they worked on him, and said he felt relieved. He wore on his head the old red fez! There was a draft from the window on his baldness. Two days before he was taken to the hospital, he called in four people who happened to be sitting in the salon through the night—Salzmann, Russell, Vera were three, I suppose Babo was the fourth—and just looked at them for a long time, saying not one word. They believe he was saying goodbye.

The priest at the Russian church stated that there has never been such a funeral before, except Chaliapin's; that he has never seen such mass grief, or such a concentration of attitude, he said, on the part of the mourners. Even the undertaker who had never seen G. before he saw him dead, broke down at the grave and wept! Just from the vibrations, I daresay.

He left a lot of money—in Switzerland, three Paris banks. His sister, Sonya, is having a full-length statue made of him, to be kept in the apartment. It will be dressed in his clothes and on his head will be placed his fur cap . . . The French group are going to keep the apartment as a sort of shrine to which we may all go. The group dances and readings are continuing. Salzmann goes to America first part of December....She will carry on his work as best she can and I suppose we will all help her. Katie has so pledged and so shall I.

I am lunching with Salzmann tomorrow and will have further news then to send you. I sail a week from today. I still have bronchitis from the cemetery blasts; I expected pneumonia.

Love to all and from Janet also.

Solita.

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Solita Solano

[SET 2]

On Tuesday, October 25, 1949, after many days in bed, Mr. G. finally consented that Dr. Welch be sent for. When Dr. W. arrived in the evening of Oct. 26 and declared to G. that he could take care of him much better if only allow himself to be hospitalized. G. refused no longer to leave his flat. As soon as the ambulance had delivered him to the American Hospital, Dr. W. tapped him for water and removed 13 litres. On the 27th I telephoned to Gabo for news: "Il est très faible, mais il ya de l'espoir." [He is very weak, but there is hope.] I rushed to the hospital to find Valya and Gabo in the salon. They told me that Dr. W. had slept – when he slept – by G's side: that G was being fed anally by glucose; there's a mysterious issue of blood that may be only a hemorrhoid; that he is so weak that he just lies there without speaking. I sat in the salon of the hospital all the afternoon.

[Friday] Oct. 28.

No change in his state since two days ago. We all sit in the hospital every day, waiting for bits of news. Valya was sent to find softest possible sheets for G's bed. The atmosphere now is that of doom, though one cannot bring oneself to believe it. Jeanne de S., Gabo and I were the last to believe that there was little hope.

[Saturday] Oct. 29.

I telephoned at 10:30 A. M. for news. "He is just the same." Les imbeciles! Half an hour later he died. Unconscious. Russell telephoned at one, just as I was preparing to leave for the hospital to sit out the afternoon again. As soon as I could move, I went to Neuilly. Jeanne, Vera, some of his family, several others were already there. We waited in the salon while he was being embalmed. Vera said 1) he had cancer of the liver, 2) the French doctor had raised G's eyelids while he was supposedly unconscious and said that G. had looked back at him, 3) that four hours after his death his forehead and neck were still warm – a curious phenomenon that the doctor could not understand.

When we were called, our little procession walked out to the hospital's chapel about a hundred feet away. G. was lying on a divan, wearing the suit brought for the American trip. His "valise" which he always called his stomach was as flat as a young man's. He was covered to the shoulders with a pale brocade cloth on which had been

laid red roses, pink orchids and white flowers; on either side of his head were two large bouquets of violets. In the candlelight his face is like a statue's. The first day his face had a slightly lavender tinge and the mouth was almost smiling. The next day he looked darker and the smile had disappeared, he was already far away, the eyes had begun to sink and the lips had a grave line. Perhaps taking the death mask had made this change. He looked as if he had just said, "Now I go away with my secrets and my mystery – my work here is finished." For two days and nights people streamed to the hospital standing in line to see him. They stand about him in the most complete silence I have ever known and just star at him. Nearly all of them crying and yesterday when Bennett came he burst into such sobs that he had to leave and go outside, where we could still hear him in the distance.

[Monday] Oct. 31.

He has turned to gray stone. Carnations have replaced the violets and roses. Gabo has brought the brown and gray icon of St. George from the apartment and placed it at G's feet. The English groups and many Ouspensky pupils arrived in the night. Many went to the chapel directly from the gare carrying their bags and rugs and sat along the walk outside on the ground like Mexicans. All groups took turns to make the veille and change over every four hours. There is a service every day at four o'clock – a priest and his assistant who chants the prayers in Russian. Russell tells me that G. once said to him "I wish I were REAL man who need to sleep only one hour each night."

[Tuesday] Nov. 1.

I sat by his side, near his face, for two hours; he is more gray today and the skin is tighter over the immense intelligence of his skull. Someone has made tiny bouquets of red roses and yellow daisies and strewn them over the pale brocade. Russell and Valya were absent, having gone to Fontainebleau to prepare the plot in the cemetery which has been rather neglected. A small choir came from the Russian Cathedral and sang the responses. The chief priest was dressed traditionally – robes, silver cross and chain, long black hair and beard, liquid black eyes and a honey voice. His sister Sonya sat besides me, crying, and Luba arrived from her job in England. Crocodile dared to kiss G's forehead to say goodbye and so did Gabo, but I neither dared, nor could I have done so if I had dared. Jane Heap said, "He doesn't look dead." Vera said, "Today is his birthday, where he has gone." I forgot to say that on the day before he died, Jeanne de S., standing by his bed, had spoken to him in Russian. He did not, could not, reply but he lifted his head and held it out for her to take. She has been superb. She sits by him with closed eyes from which the tears slowly flow, her face, without blood under the skin; and when away from him, she makes all the arrangements with Bennett. The movements group met and practiced as if he were alive. Jeanne has had people for readings, I was told. Louise March flew from Vienna – another stricken, marble face.

The chapel is so small that most of the people must stand outside to listen at the services; we crowd together with our lighted tapers until we are touching the bier. The grief is silent and terrible to see as we all gaze at the noble beauty of his dead face.

[Wednesday] Nov. 2.

Today was the *mise en bière*. I did not go as I was told that only the family would attend it. But Jeanne, Louise March, Russell and others were there. I with many others waited at four o'clock for the arrival at the Cathedral. We stood for two hours until he was brought there. (I was told the casket was too small and something had to be done about it, I don't know what.) Six bearers carried him in – Valya, Michel, Gabo, Russell, Sonya's husband. The lights were dim and lovely, many flowers already, vested priests and small choir for the service. The church was crowded, all golden under the high dome and filled with incense smoke. The catafalque was covered with black, embroidered with silver. Not a sound ever comes from any gathering of his people – neither footstep, rustle, cough, even a sigh. The quality of silence is unique. No *vielle* is permitted in the church. We all went away and left him alone.

[Thursday] Nov 3. The last day.

High requiem mass began at half-past eleven. Entirely candles, masses of flowers, the voices of five white-and-gold robed priests, a cantor with a divine breaking voice. How beautiful is the Russian language! The church was packed with all those we know and with people whom I had never seen in all those years near him. After the chanting, the prayers and the singing were finished, everyone passed singly by his coffin for an hour, from the right to the left. Each mourner made a genuflection at his head, stepped up to the icon at his feet, kissed it, stepped down and passed to the left, taking leave in a farewell of ceremonious simplicity that tore one's heart open even wider, if that were possible.

At two o'clock we all returned to the church. Crowds lined the sidewalks to watch the casket carried out and placed in the great funeral motor-car. His family rode with him. Private cars and motor-buses made a long cortège to Fontainebleau. We drove for an hour and a half, first turning to pass through G's street, his flat, through all the old familiar streets, roads, forest. In a cruel icy wind we followed on foot into the cemetery to the family plot. I saw the grave had been torn open in the rocky watery earth – deep, deep. The bearers lowered him into it. For the first time I heard a sigh, a sound like a sigh, from all the people there. The priest began to chant We all passed by the terrible hole, cast a bit of earth down onto the coffin, knelt, signed ourselves – passed on. It was over.

