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“Pythagoras or Charlatan”: Mystery-making in
Gurdjieff’s 1924 Demonstrations

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Master of Arts
in Religious Studies

by

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September 2017

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ABSTRACT

“Pythagoras or Charlatan”: Mystery-making in Gurdjieff’s 1924 Demonstrations

by
Shelby King

G.I. Gurdjieff, founder of the esoteric movement known as “The Fourth Way,” has long confounded his observers, pupils, and scholars of his life and work. This paper explores how Gurdjieff’s performative ambiguity in public self-presentations has contributed to the sense of mystery surrounding his identity and motivations as a spiritual teacher. To examine Gurdjieff’s performativity in the context of one of its most formative historical cases, my work considers his often-overlooked visit to America in 1924, when he and twenty-three of his pupils arrived from France to perform “demonstrations” of sacred dances, music, and “tricks, half-tricks, and real supernatural phenomena” for audiences in New York City, Boston, and Chicago. Revisiting primary sources from the 1924 tour alongside historical studies on religion, Orientalism, popular science, and stage magic in early twentieth-century America provides evidence to suggest that Gurdjieff’s mysterious persona was a product of his own self-fashioning, an identity that he developed as a means of inviting skepticism and debate. This analysis suggests we may reconceive Gurdjieff’s public performativity as ritualized mystery-making, constituting a provocative invitation to engage in Fourth Way praxis.

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“He is here among us,” journalist Raymond G. Carroll cautioned his readers in a January 1924 article for the *New York Evening Post*. With this portentous warning, Carroll invited his fellow Americans to join him in erring on the side of suspicion, to look askance at a man named G. I. Gurdjieff, founder of the esoteric movement known as “The Fourth Way,” whose recent arrival in New York City had sparked debate among the metropolitan intelligentsia and *avant-garde* circles of the day. In describing Gurdjieff’s appearance, Carroll painted him as mystical, exotic, even severe, with “powerful black eyes,” sporting “a black mustache which rides his upper lip like a whipstock” and a head shaved “after the fashion of a Brahmin.” Carroll’s ominous tone muddied the takeaway of his half-hearted jest that, in order to follow the Fourth Way, “one must surrender all worldly goods, turn them in to the Master for the common good of the cult and its further propagation.”¹ The indeterminacy of the truth to Carroll’s assessment of Gurdjieff and his “cult” echoed the ambiguity of the public’s debate over their strange visitor. Was Gurdjieff “a new Pythagoras or a charlatan?”² Ambiguity held these two poles in tension, and Gurdjieff’s own inconclusiveness on the matter effectively fueled the debate over his authenticity—a debate that left its participants to discern between truth and deception, magic “tricks” and “real” magic, and masks and true selves.

Georgii Ivanovich Gurdjieff was a man of many faces, places, and personas, and the complex and often contradictory histories told of his life through print media and hearsay effectively contributed to his growing air of mystery.³ He was one among many mystics

¹ Raymond G. Carroll, “Gurdjieff Heads the Newest Cult Which Harks Back to Ancient Days,” *New York Evening Post* (26 January 1924).

² Gorham Munson, *The Awakening Twenties: A Memoir-History of a Literary Period* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 256.

³ *Ibid.*, 255.

hailing from the East at the time, described by observers in a number of Orientalist tropes—a mysterious man with hypnotic eyes, a dangerous magus, a swindling fakir, a sultry olive-skinned charmer, a profound and enlightened being, a fraud in a fez hat.⁴ The newspapers struggled to get his name right, and much less could they determine his origin or ethnicity—he was of Greek and Armenian descent, born in Alexandropol among the Caucasus Mountains (now Gyumri), lived in Petrograd (now St. Petersburg), fled Russia in the uprising of the Bolshevik Revolution, and by the time of his arrival in New York City, had recently relocated to Fontainebleau, France to instruct pupils.⁵ To further confuse matters, Gurdjieff's curious observers rarely heard the man himself speak, as his limited conversational English meant much of what he said came through the words of pupils serving as translators.⁶ Efforts to situate Gurdjieff, both in space and time, were made all the more complicated by the fact that his date of birth was (and still is) unknown, listed differently according to each official

⁴ For example, journalist Ernest Brennecke reported on his experiences visiting the Institute, claiming that pupils “are guided by a magician and powerful figure, an adept in Eastern ‘magic,’ to whom they submit themselves in everything they do or think. ... Slightly squinting eyes, full, wide nostrils and a mouth hidden by a dropping mustache betrayed little or no emotion, except, perhaps, a species of cold amusement. Perhaps, also, more than a faint trace of cruelty. A cigarette drooped from one corner of his mouth.” Ernest Brennecke, “Behind the Scenes at Gurdjieff’s Weird Chateau of Mysteries,” *New York World* (25 November 1923); Another piece appearing prior to Gurdjieff’s arrival claims that “the priest sits behind his silken curtains and ‘sees all’ without being observed.” “Fontainebleau’s High Priest and His Cult,” *Sunday Constitution Magazine*, (29 April 1924); “From time to time the originators and high priests of various strange creeds of health, philosophy or spiritual conduct float over to America, and the latest strange bird to arrive here (where dollars are easy to pick up) is ‘Dr.’ George Gurdjieff. ... Dr. Gurdjieff has cast his eye especially upon five Americans whom he believes could put some...feathers in his hair. Then soft music should play for him while he is made to taste perfumed wine and to give himself up both to the intoxication of the vine and the dance.” “Dr. Gurdjieff and His Magical Secrets of Life,” *New York American Weekly* (10 February 1924); “Some [of the dances to be demonstrated] are heavenly he said. Others are so satanic that they would quickly burn out the marrow of the untrained disciple.” “Superman Cult Founder Coming,” *The Boston Post* (29 February 1924).

⁵ For example, “the Russian philosopher and sage.” “Dr. Gurdjieff and His Magical Secrets of Life”; “Gurdjieff is a Russian. ... [He explained his theory] in a queer dialect which included snatches of Hindu, French, Russian and unknown brogues.” “Three-Man Theory Advanced by Russian on Arrival in U.S.,” *Lubbock Morning Avalanche* (20 January 1924); Also see “Pupils Give Demonstration,” *New York Herald* (4 March 1924); “Pupils Give Demonstration,” *New York Times* (5 March 1924); Knopf Publisher’s Announcement, “Cosmic Star of Newest Seer to Light New York Horizon,” quoted in Paul Beekman Taylor, *Gurdjieff’s America: Mediating the Miraculous* (Lighthouse Editions Limited, 2004), 49.

⁶ See, for example, Claude Bragdon’s claim that “Gurdjieff spoke English badly and understood it scarcely at all,” Claude Bragdon, *More Lives Than One*, 327, quoted in Paul B. Taylor, *Gurdjieff and Orage: Brothers in Elysium* (York Beach, ME: Weiser Books, 2001), 45.

form of identification (all of which he burned in 1930—including his birth certificate, passports, and identification cards). With speculations of pupils and scholars alike ranging from 1866 to 1880, Gurdjieff would have been anywhere between forty-four and fifty-eight years old when he arrived in America.⁷ While he may have been difficult to place in space and time, as Gurdjieff and his pupils disembarked the CGT *Paris* in New York City on January 6, 1924, one thing was clear to his American observers—the mysterious Gurdjieff was certainly *here*, among them.

Despite Carroll’s attestations, Gurdjieff was not “frankly seeking converts” in America; as we will see, Gurdjieff’s activities and modes of self-presentation in America negate the usefulness of such a simple reduction. He arrived in New York City, along with twenty-three of his pupils, from Fontainebleau, France, where Gurdjieff had recently converted an old priory into the official center for instruction in the Fourth Way—the Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man.⁸ Broadly, the troupe’s agenda was to share Gurdjieff’s teachings with audiences in New York City, Boston, and Chicago. While their itinerary certainly included the well-trodden public lecture circuit, Gurdjieff and his pupils also came prepared with something more than the run-of-the-mill. They had spent months together developing and perfecting an idiosyncratic medium for sharing the Fourth Way teachings

⁷ Thomas de Hartmann and Olga de Hartmann, *Our Life with Mr. Gurdjieff*, enlarged edn. rev. by C. T. Daly and T. A. G. Daly (London: Arkana Penguin Books, 1992), 256; Regarding the confusion surrounding Gurdjieff’s age, Kenneth Walker’s statements are particularly evocative: “although Gurdjieff was said to be over eighty years of age there was not a line on his face.” Kenneth Walker: “Gurdjieff, the Unknown Man,” *Tomorrow* (New York, Winter 1952-1953), reprinted in *Gurdjieff International Review* 3, no. 1 (Fall 1999), <http://www.gurdjieff.org/walker1.htm>; Attempts by the press to pin-point his age were rarely consistent. One article claimed, “He has given a lifetime to its [his system’s] study, and he is now on the shady side of fifty.” “To Teach America to Dance its Troubles Away,” *Syracuse Herald* (17 February 1924); According to Paul B. Taylor, Gurdjieff “once carried a passport that noted the date of his birth as sometime in the distant future.” Taylor, *Gurdjieff’s America*, 264-65; For more on the confusion surrounding Gurdjieff’s origins and age, see Johanna Petsche, *Gurdjieff and Music: The Gurdjieff/de Hartmann Piano Music and its Esoteric Significance* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2015), 40.

⁸ Gurdjieff and his pupils officially settled into the Institute’s new home base in the Prieuré des Basses Loges on 1 Oct 1922. Paul Beekman Taylor, *G. I. Gurdjieff: A New Life* (Eureka Editions, 2008), 226.

through a series of elaborate public performances. These performances were meant to convey the types of knowledge and embodied perceptual skills that Fourth Way pupils could cultivate by “harmonizing” what Gurdjieff identified as the distinct physical, emotional, and intellectual centers of their beings. His teachings illuminated the autonomous and often conflicting characteristics of all three centers, which, when left to operate independently and out of balance with one another, gave rise to the baffling, distressing, and painful experiences of modernity. Thus, we can only begin to understand ourselves and our social interactions by first closely observing our three centers. Gurdjieff distinguished his teachings from other spiritual paths that proposed special methods for perfecting only one of these centers. The monk, for instance, seeks control over the emotions, the yogi over the mind, and the fakir over the body. Gurdjieff’s method, put simply, combined the distinct ways of the monk, the yogi, and the fakir into a more encompassing “Fourth Way” that made self-improvement possible by harmonizing the pupil’s three centers.

While the performances Gurdjieff choreographed were designed to convey his teachings, the strategies he employed to advertise, explain, and conduct them indicate they were also designed to conjure mystery. Notably, Gurdjieff did not participate in the performances himself, but rather stood off-stage directing his pupils, occasionally peeking out from behind the wings of the stage to whet the appetites of audience members who were curious to see the mysterious man with their own eyes. He advertised the performances in the press as “demonstrations” of some of the sacred music, bodily exercises, and supernatural phenomena he had discovered in ancient sources during his explorations in the Far East. The bodily exercises, or “Movements,” in Fourth Way terminology, were performed to sacred musical numbers played on piano by pupil and acclaimed Russian composer Thomas de Hartmann.

These Movements included sacred dances and ritual ceremonials performed by larger groups of pupils, as well as individual and small-group “gymnastics.” These exercises were choreographed in accordance with Gurdjieff’s teachings on cosmic principles and their manifestations in human behavior, a design which ultimately gave the pupils’ movements a precisely coordinated, geometric, and sometimes even rigid quality. In striking contrast, the variously colored sashes adorning the performers’ uniformly white costumes lent kaleidoscopic beauty to the patterned symmetry of their moving bodies. Press reviews and recollections from audience members often described these exercises in terms of the exotic, casting them in an Orientalist dreamscape, all the more remarkable in the rhythms and patterns that set them apart from Western notions of dance and gymnastics.⁹

⁹ “The program began with the dancers in an almost military order of seven files and three rows, but costumed with quite unmilitary softness. Both men and women wore white tunics over full white trousers gathered at the ankle, much like the Rajput way of dressing, with its yielding responsiveness to bodily motion. The tunics were belted with wide sashes, looped on the left side, in the seven colors of the spectrum, and for the first few movements the dancers stood in the order: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet. Though they remained so for the ‘obligatories,’ their swift movement in complex figures appeared to make the colors change and shift. Someone in the audience said that it seemed like watching white light passed very slowly through a prism and breaking into its spectral order.” Louse Welch, *Orage with Gurdjieff in America* (Boston / London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), 5–6; As audience member (and soon-to-be Fourth Way pupil) Charles Stanley Nott recalled from his impressions of the Movements performed at one of the first New York City demonstrations, he was struck with a nostalgic chord, transported back through memory to a tour he had taken of a temple in Northern China. The music and dances surfaced memories of the temple’s variously colored tiles which seemed to shift and distort before his eyes as he moved closer to the attraction. Much like those variously colored tiles, the performing pupils adorned their uniformly white costumes with variously colored sashes that lent kaleidoscopic beauty to their moving bodies. Nott recalled that as he approached the Chinese temple, it was the “effect of the perspective, the changing shapes,” that made such an “extraordinary impression” on him. The impression was one of distorted perception: “it was as if they, not I, were moving,” Nott thought. The “moving” tiles “conveyed an impression of light and colour, of emotional and mental freedom, a harmonious wholeness, a sense of perfection that something in me longed for.” And so, too, did the demonstrations. Charles Stanley Nott, *Teachings of Gurdjieff: A Pupil’s Journal* (London: Arkana, 1990), 68; For more on Gurdjieff’s “Movements,” see Joseph Azize, “Gurdjieff’s Sacred Dances and Movements,” in Carole Cusack and Alex Norman (eds.), *Handbook of New Religions and Cultural Production* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012), 297-330; Johanna Petsche, “The Sacred Dance of the Enneagram: The History and Meanings Behind G.I. Gurdjieff’s Enneagram Movements,” *Fieldwork in Religion* 11, no. 1 (2016): 53-75; For more on Gurdjieff and music, see Johanna Petsche, “G.I. Gurdjieff’s Piano Music and its Application in and Outside ‘the Work,’” in Cusack and Norman (2012), 271-296; Johanna Petsche, “Gurdjieff and de Hartmann’s Music for Movements,” *Alternative Spirituality and Religion Review* 4, no. 1 (2013): 92-121; Johanna Petsche, *Gurdjieff and Music* (2015); Gert-Jan Blom, *Oriental Suite: The Complete Orchestral Music 1923-1924* (Netherlands: Basta Audio Visuals, 2006).

As public audiences and press agents seemed to agree, these exercises contrasted sharply with expressionist dance performances *en vogue* at the time in metropolitan avant-garde entertainment.¹⁰ Taken together, the sacred dances, ceremonials, gymnastics, and ritual movements confounded and mystified observers in their overall resistance to ordinary categories of artistic expression, as evident in the following excerpt from the *Chicago Daily Tribune* review of the demonstration performed at Chicago's famous Orchestra Hall (21 March 1924):

“It was not in any respect a theatrical reproduction...they were uncommonly interesting, if only from the fact that their effect came only from bodily expression. And this expression ran all the way from the ventral unease of the old streets of Cairo shows, through an ornate shimmy to some striking and lovely pictorial effects. Many were of extraordinary intricacy, the more so that it was an intricacy little known by the western world. Some of the bodily movements were in opposition to the rhythm of the music; in others the hands followed the music while the feet opposed it. In still others the positions were reversed. There were some group ceremonials that would make the fortune of a modern stage manager if he knew how to work them, for the members of each half of the group were all performing different movements and yet the two halves were in exact, geometric symmetry. Seldom does one see such perfection of rhythm. The effect was rather breath taking.”¹¹

The *Daily Tribune* reporter's reflections are telling, insofar as they capture the gist of what most reviews and memoirs from audience members similarly noted: these dances and exercises were like nothing they had ever seen before. They were non-Western in their intricacy, reminiscent of the “ventral unease” of the belly-dancing performers that so

¹⁰ “Nothing like these dances had ever been seen in New York,” literary critic Gorham Munson recalled, “and they aroused intense interest.” Gorham Munson, “Black Sheep Philosophers: Gurdjieff—Ouspensky—Orage,” *Tomorrow* 9 (1950): 20-25, reprinted in *TAT Journal*, 9 (Spring 1998), 4; “Apart from the difficulty of describing them, the Movements defy tidy categorization of any type.” Joseph Azize, “Gurdjieff's Sacred Dances and Movements,” 303; As Gurdjieff would later explain to a group of potential patrons in New York City, his aim in directing these demonstrations “was to introduce, in this way, into the process of the everyday life of people the significance of these ideas, and to show the practical results to which they could lead—ideas based on material I had collected in different parts of Asia inaccessible to the average man.” “The Material Question” in G. I. Gurdjieff, *Meetings with Remarkable Men* (New York: Penguin Arkana, 1985), 291.

¹¹ Edward Moore, “Dances of Old and Far Away Revealed by Gurdjieff Pupils,” *Chicago Daily Tribune* (22 March 1924), 17.

delighted (and scandalized) American audiences years before at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair.¹² The perfection of their execution, moreover, marked these performances as something more than the everyday theatrical reproduction—something magical, perhaps even sacred.¹³

These public responses were, in part, shaped by the rhetoric Gurdjieff and his pupils employed in press commentary, lectures, and the explanations and background information provided to audiences of the demonstrations. The “ancient sacred dance,” for instance, was introduced to audience members as “not only the medium for an aesthetic experience, but also a book as it were, containing a definite piece of knowledge. Yet it is a book which not everyone may read who would—which not everyone can read who will.”¹⁴ This introduction conveyed to audiences that behind surfaces appearances, these movements were more than mere dances—they held esoteric knowledge and thus had deeper sacred significance. Furthermore, this rhetoric challenged audience members to align themselves with the select few who had the capacity to “read” the knowledge encoded within and embodied by the pupils’ movements.

¹² For more on Orientalist dance in America, see “Eastern Femininities for Modern Women, 1893-1930” in Susan Nance, *How the Arabian Nights Inspired the American Dream: 1790-1935* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 171-204; Also see “Belly-Dancing’s Defender” in Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Heaven’s Bride: The Unprintable Life of Ida C. Craddock, American Mystic, Scholar, Sexologist, Martyr, and Madwoman* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 1-32; For more on the Chicago World’s Fair, see Rev. John H. Barrows, ed., *The World’s Parliament of Religions: An Illustrated and Popular Story of the World’s First Parliament of Religions, Held in Chicago in Connection with The Columbian Exposition of 1893, Vol. II* (Chicago: The Parliament Publishing Co., 1893); Richard Hughes Seager, *The Dawn of Religious Pluralism: Voices From the World’s Parliament of Religions, 1893* (Open Court Publishing, 1993).

¹³ See Michael Taussig’s discussion of magical efficacy as dependent upon the magician’s skill and technique in executing the “trick.” He advances a potential definition of magic as involving “a supreme level of technique, so rarefied and skilled that it passes from ‘mere’ technique to something else we might dignify as magic or even sacred...” Michael Taussig, “Viscerality, Faith, and Skepticism: Another Theory of Magic,” in Nicholas B. Dirks (ed.), *In Near Ruins: Cultural Theory at The End of the Century* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 221-56 [250-51 cited].

¹⁴ G. I. Gurdjieff, *Gurdjieff’s Early Talks: in Moscow, St Petersburg, Essentuki, Tiflis, Constantinople, Berlin, Paris, London, Fontainebleau, New York, and Chicago, 1914-1931* (London: Book Studio, 2014), 277.

This challenge was amplified, even eclipsed, by the demonstration’s finale—a series of “tricks, half-tricks, and real supernatural phenomena.” To observers, these phenomena seemed indistinguishable, differing only in the degree of their concealed artificiality. They were introduced to audiences as evidence of the “quickness of mind and attention” and “capacity for a critical observation” that pupils of Gurdjieff’s Institute could develop through Fourth Way practices. Audiences were told that while all three categories of phenomena would be performed as if genuine, the task of discernment would be left up to them.¹⁵ This task highlights Gurdjieff’s engagement with his observers’ skepticism and perceptiveness and his interest in challenging them to distinguish between truth and deception, a challenge that echoed throughout the entirety of his 1924 tour.

The impact of Gurdjieff’s demonstrations on audience members ranged from awe to downright confusion, and in some cases, even fear.¹⁶ Yet beyond the demonstrations of

¹⁵ “Tricks” were introduced as “phenomena which are brought about artificially, whereas the performer pretends that they result from this or that source of natural force.” “Half-tricks,” or “semi-tricks,” on the other hand, were explained as “phenomena which are produced neither by deceit nor in the way in which they are explained...produced through laws different from those to which they are ascribed and at the same time not artificial in their essence.” And finally, “real supernatural phenomena,” the audience learned, transcended what “official science” could explain: “Their study is organized in the Institute very seriously and in full accordance with the methods of Western science. Not all members or pupils are admitted to it. Three conditions are essential. The first is a high Western education in some special branch; the second is a naturally persevering and sceptical [sic] mind; the third and most important is the necessary preliminary assurance of the future trustworthiness of the pupil to make sure that he will not abuse the knowledge he may thus acquire for the pursuit of egoistic aims. As regards the tricks, their study is considered necessary both for the future investigators of genuine phenomena and for every pupil of the Institute; not only does their cognizance free a man from many superstitions but it also introduces in him a capacity for critical observation indispensable to the study of the real phenomena which requires a perfectly impartial attitude, a judgment unburdened of pre-established beliefs.” Nott, *Teachings of Gurdjieff*, 16-17. For a similar account, see the transcript “Movements, Exercises, Demonstrations: New York 1924: General Introduction” in Gurdjieff, *Gurdjieff’s Early Talks*, 277-87.

¹⁶ See, for example, audience member Louise Welch’s recollection of the “Stop exercise,” part of the series of sacred gymnastics. It was apparently so impressive that it has made its way into virtually every account of the demonstrations, from the recollections of audience members and press reviews to current secondary scholarship, even becoming something of a cliché in the literature. “As soon as the dancer hears the shout to stop, Orage explained, he must ‘freeze’ and remain motionless until the signal to melt into his more usual posture. There were several explanations for the exercise, he told them. Since the body is made to stop in quite unplanned positions, the dancer cannot help but observe himself in a new situation—between postures, as it were. This was one way to break the vicious circle of his automatism. But no explanation could wholly prepare either the pupils or the audience for the stop exercise. Those who saw it were electrified. Some reported their

Movements and supernatural phenomena, the “most controversial topic at intelligentsia gatherings... that spring and into the summer months,” a topic thoroughly drenched in the rhetoric of skepticism and discernment, was Gurdjieff himself. From pupil to press to public more broadly, the reflections offered by Gurdjieff’s American observers coalesce around various attempts to grapple with his mysterious persona—with who he *really* was, with what was *really* going on behind the baffling phenomena his pupils performed in demonstrations, and with what he was *really* doing in America. Questions regarding Gurdjieff’s authenticity and the truth behind his public personas have been taken up by scholars who have chipped away at the mysteries of his identity by tracing the *real* sources of his teachings in support of or in contrast to his claims. From scholars who have investigated Gurdjieff’s claims to have traveled to the Far East in search of ancient wisdom, to reporters who were too skeptical of his “cult” to be convinced of his good intentions, to public debates over his status as “Pythagoras or charlatan” among the intelligentsia, authenticity appears to be the central battleground for and about Gurdjieff.¹⁷

The 1924 tour provides an opportunity for exploring the somewhat abstract notion of Gurdjieff’s performativity through its more concrete materialization in discrete performance

reaction as fear. Others were shocked into the vision of a new human possibility. Others reported that the dancers, still frozen in the stop, fell off the stage into the orchestra pit. That did not, of course, actually happen, but the shock of the immediate and complete obedience to the shouted signal dazzled the audience in unforeseen ways.” Welch, *Orage with Gurdjieff in America*, 5-6; Also see pupil Tcheslaw Tchekhovitch’s recollection of one audience member who expressed his fear to Gurdjieff during a Q&A session following a Chicago demonstration: Tcheslaw Tchekhovitch, *Gurdjieff: A Master in Life: Recollections of Tcheslaw Tchekhovitch*. (Toronto: Dolmen Meadow Editions, 1990), 128-133.

¹⁷ Dean MacCannell locates the dialectic of authenticity “at the heart of the development of all modern social structure,” arguing that the concerns it raises “conserve a solidarity at the level of the total society, a collective agreement that reality and truth exist somewhere in society, and that we ought to be trying to find them and refine them.” Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1999), 155; Also see T. J. Jackson Lears’ discussion on antimodernist interests among Americans for whom “the quest for authenticity conceals a desperate flight from a meaningless existence.” T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture 1880-1920* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), 305.

acts, namely, his modes of self-presentation to the press and to audiences at his demonstrations. This lens of performativity allows us to assess the characteristics of embodiment and speech (i.e. performance acts) that both Gurdjieff and his audience associated with authenticity and deception.¹⁸ Performance, as Elin Diamond has argued, is a “contested space, where meanings and desires are generated, occluded, and of course multiply interpreted.”¹⁹ The mystery Gurdjieff’s observers attributed to him during his 1924 tour, when read alongside debates his presence in America raised, point to the American cultural conventions for performing authenticity that his public personas met or challenged. For instance, his strategic invisibility during demonstrations, occasionally peeking out from the wings to flash his powerful black eyes to observant audience members, challenged the visibility that Enlightenment-shaped sensibilities upheld as conventional means for assessing truthfulness. A skeptical eye might have read his strategic self-concealment as shady; a more hopeful eye might have sensed the power of mystery in the unseen and unknown.²⁰ Take, for another example, Gurdjieff’s enlisting of rhetoric that invoked the Far East and its ancient wisdom, whether in describing himself and his experiences to the press or in framing the explanatory introductions to the demonstrations. This rhetoric conjured the magical and mystical imagery that so spectacularly seduced Western Orientalist imagination. The readily available examples of other spiritual teachers also touting Eastern wisdom, by contrast, signaled the possible presence of fraudulence in exploitations of fad.

¹⁸ Though I only infrequently engage with her work in this paper, I have found Judith Butler’s definition of performativity to be helpful for grasping its wider significance in historico-cultural studies such as this. Performativity, Butler argues, “is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition.” Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 12.

¹⁹ Elin Diamond (ed), *Performance and Cultural Politics* (London and NY: Routledge, 1996), 4-5.

²⁰ The “known unknown,” Taussig writes, is “a species of knowledge no less political than it is mysterious.” Taussig, “Viscerality, Faith, and Skepticism,” 250.

Revisiting the 1924 tour in America provides an illuminating frame for (re)considering Gurdjieff's mysterious persona as a product of his own self-fashioning, an identity that I suggest he developed as a means of inviting skepticism and debate.²¹ Tracing a lineage of Gurdjieff's self-fashioning, I examine the process by which he manipulated cultural conventions and social expectations and thereby generated the mysterious personas that his American observers perceived throughout his 1924 tour. Identifying his public personas, from his early career to his 1924 tour, I explore the development of this mysterious identity and, focusing particularly on the series of "tricks, half-tricks, and real supernatural phenomena," I show how this persona was re-inscribed in a new context through his American demonstrations.

To retell the story of 1924, however, is to dwell within ambiguity and mystery, reorienting us from questions of Gurdjieff's authenticity to observations of his performed inauthenticity. Tracing the ways in which Gurdjieff culled, crafted, and conveyed mystery, from his performed public personas to the staged performances of his 1924 demonstrations, highlights a continuing engagement with his audience's skepticism and discernment.²² Much as the "tricks" of his demonstrations beckoned associations of illusion and deception, Gurdjieff's public personas signaled to many observers an all-too-obvious occlusion of

²¹ I am building primarily upon the works of Neil Harris, Michael Leja, James Cook, and David Walker—historians who have each convincingly argued that this tendency toward skepticism influenced much of the nineteenth and early twentieth-century American encounter with public attractions. Furthermore, these historians have demonstrated the variety of modes by which skepticism was rendered functional and strategically employed by promoters of these attractions. Neil Harris, *Humbug: The Art of P. T. Barnum* (University of Chicago Press, 1973); Michael Leja, *Looking Askance: Skepticism and American Art from Eakins to Duchamp* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); James W. Cook, *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum* (Harvard University Press, 2001); David Walker, "The Humbug in American Religion: Ritual Theories of Nineteenth-Century Spiritualism," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 23, no. 1 (Winter 2013): 30-74.

²² Neil Harris has explored P.T. Barnum's career as an engagement with his audience's curiosity through a characteristic "operational aesthetic." Harris, *Humbug*, 77-79.

identity—echoing the etymological origins of the Latin *persona*, meaning “mask.”²³ Like all masks, Gurdjieff’s public personas dared his curious observers to acknowledge and imagine the mysterious presence of the *real* identity they concealed.²⁴ From the storied gaps in his autobiographical claims to the demonstration’s challenge of discernment, Gurdjieff signaled mystery to his American audience through public performances of conspicuous concealment. As I will argue, this performative play with concealment and revelation allows us to reconceive Gurdjieff’s public personas as ritualized mystery-making and as a provocative invitation to engage in Fourth Way praxis. Through his explicit and implicit calls for discernment between truth and deception, Gurdjieff guided his audience to adopt a hermeneutic of suspicion as they observed and interpreted his performative mystery.²⁵

²³ Pupil Thomas de Hartmann similarly addresses Gurdjieff’s personas as masks: “Mr Gurdjieff always had this uncanny ability to assume the mask of a person whom he wished to portray.” De Hartmann, *Our Life*, 191; According to the suspicious observer Jessie Dwight, Gurdjieff’s technique of concealing his true motivations was “so blatantly subtle—so like an elephant trying to be a snake.” Quoted in Paul B. Taylor, *Gurdjieff and Orage*, 66; In Taylor’s words, Gurdjieff “was a trickster whose many roles challenged the reading of a single nucleate center beneath them.” Ibid, 252.

²⁴ Gurdjieff’s self-concealing public personas functioned as “the skin of the secret,” as Taussig phrases it, “announcing the existence of secrecy through marvelously ritualized permutations of concealment and revelation concerning the known unknown.” Taussig, “Viscerality, Faith, and Skepticism,” 250.

²⁵ I have built my understanding of Gurdjieff’s public personas as ritualized mystery-making from Michael Taussig’s work on revelation and concealment as ritual performances. In particular, I have drawn on Taussig’s discussions on magic practitioners and shamanic healers whose strategic playing with revelation and concealment serve to conjure mystery for observers (participants, no less than ethnographers) and performers alike. See Michael Taussig, “Viscerality, Faith, and Skepticism”; I use the term “hermeneutic of suspicion” in reference to Paul Ricoeur’s aligning of Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche under a common heading as thinkers who have employed such an approach—one that, for Ricoeur, indicates a method of interpretation in which “to seek meaning is no longer to spell out the consciousness of meaning, but to *decipher its expressions*.” Ricoeur considers Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche to be “masters of suspicion,” insofar as each created “a mediate *science* of meaning, irreducible to the immediate consciousness of meaning. What all three attempted, in different ways, was to make their ‘conscious’ methods of deciphering coincide with the ‘unconscious’ work of ciphering which they attributed to the will to power, to social being, to the unconscious psychism.” See Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (Yale University Press, 1970), 32-36; Like Ricoeur’s three “masters of suspicion,” Gurdjieff taught a “Fourth Way” that professed a new method for understanding oneself and others by harmonizing the three distinct, autonomous, and naturally conflicting centers of being—moving/physical, thinking/intellectual, and feeling/emotional centers. We see this “hermeneutic of suspicion” evoked in the Demonstrations, which encouraged audiences to “read” the “book” performed on stage for its deeper esoteric meaning. Joshua Gunn has examined a similar dynamic in what he calls the “occultic,” an occult rhetoric employed in esoteric discourse in order to indicate the presence of deeper hidden meaning to be explored beneath an exoteric surface-level interpretation. Joshua Gunn, *Modern Occult Rhetoric: Mass Media and the Drama of Secrecy in the Twentieth Century* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005) [especially the introduction, xv-xxix].

Calling his observers to question the self-evidence of reality, Gurdjieff encouraged them to consider the possibility of something *real* beneath deception—a real face behind his public personas, “real supernatural phenomena” belied by “tricks and half-tricks.”

The Significance of Gurdjieff’s 1924 Tour

The 1924 series of demonstrations in America are often overlooked in critical works within the historiography of Gurdjieff scholarship. When addressed, it is often only by way of tracing biographical moments of Gurdjieff’s career or as one component of broader interests in Gurdjieff’s teachings. For some scholars, the 1924 demonstrations represent but one site in which to locate Gurdjieff through a lifelong process of global exchange.

Chronological studies mark the 1924 tour as a mere five-month sojourn, a small speck within a much more extensive history of multiply meaningful moments in Gurdjieff’s career. For other scholars, the dances his pupils performed for audiences in 1924 have constituted a minor point of interest in larger explorations of the embodied forms of Fourth Way practices (particularly the “Movements”). The 1924 tour thus exists primarily as a cursory note, but rarely as an event of focused interest.²⁶ Granted, these works have contributed much to our

²⁶ For works that address the 1924 tour in this way (i.e., an event subsumed under more significant themes for the author’s particular focus), see the following: For chronologies, see Appendix in Mohammad H. Tamdgidi, *Gurdjieff and Hypnosis: A Hermeneutic Study* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 237-52. See also Johanna Petsche, “A Gurdjieff Genealogy: Tracing the Manifold Ways the Gurdjieff Teaching Has Travelled,” *International Journal for the Study of New Religions* 4, no. 1 (2013): 49-79; For works on Gurdjieff’s “Movements” and music, see Johanna Petsche, *Gurdjieff and Music* (2015), 55-77, 97, 110-33, 221-35; Johanna Petsche, “The Sacred Dance of the Enneagram” (2016); John Mangan, “Thomas de Hartmann: A Composer’s Life,” *Notes* (Second Series) 53, no. 1 (September 1996), 18-29; For broader assessments of Gurdjieff’s career, see chapters 3-6 in Paul B. Taylor, *Gurdjieff’s America*, 31-70; Chapters 3-5 in Paul B. Taylor, *Gurdjieff and Orage*, 41-134; George Baker and Walter Driscoll, “Gurdjieff in America: An Overview,” in Timothy Miller (ed.), *America’s Alternative Religions* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 259-265; Rather than an intentionally hushed discussion, I suspect this gap in the historiography of Gurdjieff scholarship has much to do with what scholars have found to be of greater importance relative to Gurdjieff’s life and career changes—that is, his near fatal car crash in France less than one month after his departure from America, and shortly thereafter, his decision to officially close the Institute in Fontainebleau. Both of these

understanding of critical moments in Gurdjieff's career, and the collaborative efforts of scholars Johanna Petsche, Steven Sutcliffe, Joseph Azize, Carole Cusack, and David Pecotic have generated a staggering set of resources to trace the development of significant themes in Gurdjieff's Fourth Way teachings.²⁷ Building on their insights and discoveries, I hope to contribute to a deeper understanding of Gurdjieff by returning to his 1924 demonstrations in America in order to shift the lens of the historiographical focus to a closer examination of Gurdjieff's public personas.

events have factored into some of the most influential works in Gurdjieff scholarship, and given their temporal proximity, they are often (and perhaps for good reason) understood to be related. Both events remain controversial, not only in pupil accounts but also among scholars. Some pupils speculated Gurdjieff's accident was a deliberate act, and their reasons are numerous. Likewise, pupils and scholars alike have speculated Gurdjieff announced his intentions to close the Institute for pedagogical purposes—to forcefully distance himself from pupils whose dependence upon him (otherwise understood as their problematic devotion to him) distracted them from the central Fourth Way practice of “working on oneself.” For more on interpretations of Gurdjieff's accident and closure of the Institute, see Taylor, *Gurdjieff's America*, 66-75; Taylor, *Gurdjieff and Orage*, 78-84; Taylor, *A New Life*, 118-24; Nott, *Teachings of Gurdjieff*, 80-85.

²⁷ See works produced by these authors in collaboration on a special issue on Gurdjieff studies, Steven Sutcliffe and Carole M. Cusack (eds.), *International Journal for the Study of New Religions* 6, no. 2 (2015): 109-217. For specific articles in this issue, see Steven Sutcliffe and Carole M. Cusack, “G. I. Gurdjieff and the Study of Religion/s,” 109-114; Steven J. Sutcliffe, “Gurdjieff as a *Bricoleur*: Understanding the ‘Work’ as a *Bricolage*,” 117-137; Joseph Azize, “The Practice of Contemplation in the Work of Gurdjieff,” 139-56; Carole M. Cusack “Intentional Communities in the Gurdjieff Teaching,” 159-76; Michael Pittman, “Orality and Refractions of Early Literary Textualizations in Gurdjieff's *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*,” 179-95; Also see Joseph Azize, “Gurdjieff's Sacred Dances and Movements”; Joseph Azize, “The Four Ideals”: A Contemplative Exercise by Gurdjieff. *ARIES* 13 (2013): 173–203; Carole M. Cusack, “An Enlightened Life in Text and Image: G.I. Gurdjieff's *Meetings With Remarkable Men* (1963) and Peter Brook's *Meetings With Remarkable Men* (1979),” *Literature & Aesthetics* 21, no. 1 (2011); David Pecotic and Carole M. Cusack, “The (World Wide) Work 2.0: The Gurdjieff Tradition Online,” *Fieldwork In Religion* 11, no. 1 (2016): 91-103; Johanna Petsche, “Gurdjieff and Blavatsky: Western Esoteric Teachers in Parallel,” *Literature & Aesthetics* 21, no. 1 (2011): 98–115; Petsche, “G.I. Gurdjieff's Piano Music and its Application in and Outside ‘the Work’”; Petsche, “Gurdjieff and de Hartmann's Music for Movements”; Johanna Petsche, “A Gurdjieff Genealogy”; Petsche, *Gurdjieff and Music*; Johanna Petsche, “The Sacred Dance of the Enneagram”; Steven Sutcliffe, “Hard Work: Locating Gurdjieff in the Study of Religion/s,” *Journal for the Academic Study of Religion* 27, no. 3 (2014): 262–84; Sophia Wellbeloved, *Gurdjieff: The Key Concepts* (London: Routledge, 2003); Sophia Wellbeloved, “Gurdjieff, ‘Old’ or ‘New Age’: Aristotle or Astrology?,” *Journal of Alternative Spiritualities and New Age Studies* 1, no. 1 (2005): 75–87; Michael Pittman, *Classical Spirituality in Contemporary America: The Confluence and Contribution of G.I. Gurdjieff and Sufism* (London and New York: Continuum, 2012); In joining their discussion through my own approach, I am indebted to these scholars, particularly Paul B. Taylor for the many works in which he has shared rare archival material otherwise inaccessible to me: Taylor, *Gurdjieff and Orage*; Taylor, *Gurdjieff's America*; Taylor, *A New Life*; For press reports, see also Taylor's thorough survey in *Gurdjieff in the Public Eye: Newspaper Articles, Magazines and Books 1914-1949* (Eureka Editions, 2010). For lecture transcripts and introductory scripts from the demonstrations, I draw primarily from a volume recently compiled by Joseph Azize that has brought additional archival material into the sphere of Gurdjieff scholarship: Gurdjieff, *Gurdjieff's Early Talks*.

Taken together, the 1924 series of demonstrations constitute the most widely publicized moment in the overall scope of Gurdjieff's career. Reporters from popular English-language newspapers were invited to the Institute in France throughout the summer of 1923 to generate publicity prior to the tour, and associated press outlets spread word far and wide of the arrival of this mysterious figure on American soil. Gurdjieff's American audience was thereby given a glimpse of his character and mission and primed for the mystery to come. As I will more thoroughly explore later, this broad press coverage constituted a pivotal point for Gurdjieff's development of his public personas.

In addition to (and perhaps shaped by) the interpretations offered by the press, accounts from audience members provide ample ground for analysis, particularly in their various attempts to deal with this mysterious figure. Indeed, much of the source material for current secondary scholarship on Gurdjieff is derived from the accounts of individuals who first encountered Gurdjieff's teachings, if not Gurdjieff himself, during his 1924 tour. The accounts and memoirs of influential pupils, such as Jane Heap, Margaret Anderson, Jean Toomer, Charles Stanley Nott, and Louise Welch, to name a few, are the impressions of individuals who learned of Gurdjieff for the first time in the context of his 1924 tour.²⁸ The 1924 tour is, thus, one of the richest sources of data for analyzing Gurdjieff's public persona today.

²⁸ Though she did not produce a memoir on her experiences with Gurdjieff, Jane Heap's letters have provided scholars with a closer look at her personal reflections. See Jane Heap and Florence Reynolds, *Dear Tiny Heart: The Letters of Jane Heap and Florence Reynolds* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2000); Margaret Anderson, *The Unknowable Gurdjieff* (New York: Arkana, 1962); As with Heap, Jean Toomer's personal reflections are collected in works by other authors. See Jon Woodson, *To Make a New Race: Gurdjieff, Toomer, and the Harlem Renaissance* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999); and Paul B. Taylor, *Shadows of Heaven: Gurdjieff and Toomer* (York Beach, ME: Weiser Books, 1998); For some of the personal reflections offered by pupils, see Nott, *Teachings of Gurdjieff*; C.S. Nott, *Journey Through This World: The Second Journal of a Pupil: Including an Account of Meetings with GI Gurdjieff, AR Orage and PD Ouspensky* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969); Welch, *Orage with Gurdjieff in America*.

Handling the Mystery: An Overview of the Historiography

In order to explore how others have conceptualized Gurdjieff's identity, his purposes, and the broader significance of his self-presentation, it is necessary first to review some of the current scholarly engagement with Gurdjieff's mysterious persona, as well as the primary explanations offered by Fourth Way pupils. The growing body of recent secondary scholarship on Gurdjieff speaks to the academic interest in entering the debate over his authenticity by attempting to deconstruct this "Mystery Man." Paul Beekman Taylor's childhood acquaintance with Gurdjieff inspired his methodical revision of the "regrettable mass of misinformation concerning Gurdjieff's life."²⁹ He adds that some of this misinformation "has been incited by Gurdjieff's own purposeful 'fictions' of self, including occasional either careless or intentional misdating of events."³⁰ Mining historical data in attempts to reduce the mystery he presents, scholars such as Taylor have endeavored to simplify Gurdjieff in order to understand him, and thereby uncover a sense of his true self.

With good reason, Gurdjieff scholars have primarily worked through the "mass of misinformation" by fact-checking Gurdjieff's autobiographical claims. Sophia Wellbeloved has identified possible sources for Gurdjieff's teachings, aligning them more closely with "New Age" teachings than the Eastern masters and adepts from whom he claimed to have received the ancient wisdom that shaped his teachings.³¹ Both Johanna Petsche and Carole Cusack have argued that Gurdjieff's teachings and pseudo-autobiographical stories seem

²⁹ Taylor, *Gurdjieff's America*, 2

³⁰ Ibid. Gary Lachman has similarly noted that Gurdjieff "invented and reinvented himself so many times, left so many false trails, and encouraged so many myths and mistakes about exactly who he was that uncovering the truth about his past would take a lifetime." Gary Lachman, *In Search of P.D. Ouspensky: The Genius in the Shadow of Gurdjieff* (Wheaton, Illinois: Quest Books, 2004), 82; Joseph Azize has likewise stated, "The plain fact is that we do not know what, if anything, Gurdjieff did see in Asia." Azize, "Gurdjieff's Sacred Dances and Movements," 305.

³¹ Wellbeloved, "'Old' or 'New Age.'"

largely based on the life and teachings of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, a connection some of Gurdjieff's contemporaries also suggested, much to his consternation.³²

Steven Sutcliffe has taken a different route to tackle the mystery, arguing that rather than attempting to weed out misinformation that muddies the coherence of a "system" of Fourth Way teachings, we should view Gurdjieff's career through the lens of *bricolage* (à la Claude Lévi-Strauss and Michel de Certeau), which allows us to see Gurdjieff's identity and teachings as components of a creative and experimental work-in-progress. As Sutcliffe argues, "Gurdjieff practiced a canny, contingent and improvisational method derived from his life-long, skillful practice of *bricolage*." Through the model of *bricoleur*, Sutcliffe sees Gurdjieff's various transformations of identity and teachings as evidence of his improvising, using and adapting tools and techniques he had ready-to-hand in navigating the cultural and social contexts he encountered throughout his career.³³

³²Petsche, "Gurdjieff and Blavatsky"; Petsche, *Gurdjieff and Music*, 111; Cusack, "An Enlightened Life"; Joseph Azize echoes these arguments, noting a striking syncretism in Gurdjieff's autobiographical claims that seems "so reminiscent of Theosophy." Offering his own interpretation of this syncretism and emphasis on ancient and Oriental sources, Azize suggests "these descriptions owe everything to Gurdjieff's salesmanship and delightful sense of humour." Azize, "Gurdjieff's Sacred Dances and Movements," 304-5; For an additional point of potential overlap between Gurdjieff and René Guénon (per my observations, though briefly hinted by the author as well), see Mark Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth-Century* (Oxford University Press, 2004) [especially the prologue, 3-17; and Part 1, 21-69].

³³ Sutcliffe, "Gurdjieff as a *Bricoleur*"; In using the terminology of 'bricolage,' Sutcliffe is drawing on works including that of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Michel de Certeau. For Lévi-Strauss, "bricolage" was a useful analogy for explaining a pre-modern scientific approach that employs a limited but extensive and heterogeneous repertoire of tools and information. "The 'bricoleur' is adept at performing a large number of diverse tasks; but, unlike the engineer, he does not subordinate each of them to the availability of raw materials and tools conceived and procured for the purpose of the project. His universe of instruments is closed and the rules of his game are always to make do with 'whatever is at hand', that is to say with a set of tools and materials which is always finite and is also heterogeneous because what it contains bears no relation to the current project, or indeed to any particular project, but is the contingent result of all the occasions there have been to renew or enrich the stock or to maintain it with the remains of previous constructions or destructions." Furthermore, Lévi-Strauss employs the concept to explore "mythical thought" as a form of "intellectual 'bricolage.'" See chapter one, "The Science of the Concrete" in Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind (La Pensée Sauvage)*, Nature of Human Societies Series (University of Chicago Press, 1966), 1-33; Michel de Certeau employs Lévi-Strauss's characterization of the 'bricoleur' to examine the way readers similarly use "the materials at hand" in a production of meaning. However, in contrast to the 'mythological universes' that Lévi-Strauss's 'bricoleur' may produce, de Certeau argues that the reader's production of meaning "is another kind of 'mythology' dispersed in time, a sequence of temporal fragments not joined together but disseminated

While the model of *bricolage* allows us to skirt issues of the coherence of Gurdjieff's teachings, it still requires us to navigate a monstrous web of potential fiction, where the historical truth of the matter is often tangled into the only sources available for confirming Gurdjieff's claims—biographies that have taken Gurdjieff's claims for granted, and the memoirs of pupils whose affiliation with and respect for their teacher have led them to do the same. Taylor calls for a more careful assessment of Gurdjieff as an object of historical inquiry, arguing that, "though the historical contexts in which I have located him are real, Gurdjieff is not. Who we view as a man is a self-creation in stories of self and in his storied deconstruction of tales told by others."³⁴ Through these insights, Taylor identifies a serious lacuna in Gurdjieff scholarship, namely that the "invented" self Gurdjieff presented to his observers and the "purposeful 'fictions' of self" he documented in his writings compounds his inaccessibility for scholars who must rely on the "mass of misinformation" generated by first-hand accounts of those affected by Gurdjieff's disguises.

through repetitions and different modes of enjoyment, in memories and successive knowledges." See Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (University of California Press, 1984), 174-75; "The model of the *bricoleur*," Sutcliffe argues, "provides the missing mechanism through which to understand the propulsion of a 'work' that has always been 'in progress.' And it explains how Gurdjieff could so effectively straddle fields of cultural production usually tightly differentiated in modernity." While I do agree with Sutcliffe that the model of *bricolage* helps unify the many disparate sources of Gurdjieff's teachings as components in a career-long flux of teachings, emphases, and modes of self-presentation, it is worth questioning Sutcliffe's suggestion that the *bricolage* model is "the missing mechanism" here. If we are to understand the experimental nature of Gurdjieff's career, it is helpful to outline which aspects of the *bricoleur* "toolbox" he incorporated into his teachings, or in other words, what worked and why. As I explore here, the 1924 tour allows us to examine the dynamic interplay of Gurdjieff's presentations of himself and his teachings to early twentieth-century Americans, and the interests and concerns of that audience whose gaze both constrained and was constrained by those presentations. If we were to further extend Sutcliffe's use of 'bricolage' to describe Gurdjieff's experimental approach in bringing his Fourth Way teachings and practices to America in 1924, we may identify his ready-to-hand "tools" in a set of clearly discernable loci of interest—both his and those of his audience—including romanticized images of the mystical East, heterodoxy in religious approaches, industrialization and the "mechanization" of bodies, the *avant-garde* arts and the social networks built around them, and skepticism framed by debates over illusion versus reality, deception versus truth.

³⁴ Taylor, *Gurdjieff's America*, 264-65.

Maintaining that we must not take any of Gurdjieff's autobiographical statements at face value, Taylor argues for an alternative reading of Gurdjieff's stories of self as "parables."³⁵ While this does help us to identify new hermeneutical methods for interpreting Gurdjieff's teachings, it does little to help scholars articulate the significance of Gurdjieff as an historical figure. The consistently consensual and self-referential quality of a "parable" reading vis-à-vis Fourth Way teachings may even constrain our analysis, resisting creative comparison with historical figures who bear intriguing resemblances to Gurdjieff's public personas and performative mystery-making.³⁶ Moreover, if we accept that there is no better way to "read" Gurdjieff than as "parable," we smooth over the many paradoxes and contradictions he presents rather than appreciating them as intriguing possibilities for exploring categories of truth and untruth, masks and real faces, charlatanry and authenticity.

Turning to how pupils have understood Gurdjieff's mysterious personas, it seems much of the controversy stems from his apparent defiance of expectations regarding how a spiritual teacher *should* behave.³⁷ Rather than generating "an atmosphere of great seriousness and importance to give newcomers a good impression," Gurdjieff "was just the opposite: everything that could repel, even frighten, a new man was always produced."³⁸ Gurdjieff was

³⁵ Paul Beekman Taylor, "Inventors of Gurdjieff," *Gurdjieff International Review* 8, no. 1 (Fall 2004), <http://www.gurdjieff.org/taylor1.htm>; Gary Lachman has similarly suggested, "Gurdjieff's account of his formative years can be read on a variety of levels: metaphor, allegory, pure tall tale, metaphysical fiction, autobiography, or simply invention." Lachman, *In Search of P.D. Ouspensky*, 88; Taylor's and Lachman's readings are perhaps supported by Gurdjieff's suggestion to pupil C.S. Nott: "Never believe anything you hear me say. Learn to discriminate between what must be taken literally and what metaphorically." Nott, *Teachings of Gurdjieff*, 75.

³⁶ I am reminded here of J. Z. Smith's methodological critique of extrahistorical categories and assertions of "uniqueness." See Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (University of Chicago Press, 1990), 42, 116.

³⁷ "The truth is that Gurdjieff violated all our preconceptions of a 'spiritual leader' and sometimes repelled 'religious seekers.'" Gorham Munson, "Black Sheep Philosophers," 3. Also see James Webb, *The Harmonious Circle: The Lives and Work of G.I. Gurdjieff, P.D. Ouspensky, and Their Followers* (Boston: Shambhala, 1987), 330-31.

³⁸ De Hartmann, *Our Life*, 74.

well known for his capacity to adopt various personas. He played the swindler, the kind old grandfather, the senile drifter, the black magician, the skilled repairman, and the hypnotist—and many of these roles emerged through his interactions with the public and press during his 1924 visit to America.³⁹ Role-playing afforded him a certain invisibility, as evident in a recollection from one of his pupils at the Institute:

“When visitors were being shown round the grounds they would sometimes pass him with only a glance, like an American who was talking to me about what a wonderful man Mr. Gurdjieff must be, and that he would like to meet him . . . Just then Gurdjieff passed by and went into the house. ‘That is Mr. Gurdjieff,’ I said. ‘Well,’ he replied, ‘isn't that queer! I spoke to him in the grounds and thought he was the gardener.’”⁴⁰

According to pupils, shifting into these various roles enabled Gurdjieff to observe the reactions of others and for those around him to observe themselves through their automatic responses. Bursting into aggressive name-calling, flattery abruptly followed by condescension, even the outright ignoring of some pupils—any number of about-face behaviors could purportedly “shock” a pupil into acknowledging his or her impulses and emotionally reactive tendencies.⁴¹ For Thomas de Hartmann, one of Gurdjieff’s earliest pupils, Gurdjieff’s role-playing could only be explained by his “determination to make us work, to remember our true aim, which, if serious, could not be shaken by any kind of action on his part.”⁴²

From de Hartmann’s perspective, role-playing was the only method through which Gurdjieff could “create every kind of impression in a pupil” and to thus engage them in the most comprehensive assessment of their own reactivity. “For instance,” de Hartmann

³⁹ For an in-depth overview of Gurdjieff’s presence in America, see Taylor’s *Gurdjieff’s America and Gurdjieff and Orage*; For a discussion of the roles Gurdjieff played in America and elsewhere, see Taylor’s “Inventors of Gurdjieff.”

⁴⁰ Nott, *Teachings of Gurdjieff*, 111.

⁴¹ For a handful of representative cases, see Taylor, *Gurdjieff’s America*, 72, 182-83, 196-97, 218; Taylor, *Gurdjieff and Orage*, 79, 89, 91; Taylor, *A New Life*, 7-8, 132.

⁴² De Hartmann, *Our Life*, 7.

explained, “if he wished to make someone experience injustice, he had to play the part of an unjust man—and he knew how to do it superbly!”⁴³ Similarly, Kenneth Walker recalled from his experiences with Gurdjieff that, “with a few words, a gesture, or by the mimicry of some personal peculiarity that someone was trying vainly to hide, he had been showing us to ourselves.”⁴⁴ In Roger Lipsey’s assessment, “Gurdjieff considered the capacity to play consciously the roles imposed by daily life to be a key to inner freedom.”⁴⁵ We see in each of these explanations a deeper hidden meaning behind Gurdjieff’s many masks, one that has serious spiritual capital for those who could glean from behind the mask an authentic teacher and a personally meaningful lesson.

Pupils have also explained his role-playing as a filter to weed out undesirable or incapable pupils from the start. On the one hand, the filtering purpose may be understood as a “spiritual litmus test,” resting on the assumption that those who could not grasp the significance of the roles they observed had no hope in grasping the complexity of Gurdjieff’s teachings.⁴⁶ Another competing filter interpretation is one that understands Gurdjieff’s “quirks and oddities” as an “exaggeration” serving an overarching purpose of warding off individuals susceptible to worshipping him as a “god-like being.”⁴⁷ In line with this, Michel Random has argued for a reading of Gurdjieff’s role-playing as consistent with practices associated with the Malamatis, a ninth-century esoteric Muslim group otherwise known as

⁴³ Ibid., 70

⁴⁴ Kenneth Walker, “Gurdjieff, the Unknown Man”; For a similar interpretation, see Munson, “Black Sheep Philosophers,” 7.

⁴⁵ Roger Lipsey, “Gurdjieff Observed,” in Jacob Needleman and George Baker, eds., *Gurdjieff: Essays and Reflections on the Man and His Teaching*, (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004), 329.

⁴⁶ Henry Leroy Finch, “The Sacred Cosmos: Teachings of G. I. Gurdjieff,” in Needleman and Baker, eds. *Gurdjieff: Essays and Reflections on the Man and His Teaching* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004), 23.

⁴⁷ Andrew Rawlinson, *The Book of the Enlightened Masters: Western Teachers in Eastern Traditions* (Chicago and La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1997), 291.

“the people of blame.” Random identifies similarities between Gurdjieff’s role-playing and the Malamati “concealment of meritorious actions or spiritual refinement beneath appearances open to criticism, in order to avoid receiving praise.”⁴⁸ In the context of the 1924 tour, however, this interpretation is less convincing. While Gurdjieff may have indeed “exaggerated his quirks and oddities” to discourage particularly incapable or sycophantic pupils, his orchestrated exaggerations of personal “quirks and oddities” in America—especially through the press—did more to encourage his audience’s attention than discourage their readiness to consider him worthy of reverence.

For Fourth Way pupils, the “shocks” Gurdjieff produced through his “role-playing” were standard practice.⁴⁹ For Gurdjieff’s American audience, however, the purpose of his self-presentation was not so clear. His American observers—a vast audience, composed for the most part of individuals with whom he would never become personally intimate—could not benefit from his role-playing in the strictly pedagogical sense in which his pupils believed themselves to benefit. In other words, the role-playing Gurdjieff enacted for his pupils—ostensibly an “act” performed to “shock” them into recognizing their own individual tendencies through their “reactions”—was a form of acting necessarily relegated to dialogue, effective only insofar as the actor (i.e. Gurdjieff) could perform an identity that was sure to

⁴⁸ Michel Random, “The Men of Blame and the Fourth Way” in Needleman and Baker, eds., *Gurdjieff: Essays and Reflections on the Man and His Teaching* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004), 226.

⁴⁹ This is not to suggest that pupils uniformly grasped the significance of Gurdjieff’s role-playing. As Fourth Way pupil Henry Leroy Finch attests, Gurdjieff’s role-playing “baffled not only the general public... but even Gurdjieff’s students themselves. We often do not know what he is up to or how to take his tricks and turns, including methods of disguise, intentional misrepresentation, role-playing, elaborately staged scenes and demonstrations, and, even more difficult to deal with, insults, shocks, and wild bursts of *controlled* temper.” Finch, “The Sacred Cosmos,” 20; It is perhaps no wonder why pupils attempting to understand Gurdjieff’s role-playing have, by and large, stuck to Gurdjieff’s own explanation of his behavior. On the one hand, “baffled” as they might have been, any explanation is easier to handle than no explanation at all. On the other hand, the trust many pupils put in Gurdjieff lent authority to his explanations.

elicit a pupil's response. It required a preexisting awareness on Gurdjieff's part of the "type" of individual he was provoking. It also required a commitment on Gurdjieff's part to see the exercise through, which would be inconceivable if the individuals for whom the role was performed would not reliably learn anything about themselves. Indeed, his "role-playing" has been discussed by pupils and scholars as a unique method that required an awareness of that method for its ideal outcome to be realized, for the individual implicated in Gurdjieff's "role-playing" to actually learn anything about themselves as a result of their provocation.⁵⁰ This Fourth Way method, moreover, was self-referential and thus required the instructor to generate terms for understanding the purpose and eventual results of the role-playing interaction—to understand the interaction as an exercise in role-playing as such. Thus, an audience unfamiliar with this method could not reliably learn from a role-playing interaction if its intended significance was unknown.⁵¹

⁵⁰ As Henry Leroy Finch surmised, "Gurdjieff himself wore a very evident 'disguise' which, as it seems, automatically excluded those people who could not see through it." Finch, "The Sacred Cosmos," 23.

⁵¹ Taylor's suggestion of a pedagogical significance behind Gurdjieff's personas points to the tendency in secondary scholarship I am questioning here, namely the mapping of a pupil's reading of "role-playing" onto analyses of Gurdjieff's public personas: "If he was misread more often than not, the reading itself was a lesson for others in becoming aware of their own habitually locked perspectives and perceptions." Taylor, *Gurdjieff and Orage*, 252; To suggest, as I have, that Gurdjieff's masks should be dealt with as such, rather than as purposeful "roles" meant for the greater good of their witnesses, admittedly threatens what we might consider the canon of Gurdjieffian literature. But canon, as Jonathan Z. Smith reminds us, denotes closure and order and thus prescribes a sort of limitation to modes of analysis—a limitation that can only be overcome by ingenuity in the interpretation of what limited nodes our subject contains. Jonathan Z. Smith, "Sacred Persistence: Toward a Redescription of Canon," in *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 36-52; My intention is not the wholesale destruction of the pedagogical purpose of "role-playing"—a purpose that Gurdjieff shared with pupils through intimate discussions and, later, through his writings; a purpose, moreover, that pupils trusted and found meaningful in their spiritual seeking. Nonetheless, it is worth emphasizing that through pupil accounts, we find a matter-of-fact quality to Gurdjieff's self-masking—he "wore a very evident 'disguise,'" we are told. However, Gurdjieff's own explanation of his "role-playing" is seemingly immune to this "fact" of deception, even when we are told he demonstrated "the fluency of a consummate actor" (Lipsey, "Gurdjieff Observed," 329). Of course, the interpretations pupils have advanced are of critical importance and deserve recognition. However, to take this interpretation for granted is to divert our eyes from the object of our inquiry, namely Gurdjieff's public personas. Succumbing to such diversion, as I see it, is to overlook the opportunity for reconsidering Gurdjieff in new and interesting ways that open up this seemingly settled debate. Dusting off the common assumptions made by pupils and scholars alike allows for a reconfiguration of the object of inquiry, opening up new avenues for interesting comparisons that might reinvigorate the questions surrounding Gurdjieff and his career. Thus, rather than destroy the canon, I intend a sort of "opening up," a reconfiguration of Gurdjieff as an object of inquiry that allows us to free the

The commentary that pupils have offered in defense of Gurdjieff's mysterious and debate-provoking personas frequently suggest a conversation with the public, an engagement with how non-pupils and particularly the press understood Gurdjieff's "roles." Take, for example, Fourth Way pupil Dorothea Dooling's observation: "Perhaps the only thing that can be said with certainty is that he was either a fraud or a master. If the former, we need not be greatly concerned with him, for fraud has, by its nature, a limited life span, bearing within itself that which will soon destroy it... There is far more evidence that he was indeed a master—a master whose aim with all his pupils was to help them establish in his rightful place their own individual master within."⁵² In his discussion of Gurdjieff's teaching method, Fourth Way pupil Henry Leroy Finch suggests that rather than referring to Gurdjieff's role-playing as the "way of the sly man," as Gurdjieff himself often phrased it, his method is "perhaps better called... the 'way of the shrewd man.'" Finch justifies this renaming as an attempt "to avoid the connotation of deceitfulness" that he anticipates. This doubling-down in defense exceeds the pupil's explanation of Gurdjieff's "true" purpose; accusations of deception are, it seems, built into Gurdjieff's method, and Finch's renaming—*sly* to *shrewd*—is an effort to shelter Gurdjieff's teaching from such misunderstanding.

Explanations like Dooling's and Finch's seem to arise in anticipation of how non-pupils might interpret *what is really going on*, which seems to suggest, to me at least, that there is a certain awareness of how non-pupils might respond suspended in this hypothetical interaction with Gurdjieff's critics.⁵³ Do they so keenly anticipate accusations of deception

man and his career from a self-referential approach that would require us to take *his* explanations as *the* explanations.

⁵² Dorothea Dooling, "The Ladder of Evolution" in Needleman and Baker, eds., *Gurdjieff: Essays and Reflections*, 195.

⁵³ Finch, "The Sacred Cosmos," 20.

and charlatanry because they themselves have once suspected Gurdjieff to be a fraud? I raise the question not to answer it, but rather to highlight the generative power of mystery. For Gurdjieff's pupils and for scholars alike, this observation concerns the ways in which mystery unfolds into explanation, how explanation can even recycle mystery as it unfolds into debate, and how ambiguity—sneaky thing that it is—can silently reemerge in the very attempt to settle it through explanation.

Throughout extant works on Gurdjieff—personal accounts by his observers, memoirs of his pupils, biographies, and various scholarly analyses—there is a recurrent theme of uncovering the truth by unmasking Gurdjieff. Drawing on Campbell's (1972) work on the "cultic milieu," Steven Sutcliffe argues that the mystery surrounding Gurdjieff and the sources of his teachings contributed (and still contributes) to a sense of "inexhaustibility," a ceaseless round of questions left unanswered and remaining unanswerable.⁵⁴ Indeed, much of the work on Gurdjieff speaks, whether explicitly or not, to the idea that it is the mystery itself that gives this field of scholarship its momentum. In fact, it is this very seduction-by-mystery that forms my argument here. Scholars who have continued to sift the "truth" of Gurdjieff's identity and teachings from such a "mass of misinformation" are, it seems, propelled into the very same project of discernment in which Gurdjieff's audience members were engaged throughout his 1924 demonstrations. That is to say, those who attended his demonstrations of "tricks, half-tricks, and real phenomena" were similarly driven by the compulsion to reveal the true mechanisms at work behind the deceptive exterior.

The enormous body of historical work on Gurdjieff contributes to a better understanding of the historical contexts that are "real," but as far as my interests go, scholars attempting to

⁵⁴ Sutcliffe, "Gurdjieff as *Bricoleur*," 118.

somehow access the “real” Gurdjieff are asking the wrong question.⁵⁵ The mystery of Gurdjieff’s “real” identity, his “authentic” self, is not the problem that we need to solve, but the very thing scholars have sought when attempting to grasp the motives behind his peculiar self-fashioning. It is *mystery* itself—augmented by “the power of the unsaid” in the storied silences of his autobiographical claims—that has mobilized inquiry among scholars and audiences alike.⁵⁶ But this mobilization of inquiry through his mysterious self-presentation was not simply a pedagogical method or mere promotional technique. Nor was Gurdjieff “simply seeking converts” in America, as the suspicious journalist Raymond Carroll suggested. Gurdjieff subverted any hopes for a simple reading of the motives behind his peculiar presence in America in 1924, and as we shall see, he carried out this subversion with expert precision through his mysterious and provocative public personas.

⁵⁵ Whether seeking out the “real” historical Gurdjieff, accepting a pedagogical model of “role-playing,” or following a “parable” narrative or model of *bricolage* to understand his self-masking, we overlook the theoretical possibility that identity is inherently a performance, that none of Gurdjieff’s masks were any less real than the man’s supposed “true” self. See for example, Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 519-531; Also, see Elin Diamond’s discussion on performance as “the site in which concealed or dissimulated conventions might be investigated.” Drawing on J.L. Austin’s “performative utterance which does not refer to an extra-linguistic reality but rather enacts or produces that to which it refers,” Diamond argues that “performance both *affirms and denies this evacuation of substance*. In the sense that the ‘I’ has no interior secure ego or core identity, ‘I’ must always enunciate itself: there is only performance of a self, not an external representation of an interior truth. But in the sense that I do my performance in public for spectators who are interpreting and/or performing with me, there are real effects, meanings solicited or imposed that produce relations in the real.” For the purposes of my analysis of Gurdjieff’s performance of a mysterious persona, I follow Diamond’s suggestion that such studies of performativity must be “rooted in the materiality and historical density of performance,” insofar as this provides “access to cultural meanings and critique.” To explore the personas Gurdjieff performed throughout his career, I attempt to root them in the material and historical contexts that I think are fundamental for understanding the social and cultural dynamics at work in Gurdjieff’s self-fashioning for distinct audiences. Diamond, *Performance and Cultural Politics*, 4-5.

⁵⁶ Michael Taussig, *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative* (Stanford University Press, 1999), 2; I am drawing here on Taussig’s operationalizing of Hegel’s “labor of the negative” as a method for tackling ambiguous and seemingly contradictory historical data.

Dr. Black: Charlatanry in Gurdjieff's Early Career

Gurdjieff's mystery-making was not only effective, but initiated an enduring project of discerning authenticity from artifice that was (and is) integral to the Fourth Way. This engagement with, and utilization of, his audience's skepticism predates his 1924 visit to America. Thus, to understand the central place of mystery as it was operationalized in America requires us to step back a bit. Widening our lens to observe how Gurdjieff first began to engage with his audience's skepticism will allow for a provisional sketch of his underlying rationale for inviting his American audiences to debate his authenticity as a spiritual teacher.

Some six years prior to his 1924 demonstrations in America, we can see Gurdjieff engaging with his audience's skepticism through a nascent form of the public persona he would later assume for his American observers.⁵⁷ Around 1918, Gurdjieff established a proto-Institute—The International Fellowship for Realization Through Work—in the southwestern Russian territory of Essentuki.⁵⁸ This Fellowship was Gurdjieff's first formal organization, marking his official entry into public view. He began offering public lectures each Sunday on philosophy, mysticism, and the occult, often recruiting pupils and acquaintances to speak on his ideas and the philosophies that formed the foundation of Fourth Way practices.⁵⁹ The Fellowship's first public lecture was a hit, drawing a large crowd that exceeded their expectations. But as the group prepared for the second public

⁵⁷ To my knowledge, no one has seriously engaged with or investigated this event in the historiography of Gurdjieff's public self-presentation. The only reference to this event that I can find throughout Gurdjieff scholarship is Gary Lachman's brief description that does not extend further than its categorization of the event as an example of Gurdjieff's "acting": "But just as the fellowship [the proto-Institute, est. 1918, Essentuki] was beginning to establish a respectable reputation, Gurdjieff began once again to 'act,' this time posting notices announcing that 'Dr. Black,' a fictional mountebank depicted in the satirical papers, would be lecturing as well [in addition to Ouspensky]." Lachman, *In Search of P.D. Ouspensky*, 160.

⁵⁸ De Hartmann, *Our Life*, 58.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 68.

lecture the following week, pupil Thomas de Hartmann was surprised to discover that advertisements for the event noted an unusual addition to the program of speakers:

“On Thursday posters were put up everywhere in Essentuki advertising a lecture by the notorious ‘Dr Black’. In other words, the lectures were given an intentionally suspicious character. The reputation of ‘Dr Black’, a charlatan, was very well known from satirical poems published in pamphlets of this period with titles like ‘The Trial of Johann Huss’ and ‘Dr Black, Bearer of Bad News’. But perhaps the doctor did not exist, for he never appeared.”⁶⁰

Perhaps. For de Hartmann, the advertisement had clear and ready-made significance:

“Dr. Black” was an obvious reference to a well-known fictional charlatan of the same name.

Though I have been unable to locate the specific titles that de Hartmann mentioned, he was likely referring to the work of Aleksandr Vasil’evich Barchenko, whose short stories and novels followed the mysterious adventures of Barchenko’s “literary alter ego,” Dr. Aleksandr Nikolaevich Chernyi (*Chernyi/Chernii* meaning “black,” in Russian).⁶¹

Dr. Black’s adventures betray surprising parallels to Gurdjieff’s own autobiographical claims, raising the possibility that Gurdjieff modeled aspects of his public persona on the metonymic charlatan. As Gurdjieff claimed to have uncovered ancient wisdom in his travels throughout the East and in the temple of the “Sarmoung Brotherhood,” the fictional Dr. Black “spent years in India and Tibet studying arcane knowledge at the feet of mysterious mahatmas.”⁶² Barchenko’s “Dr. Black” was both a follower of Theosophy and a professor of

⁶⁰ Ibid., 74.

⁶¹ Richard Spence, “Red Star Over Shambhala: Soviet, British and American Intelligence & the Search for Lost Civilisation in Central Asia,” *New Dawn* 109 (July-August 2008): 53-58; Very little has been published in English on Barchenko, though references to the man and his works can be found in the following: Leonid Heller, “Away from the Globe: Occultism, Esotericism and Literature in Russia during the 1960s-1980s,” in Menzel, Hagemester, and Rosenthal (eds.), *The New Age of Russia: Occult and Esoteric Dimensions* (München, Germany: Kubon & Sagner, 2012), 186-210; Andrei Znamenski, *Red Shambhala: Magic, Prophecy, and Geopolitics in the Heart of Asia* (Wheaton, IL: Quest Books, 2011); George Young, *The Russian Cosmists: The Esoteric Futurism of Nikolai Fedorov and His Followers* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 190-91; Taylor, *A New Life*, 38-39.

⁶² Spence, “Red Star Over Shambhala,” 54-55.

medicine, and Gurdjieff likewise portrayed himself as such in his early career, working as a professional healer and hypnotist at the turn of the century in Tashkent and mingling with theosophical circles throughout Russia during his period of research into the occult. In fact, a variety of historical connections suggest Barchenko and Gurdjieff may have even known each other personally, which may indicate that Barchenko's "Dr. Black" partially inspired Gurdjieff's "storied self."⁶³

While the extent to which Gurdjieff knew Barchenko remains speculative, de Hartmann's reflections do speak to Gurdjieff's awareness of Dr. Black's associations with charlatantry.

⁶³ Barchenko and Gurdjieff both spent some time in St. Petersburg ("Petrograd," at the time) just after WWI; locating the two men within this historical and cultural context may clarify some of the parallels identified between them as components of a broader revival of popular occultism in and around Russia at the time. In an article for *New Dawn Magazine*, Richard Spence describes Barchenko as "part occultist, part scientist, part explorer, and maybe just a bit of a charlatan, [but] above all, a seeker," whose "interests came to focus on recovering the lost knowledge of a prehistoric civilization [Shambhala, supposedly north of India], remnants of which he thought might still survive." Before WWI, he explored occult interests in palmistry, alchemy, hypnosis, "thought transference" and "radiant energy." By that time, Barchenko "was already a successful author, producing adventure mystery stories and novels that sampled cutting-edge paranormal discoveries and Oriental magic. His two major novels, *Doctor Chernii* [*Doctor Black*, alt. spelling *Doktor Chernyi*, 1913] and *Iz mraka* (Out of Darkness, 1914), are set in Russia, India, and Tibet and describe the mysterious adventures of Dr. Alexander Chernii, a professor of medicine, Theosophist, junior mahatma, and member of a secret order with headquarters in the foothills of Tibet. The plots revolve around the professor's attempts to put secret knowledge possessed by the order to public benefit and the efforts of his mahatma comrades to keep it secret" (Znamenski, *Red Shambhala*, 49). Paul Taylor also links Barchenko and Gurdjieff in his discussion of the interrogation of G. I. Bokii (c. 1937-1938) during the "Stalinist Purge" and identifies similarities between the Mason-related activity Bokii "confesses" and Gurdjieff's teachings and Institute practices. In his confession, Bokii names Barchenko as the "successor" of a Masonic lodge created by Gurdjieff ("The Unique Work Brotherhood"), though evidence of Gurdjieff's role in this case is slim and of questionable credibility due to the unreliable nature of interrogation "confessions." Taylor quotes the official interrogation transcript at length: "At his interrogation the accused confessed that he became a mason in 1909. The lodge he joined was created by the well-known mystic Gurdjieff who after the Revolution emigrated to the West. His successor was Dr. Barchenko. In addition, Bokii confessed that he was the head of an anti-Soviet spiritualist circle whose members were occupied with foretelling of the future. In the depositions of the SPEKO [Spets-Otdel: 'Special agency' (decoding messages of other nations)] collaborators arrested after their chief is mentioned a commune organized by Bokii in a country house, whose members, men and women, got drunk together, practiced communal bathing, sang dirty songs. In a word, behaved indecently outside working hours. As is well-known, Gurdjieff organized in emigration an 'Institute for the harmonic Development of Man' whose members tried in every way to reach the depths of 'one's own I,' including in 'sessions'—briefly in collective drinking orgies. It is possible that the use of alcohol, removing the psychic safety barriers, actually was practiced in Bokii's commune, who was to an extent a follower of Gurdjieff." Taylor, *A New Life*, 38-39; Historian Leonid Heller has also drawn indirect connections, suggesting P.D. Ouspensky, one of Gurdjieff's earliest pupils, was not only "Barchenko's guide to the esoteric sciences" but also the prototype for Barchenko's multi-volume novel *Doctor Chernii* (trans. *Doctor Black*; alt. spelling *Doktor Chernyi*, 1913). Heller, "Away from the Globe," 204.

The lectures were, according to de Hartmann, “*given an intentionally suspicious character.*” And clearly, it was Gurdjieff who was behind this orchestration of suspicion. However, through his reflections we see de Hartmann himself nonetheless entertaining the possibility of a *real* Dr. Black: “perhaps the doctor did not exist, for he never appeared.” We may take de Hartmann’s lingering questions to indicate Gurdjieff’s silence toward Fellowship members on the matter of his peculiar advertisement. And here, the silence itself is telling, inciting de Hartmann to interpretive action much as Gurdjieff would later do for his American observers through storied gaps in his self-presentation. However, embedded as it is within a recollection that already presupposes the *intentional* suggestion of charlatanry, de Hartmann’s equivocation seems to suggest an awareness of Gurdjieff’s intentions rather than a mere entertaining of possibilities. The charlatan doctor *never appeared*, but what of the spiritual teacher whom de Hartmann deemed authentic?

Whether we view de Hartmann’s equivocation as performative or genuine, we can at least recognize how Gurdjieff’s advertisement aroused the skepticism of not only his pupils, but also his public audience. In orchestrating such a suggestion of charlatanry, Gurdjieff preemptively constrained his audience’s reception of the lecture and thus set the terms of their subsequent debate. He would continue to do so with his American observers in 1924, who were similarly left questioning whether the mysterious figure was an authentic *Pythagoras* or a deceptive *charlatan*. Gurdjieff’s performative advertisement of himself as “Dr. Black” thus constitutes an early moment within a wider frame of his developing public personas—one that he would reconstruct as he engaged with audiences in different cultural and performative contexts. For his audience in Essentuki, “Dr. Black” had culturally-bound significance. As he took his show on the road to America, Gurdjieff recast this charlatan

persona in new culturally meaningful forms that continued to spark debates over his authenticity.

Gurdjieff(s) in America: Public Personas and Performativity in Press

The debates generated by Gurdjieff's presence in America drew momentum from his conspicuous self-masking. In some cases, he hinted to the press, his audience, and his own pupils that his autobiographical claims should not be trusted. He frequently blurred the details of his past by either dodging questions altogether or responding with wild assertions that could leave even the most credulous of observers feeling skeptical. More subtly, however, Gurdjieff evoked a sense of mystery as he alternated between modes of self-presentation. If in one interview he painted himself as the exotic Oriental mystic offering ancient wisdom uncovered in the hidden monasteries of the Far East, in another he self-fashioned as the scientific experimenter offering practical tools for self-improvement and theories grounded in the data derived from his own research.⁶⁴ Refusing to rest for long behind any one of these masks, Gurdjieff incited his audience to interpretive action, inviting them to debate his authenticity as they attempted to grasp the "real" Gurdjieff.

As I move forward to explore Gurdjieff's mystery-making public personas in the context of his 1924 visit to America, I take my departure from the very terms of his audience's debate: Pythagoras or charlatan, master or fraud?⁶⁵ The binarism of possibilities draws our

⁶⁴ In his piece for his column, "The First Reader," Laurence Stalling describes Gurdjieff's Institute in terms echoing the romanticized ancient ways of the Orient: "The experiments of Gurdjieff at the Fontainebleau 'School of Harmonious Development' have proved that workers acting rhythmically in going about the ordinary labors of a primitive life can accomplish more than double-fold the amount of work done by individual efforts. ...Gurdjieff wandered through the Caucasian cradle for twenty-eight years, studying the ancient dances and wisdom of monastic institutions as well as the survivals in present-day life of the East." Laurence Stalling, "The Art of Dancing," *New York World* (13 February 1924).

⁶⁵ In so doing, I follow Michael Taussig's approach in his study of defacement and public secrecy by reorienting my focus to engage with "ambiguity itself, with the fact of ambiguity as opposed to the facts that constitute it."

attention to the binary question common to each—should Gurdjieff be treated with faith or skepticism? Was the mystery surrounding him evidence of his spiritual power or his swindling? Gurdjieff’s public personas resisted concrete categorization, allowing him to remain in the hazy space between definitive interpretations as he slipped in and out of multiply meaningful identities. While he took on the guise of Dr. Black in Essentuki, a distinctive archetypal character from popular culture, he adopted a different means of orchestrating his audience’s suspicion in America. In America, it was Gurdjieff’s movement *between* personas that ultimately rendered him the prototypical charlatan figure—the self-made “confidence man” whose *real* identity and *real* motives were altogether impossible to pin down.

Oscillating between his mystical and scientific masks, Gurdjieff challenged the assumptions of the press as he variously framed and reframed his teachings in interviews and public appearances. Moreover, he attracted even greater interest as these contradictory portrayals in the press were interpreted by some as confirmation of his unique character, by others as evidence of a fraud masquerading in whatever disguise the swindled public would most eagerly follow. Whether an enlightened “Pythagoras” concealing esoteric knowledge and mysterious spiritual power or an obvious “charlatan” whose shifting self-portrayals signaled a ruse in the making, supporters and critics alike could agree that there was *something* about Gurdjieff that required further investigation. As he probed and portrayed

Thus, rather than approaching Gurdjieff’s mystery teleologically (and certainly the hermeneutical mining of “parables” has a teleological aim), seeking out the pedagogical purpose behind each mask, I turn to the ambiguous nature of Gurdjieff’s “true” self (Pythagoras or charlatan?), his “real” reasons for presenting himself and his teachings to the American public (were they pure or greedy?). Taussig, *Defacement*, 107; For more on the paradoxical nature of masks, see *ibid.*, 179; and Taussig, “Viscerality, Faith, and Skepticism.”

America's own archetypes of charlatanry, Gurdjieff recast his early self-fashioning for a new American context—Dr. Black, metamorphosized.⁶⁶

Before departing from France in 1924, Gurdjieff had already set his public reception in America in motion by orchestrating contradictory portrayals of himself through the international press. While bearing the appearance of exposés, the reports that began surfacing in American news prior to his arrival were actually solicited articles, published by journalists who were specially invited to visit Gurdjieff's Institute during the summer of 1923.⁶⁷ Inviting journalists from international press agencies to report on his teachings, Gurdjieff ensured that once he and his pupils arrived to perform their demonstrations in America, his audience would know his name. As some of first news Americans received of Gurdjieff and his Institute, these reports laid the groundwork for his reception overseas. What Gurdjieff

⁶⁶ For more on how Gurdjieff “actively invited disparagement as [a] charlatan guru,” see Wellbeloved, *Key Concepts*, 206; Gurdjieff's biographer James Webb's thoughts on the matter are particularly telling, insofar as he emphasizes how Gurdjieff's public reception was shaped by his audience's observation of his multiple public personas: “The many conflicting Gurdjieffs who appeared to different disciples theoretically ensured that the teacher himself remain invisible. But instead, these mysteries, doubts, and contradictions produced a composite ‘Gurdjieff’—a slightly bearlike animation of the archetypal Fool, the Jester, the Trickster, a man with whom no one was ever entirely safe. Thus a man who had made his business the destruction of illusions was to some extent defined by his public image; and in considering Gurdjieff, of all people, it is important to distinguish between image and reality. Gurdjieff acquired a reputation, and often rumor rather than experience etched its outlines.” Note how Webb stresses the necessity of parsing “image” from “reality” when it comes to Gurdjieff's public image, suggesting the biographer's own impulse to enter the debate over Gurdjieff's authentic self. He continues in a similar vein: “The man behind the mask could sometimes be seen peering through the eyeslits. But granted his natural cunning, his coarseness, his sensuality—why should these per se disqualify him from the task he was attempting? The charges against him must be considered one by one.” Webb, *Harmonious Circle*, 328-30.

⁶⁷ As Paul Taylor has suggested, Brennecke's report was solicited for the specific purpose of generating publicity in America prior to the demonstrations. Taylor adds that this report was likely the first Americans had heard of this mysterious figure and his Institute. Taylor, *Gurdjieff's America*, 20-21; Gurdjieff's interactions with audiences via press approximate the methods employed by America's own famed trickster, P.T. Barnum. As Neil Harris and James Cook have noted, Barnum occasionally used the press as a vehicle for intentionally generating suspicion—and thus public intrigue—around himself. In some cases, Barnum submitted anonymous or pseudonymous exposés of his own exhibits to the press. For examples of Barnum's early attempts to deceive audiences via press, see Harris, *Humbug*, 23-26; For a more focused examination of these tactics, see “The Operational Aesthetic,” *ibid.*, 59-89; Also see Cook, *Arts of Deception*, 8-9; For a detailed engagement with Barnum's strategies for generating the public's suspicion of his “humbuggery,” as well as an illuminating comparison of these tactics to those employed by early spiritualists in America, see David Walker, “The Humbug in American Religion” [especially 38-40].

initiated through publicity-generating reports of the Institute—the images he portrayed and insider’s access he provided—constituted the lens through which his American observers would view the man and his teachings.⁶⁸

One of the first of these reports appeared in the *New York World* by late November of 1923. In this full-page article, journalist Ernest Brennecke described his strange experience visiting Gurdjieff’s Institute in France. Its title, “Behind the Scenes at Gurdjieff’s Weird Château of Mysteries,” gave American readers the impression of an insider’s access—a peek behind the curtain, so to speak—to a spiritual institute, its pupils, and its founder:

“It was with the keenest anticipation of an exciting, perhaps even dangerous, adventure that I descended with my guide into the lovely gardens of the Chateau du Prieuré as night began to fall. Here I was, committed as it were for a night at the Institut Gurdjieff [sic] where, according to rumors that had been flitting along the Paris boulevards, weird activities were indulged in and magic from the East was practiced by a strange group of people from all over the world: aristocrats, millionaires, doctors of philosophy, engineers and students. Here, as café gossip had it, bizarre chants disturbed the sleep of Fontainebleau during the early hours of the morning. Here persons of noble birth were forced to scrub floors or attend to the pigs. Here was a luxurious Oriental chamber where wild fantastic dances were performed all night long.”⁶⁹

Throughout his reflections, Brennecke betrayed a near constant return to themes of Oriental allure. From his opening sentence, Brennecke presented himself as a brave adventurer on a mission to uncover Gurdjieff’s hidden secrets, to observe practices and rituals typically reserved for initiates’ eyes only. Hardly the removed observer, Brennecke seemed more like a twentieth-century Sir Richard Francis Burton. Like the translator of the widely read *Arabian Nights*, Brennecke set out to correct misguided perspectives of the East

⁶⁸ Taylor, *Gurdjieff and Orage*, 35.

⁶⁹ Ernest Brennecke, “Behind the Scenes” (25 November 1923).

by venturing into the mysterious and unknown territories himself.⁷⁰ Night fell, shrouding the knowable spaces of Paris in darkness, just as he entered the grounds of a space not unlike the night itself—obscure, a perceptual barrier to things typically visible, distorting the senses so as to render them unfit for navigating the terrain with normal everyday ease. With a wink in the direction of public opinion, he embraced the challenge to stand in for his readers’ eyes by investigating rumors of Gurdjieff’s “luxurious Oriental chamber” that harbored such “weird activities” as “bizarre chants,” “wild fantastic dances,” and “magic from the East.” In his investigation of the Institute and its founder, he told his readers what they told themselves, and by and by, fed back to them the content of their imaginations.

Brennecke was not the only journalist to convey the *Arabian Nights* impression to Gurdjieff’s curious audience in America. Alice Langelier’s report for the Pennsylvania *New Castle News* added to the already complex image circulating in Paris—and now America—about the Institute’s founder: “From a little loge, hung with rich rugs from the Orient and piled high with cushions, the leader sees all without being seen. It is he who reads and instructs upon all subjects—the science of poisons, hypnotism, magic, and sacred art of the ancient Greeks. The director assures the visitors that he is not searching for the mysterious,

⁷⁰ Richard Francis Burton (ed., trans.), *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night: A Plain and Literal Translation of the Arabian Nights Entertainments* (London: "Kama Shastra Society" [privately printed], 1885); For a classic study on Western Orientalism, see Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979); For more on American Orientalisms, see Nance, *Arabian Nights*; Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 2005) [especially chapters 3-4]; Naomi Rosenblatt, “Orientalism in American Popular Culture,” *Penn History Review* 16, no. 2 (Spring 2009), 51-63; John R. McRae, “Oriental Verities on the American Frontier: The 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions and the Thought of Masao Abe,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 11 (1991), 7-36; Jane Naomi Iwamura, *Virtual Orientalism: Asian Religions and American Popular Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Mari Yoshihara, *Embracing the East: White Women and American Orientalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); For a wide collection of Orientalism’s critical theorists, including those who challenge Said’s classic formulation, see Alexander Lyon Macfie (ed.), *Orientalism: A Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2000); For works on Theosophy as a case study for Western Orientalism, see Stephen Prothero *The White Buddhist* (Indiana University Press, 2010); and Joscelyn Godwin *Theosophical Enlightenment* (SUNY Press, 1994).

but only the perfect, harmonious life. However, a day spent among this ‘mystic’ family, in the heart of the great forest, gives one the impression that he has just stepped into a tale of ‘the Arabian Nights.’”⁷¹

Gurdjieff, Langelier reported, “sees all without being seen.” While cast as a “director” and instructor of “all subjects,” Langelier’s list of the subjects taught did not stray far beyond the occult.⁷² A tunneled view was most evident in her insistence on the mystical nature of the Institute and its members, despite Gurdjieff’s reported refutation of this image. Gurdjieff—“the director”—told his visitors that what he sought for his pupils was not “the mysterious” but the “harmonious life.” Despite the luxurious Oriental decor Langelier and Brennecke both described, the author—and thus, the reader—was assured of the practicality of Gurdjieff’s mission. When readers turned to Langelier’s article, they could go no further than its title, “Simple Life is Cult’s Slogan,” before coming up against a portrayal that contradicted the lush and exotic imagery of the Institute circulating between newspapers and common gossip. Were readers meant to understand the Institute as “mysterious” or “simple”? Did its inhabitants attend a liberal educational institution guided by a “director,” or did they dwell in the exotic, learning of sacred and magic mysteries from their panoptic “leader”? If Gurdjieff’s observers expected consistent answers to these questions, they would remain disappointed. As it turns out, the very subject of these reports played an active role in shaping their content, contradictions and all.⁷³

⁷¹ Alice Langelier, “Simple Life is Cult’s Slogan,” *New Castle News* (4 April 1923), 13.

⁷² Much of the Institute’s curriculum that Langelier reports can be found in the Institute’s Prospectus, available online at: <https://www.jcrowns.com/instituteapplication.pdf>.

⁷³ Taylor, *Gurdjieff and Orage*, 35; For more on Gurdjieff’s cultivation of Eastern mystique, see Petsche, *Gurdjieff and Music*, 111.

As the associated press picked up on early reports like Brennecke's and Langelier's, they spurred a number of more imaginative pieces on the Institute and its founder—some overwhelmingly positive, some evocative of suspicion and fear, and some altogether fabricated.⁷⁴ Growing suspicions among the American public quickly followed these diverse, slanted, and often speculative portrayals of Gurdjieff, much to the consternation of Institute pupils who felt their spiritual leader and his teachings—no less than they themselves—had been violently misrepresented.⁷⁵ “This chorus of slander,” one pupil remarked, “made Mr. Gurdjieff's work seem like a great hoax and its creator, a charlatan—a twentieth-century Cagliostro. We were dumbfounded by the way the journalists, convinced that they had a real scoop for the gutter press, exploited the public's credulity and trust.”⁷⁶

Some of his American observers joined the “gutter press” in comparing Gurdjieff to that famous eighteenth-century magician and practitioner of occult phenomena, Cagliostro.⁷⁷ In fact, dating back to the nineteenth-century at least, it was common for performers in the West to cultivate such an “air of mysteriousness” by deliberately self-fashioning personas akin to

⁷⁴ For example, Maud Hoffman's *New York Times* piece for the Arts section characterized the Institute as a welcoming environment waiting with kind open arms for curious American visitors. Maud Hoffman, “Taking the Life Cure in Gurdjieff's School,” *The New York Times* (10 February 1924). Hoffman was a member of Ouspensky's Fourth Way group in London. Orage met Hoffman at the Institute when she numbered among the invited journalists in the summer of 1923, though her two-column article did not appear in the *Times* until a year after her visit. Taylor quotes this article, describing it as “a slanted and glowing account of how well one is received and treated at the Institute.” He notes, “If, a year later, a number of Americans arrived at the Priuré with expectations to be received, lodged, boarded and entertained in this fashion, they were reasonably certain of disappointment, and many were later to express their deception as well as bewilderment.” Taylor, *Gurdjieff's America*, 21-23.

⁷⁵ Taylor, *Gurdjieff in the Public Eye*, 108.

⁷⁶ Tchekhovitch, *A Master in Life*, 117.

⁷⁷ Reflecting on Gurdjieff's reception in America, cultural critic Gorham Munson echoed the comparisons made between “this strange man” and Cagliostro. Munson, “Black Sheep Philosophers,” 8; Munson attested elsewhere that Gurdjieff was “every whit as enigmatic as was Cagliostro in the eighteenth century.” Gorham Munson, “Orage in America: Part One,” *Dynamic America*, 10 (1940); Writer William Seabrook described “the terrific domination of Gurdjieff, the Master” that he perceived in the demonstrations, portraying him as “a slave-master or wild-animal trainer, with an invisible bull-whip swishing through the air.” (Note the title of this work.) William Seabrook, “Our Modern Cagliostros” in *Witchcraft: Its Power in the World Today* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1940), 206-209.

“the saint/scoundrel character bearing an *Ex Oriente Lux* appeal in the person of the mobile Oriental-style-notion street huckster.”⁷⁸ From illusionists and stage magicians to occult practitioners of hypnotism and other psychic phenomena, performers in America modeled their public personas after Cagliostro by insinuating “relationships with ‘supernatural’ powers,” and claiming “they had gained their powers from Indian fakirs or Egyptian sages.”⁷⁹ For these performers, the multiply meaningful archetype of Cagliostro provided powerful tools for self-transformation. Appropriating this archetype allowed them to adopt exotic personas, like the worldly adventurer or the cunning fakir, by appealing to a variety of associations, from the romanticized mystical Orient to the realm of occult magic.

As we have seen with his “Dr. Black” advertisement in Essentuki, Gurdjieff had a history of playing the charlatan, and the image of fraudulence and deception would serve well to intrigue his American audience. Americans had long worried about the prevalence of deception, from “confidence men” and counterfeit money to fraudulent advertising and hoax curiosities, so at the very least Gurdjieff offered his observers an opportunity to test their suspicions.⁸⁰ The “chorus of slander” followed Gurdjieff throughout his stay in America, cropping up not only in the press but also in social gossip, from casual observers to the writers and avant-garde poets of the intellectual elite Gurdjieff hoped to attract to

⁷⁸ Nance, *Arabian Nights*, 93.

⁷⁹ Julia Mannherz, “The Occult and Popular Entertainment in Late Imperial Russia,” in Menzel, Hagemester, and Rosenthal (eds.), *The New Age of Russia: Occult and Esoteric Dimensions* (München, Germany: Kubon & Sagner, 2012), 40; The rhetorical framing Gurdjieff adopted for the demonstrations’ explanatory introductions presents another site for exploring his self-fashioning. In line with my analysis, Azize has noted the probability that Gurdjieff cast the Movements within “exotic pedigrees in order to clothe [them] in oriental allure.” Joseph Azize, “Gurdjieff’s Sacred Dances and Movements,” 304.

⁸⁰ Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982); Stephen Mihm, *A Nation of Counterfeiters: Capitalists, Con Men, and the Making of the United States* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2007); Cook, *Arts of Deception*.

demonstrations and lectures.⁸¹ His image as a modern-day Cagliostro was continually revived as his American observers debated the ambiguous identity of this mysterious “saint/scoundrel” who fluidly oscillated in his self-fashioning between the two contradictory personas. “All sorts of things were said about him: that he cast a hypnotic spell over his followers and fleeced them (and in a sense this was true); that he was a black magician and an irreligious and unscrupulous man.”⁸² Yet while pupils defended Gurdjieff against the “gutter press” and accusations of “charlatanry,” exploring Gurdjieff’s self-fashioning—his performed exaggerations and conspicuous silences—suggests that at the creative center of those accusations stood the accused himself.⁸³

According to one of his American observers, the reputation Gurdjieff fostered “followed the pattern of all the swamis, gurus and masters who have roamed the Western world: his past in the East was veiled in mystery.”⁸⁴ The lecture circuit in metropolitan cities was awash

⁸¹ For instance, Llewelen Powys reflected on his experience as an audience member the Neighborhood Playhouse demonstration in New York: “On the night I had the opportunity of observing Gurdjieff while he stood smoking not far from me in the vestibule. He had a high, bald head with sharp, black eyes. His general appearance made one think of a riding master, though there was something about his presence that affected one’s nerves in a strange way. Especially did one feel this when his pupils came on stage to perform like a hutchful of hypnotized rabbits under the gaze of a master conjuror.” Llewelen Powys, *The Verdict of Bridle-goose* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1926) cited in Webb, *Harmonious Circle*, 269; “When Alan Porter, literary editor of *The Spectator*, mentioned “Gourdjieff” as a contributor to a new orthodoxy, John Middleton Murry replied in his new magazine *Adelphi* that ‘I do not like the smell of this ‘future orthodoxy,’ it smells too perceptively of charlatanry and abracadabras and initiation at a guinea a head.” John Middleton Murry, “Quo Warranto,” *Adelphi* II:3 (August 1924), cited in Taylor, *Gurdjieff in the Public Eye*, 161.

⁸² Kenneth Walker, “Gurdjieff, the Unknown Man.”

⁸³ Kenneth Walker observed that “Gurdjieff had a wonderful capacity for giving the appearance of accident to what he had deliberately contrived.” *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Munson, “Black Sheep Philosophers,” 2; One article associated Gurdjieff and his teachings with various representatives of Indian spiritual traditions who offered teachings and practices to offset the busy pace of modern American metropolitan life.: “India has sent its Swamis and Yogis to convert the hustling northern lands, but they go on with their hustling and refuse to contemplate. One of the most recent of these missionaries is a Russian, G. I. Gurdjieff...” Though the author mistakenly refers to the Greek-Armenian Gurdjieff as a “Russian,” his comments are noteworthy insofar as he speaks to the chaotic qualities of modernity that Dean MacCannell identifies at the core of a “touristic impulse” to seek a unified consciousness and identity through tourism, sightseeing, and observing Otherness (MacCannell, *The Tourist*, 1-16): “Most of this has a rather strange and fantastic sound to the average American. He is even inclined to smile at the thought of himself or his wife taking up, for instance, ‘Oriental (sacred) dances,’ or dulio-therapy. But let him not scoff. There are considerable numbers of people who take it all in great seriousness. Such cults seem to make their strongest appeals at such times as this when people are reacting from intense strain.” “A Russian, Gurdjieff, Brings a

with visitors who, like Gurdjieff, often claimed to bring Eastern secrets to serve as solutions to various Western problems.⁸⁵ In light of the prevalence of these “Oriental” identities, by the 1920s some Americans were quick to suspect a level of contrived self-promotion—even deception—and, hardly keen to have the wool pulled over their eyes, they challenged those who attempted to make these claims of arriving as the harbingers of Eastern secrets or ancient wisdom.⁸⁶

American suspicions of Eastern spiritual figures were fueled by a variety of xenophobic stereotypes. By the turn of the century, anti-immigration sentiments were fomented by press reports that sensationalized the “Hindoo Invasion.” However, critiques framed by interest in public policy or maintaining economical order often belied more insidious aggressions built around American male fears of the sultry, exotic foreigners who competed for female attention. Prejudiced tropes cast Indian swamis and gurus as sexually deviant swindlers of credulous white women. Racism fed scandal where biracial sexual relationships were suspected, and women frequently joined in to launch accusations of licentious behavior not only at Eastern emissaries but their followers, too. But Protestant criticism took center stage

New Orientalism,” in a “Religion To-Day” section of unnamed journal, quoted in Taylor, *Gurdjieff in the Public Eye*, 157.

⁸⁵ See Schmidt, *Restless Souls*, 158-79; As Susan Nance has likewise shown in her *Arabian Nights*; this practice was not restricted to foreign visitors, since, for some Americans, “playing Eastern” allowed them to take on Oriental roles and performance identities. Gorham Munson, who attended the New York demonstrations and witnessed the stir caused by Gurdjieff’s presence in America, attempted to “account for the interest persons of metropolitan culture in the Western world have shown in the Eastern ideas of Gurdjieff.” On the one hand, Munson found “the therapeutic interest” to be an easy explanation “for people who seek respite for their personal unhappiness in psychoanalysis, pseudo-religious cults, and the worship of the group.” This “common interest” aside, he asked “why Eastern ideas have attracted in these years the interest of sophisticated thinkers.” For Munson, the answer was clear: “Western culture is in crisis. Ours is a period of two world wars and one world depression. In this period it has been impossible for a thoughtful person not to have been deeply disappointed in his hopes for man. He has seen one effort after another produce an unintended result.” Munson detected in his contemporaries “a desperate tendency to turn in our crisis to ideas and teachings that stand outside the stream of Western culture.” Munson, “Black Sheep Philosophers,” 20-25.

⁸⁶ We can see in this suspicion the residuum of a Gilded Age perceptive change, which Michael Leja has posited as the broad tendency toward “looking askance.” As Leja suggests, Americans in the Gilded Age were quite aware that what was “gilded” in their society was but a thin veneer, and in order to discern truth in such fiction, one had to acquire a perceptive eye by “looking askance.” Michael Leja, *Looking Askance*.

in the debate over the “Hindoo Invasion,” as clergy, missionaries, and journalists spread concerns about the hypnotic power these foreign spiritual emissaries held over (what they believed to be) the weak and wayward female soul. More often than not, stereotypes capitalized on financial concerns as Eastern emissaries were conflated with con artists and confidence men. Each of these genres coalesced in accusations of fraud as these foreign spiritual figures were painted with the broad label of “charlatan.”⁸⁷

Parallels between Gurdjieff and similar Others were not lost on his observers, and those tempted to conflate him with familiar Eastern emissaries often did so in order to question and debate his authenticity. Implications of charlatanry and self-serving deviance commonly arose from comparisons of this sort, as evident in the tongue-in-cheek tone of a report on Gurdjieff’s Institute from the *New York American Weekly*:

“From time to time the originators and high priests of various strange creeds of health, philosophy or spiritual conduct float over to America, and the latest strange bird to arrive here (where dollars are easy to pick up) is ‘Dr.’ George Gurdjieff. ...Dr. Gurdjieff has cast his eye especially upon five Americans whom he believes could put some...feathers in his hair. Then soft music should play for him while he is made to taste perfumed wine and to give himself up both to the intoxication of the vine and the dance... The music...is exotic, sensuous, mystical, provocative. It is played by hidden musicians. Gurdjieff, master of the dance, sits behind a curtain. He cannot be seen, neither can he see. He doesn’t have to. His three souls being each strong and lusty, he feels with all of them the rhythms of the crowd and does not need his eyes. ...Sometimes they mingle souls til dawn.”⁸⁸

As Paul Taylor has indicated, this report was fabricated to suggest the anonymous author had actually visited Gurdjieff’s Institute in France. It was instead an elaborate and sensationalized fictional account based on Brennecke’s *Arabian Nights*-style report from his

⁸⁷ Nance, *Arabian Nights*, 205-29; For an examination of this historical and cultural context (i.e. suspicion regarding the “Hindoo Invasion”), see Steven F. Walker, “Vivekananda and American Occultism,” in Howard Kerr and Charles L. Crow (eds.), *The Occult in America: New Historical Perspectives* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 162-76.

⁸⁸ “Dr. Gurdjieff and His Magical Secrets of Life.”

1923 visit to the Institute.⁸⁹ I am however less concerned with the factual status of the *American Weekly* piece than I am with the comparative opportunity it presents. Identifying where these imagined observations depart from Brennecke's allows us to glimpse more than the author's creative license. For Brennecke, the Oriental persona Gurdjieff portrayed inspired dreamy, poetic, and mystical imagery. For the author who drew from Brennecke's account for the *American Weekly* article, the Eastern mythos Gurdjieff embodied signaled something far more insidious, something fraudulent that triggered associations with opportunistic, sexually predatory swindling, masquerading as religious ritual. Each writer pulled divergent associations from the same font of Western depictions of the Orient, and these differences in their reports speak to the power of mythic ambiguity. For the writers, the ambiguity of the Oriental mythos enabled them to generate distinct impressions of Gurdjieff and his Institute, each corresponding to the author's purpose, focus, and framework of interpretation. As the anonymous author adapted and reimagined Brennecke's account, Gurdjieff transformed in the public eye from Pythagoras to charlatan.

This was not the only persona Gurdjieff promoted, however. To the Eastern Other, he added another "mask of incomprehensibility," that of the scientific investigator, which added an additional layer of mystery for his observers to question, debate, and compare to similar figures within their own frameworks of interpretation. In portraying himself as a scientific investigator who offered objective, mathematical methods for self-development, Gurdjieff shape-shifted his dynamic public persona in ways that could both complimented and contradicted his Oriental image.⁹⁰ Following the signposts of popular science, Gurdjieff

⁸⁹ Taylor, *Gurdjieff in the Public Eye*, 135.

⁹⁰ Consider, for example, Fourth Way pupil Margaret Anderson's summation of Gurdjieff's teachings: "Every science has to draw upon a special vocabulary. The Gurdjieff vocabulary is as precise as that of any other science. All the terms in the Bible were once precise scientific terms...*This method*: a mathematical and

framed his teachings in terms of recent psychological theories and technological developments, sometimes adopting the lingo of modern science, and in some cases, critiquing that very institution for its narrow assumptions. “Modern specialized civilization,” he told the *Chicago Daily News*, “has the man of today half-baked, and some only one third baked. In every man are really three men. One thinks, a second acts and third feels, in the harmonizing of all three the individual becomes perfect.”⁹¹ Simultaneously working within the language and beyond the bounds of modern science, Gurdjieff presented the Fourth Way as a unique model for conceptualizing the connection between science and self.

Gurdjieff had a history of self-consciously marshaling technological devices to shape an image of himself as a modern scientist with professional expertise and data-driven methods for self-development. As one pupil recalled, Gurdjieff “began buying all manner of household materials and electrical equipment” during a visit to Berlin (c. 1921-1922). “When asked the reason, [Gurdjieff] replied that it was not a question only of the devalued Mark, but

material explanation of the creation, maintenance and purpose of the universe, man’s place in that universe, his function and duty... All great schools, all great systems of thought, all great religions have always striven to give man two freedoms: *inside* freedom (from vanity, self-love, etc.), and *outside* freedom (from ‘education’, etc.). The first steps towards freedom are self-observation, to ‘know thyself’. Gurdjieff’s system begins with neutral scientific observation of one’s self—taking notes on the body in the scientific manner. First the physical; later, notes on the mental and emotional centres. The centre of gravity of *change*: you can’t change by the mind alone; you must begin with the body, bring body and emotions into line.” Anderson, *The Unknowable Gurdjieff*, 49-55; Gurdjieff’s fusing of the mystical and scientific in his teachings and public personas seem to qualify him as a proponent of what Sydney Ahlstrom has termed “Harmonial religion,” a tradition “in which spiritual composure, physical health, and even economic well-being are understood to flow from a person’s rapport with the cosmos. ... Their fundamental claims involve a persistent reliance on allegedly rational argument, empirical demonstration, and (when applicable) a knowledge of the ‘secret’ meanings of authoritative scriptures.” However, as Ahlstrom notes himself, “Harmonial religions” like Christian Science and New Thought bear close similarities to esoteric predecessors to the “Age of Aquarius,” including (by Ahlstrom’s categorization) Theosophy and American Occultism. Ahlstrom depicts the latter category as “either explicitly plac[ing] themselves outside of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, or [claiming] to absorb the truths of all historical religions. They tend to relate themselves positively to the great Eastern religions. ... Despite strong rational and empirical interests, they emphasize esoteric doctrines, astrology, flamboyant symbolism, occult powers, and/or secret organizational structures.” Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1972), 1019-20, 1038.

⁹¹ “Three disciples of Gurdjieff in costume of Soufi Christians demonstrating some of their meditative work,” *Chicago Daily News* (19 March 1924).

the machinery would make his future patients feel he was up to date. They were not to heal, but to impress.”⁹² Returning to Brennecke’s 1923 report on the Institute in France, we can see how, just prior to his American visit, Gurdjieff began to promote his teachings as founded upon similarly impressive and up-to-date scientific methods. While simultaneously nodding to the mystical ancient wisdom his teachings encompassed, Gurdjieff highlighted the practical objectives of Fourth Way practices as he described to the reporter some of the supernatural faculties his pupils could develop:

“Through the Work, “the individual attains a consciousness and knowledge beyond that which is derived by the agency of his physical senses. Assuming the spirit as a principle of higher nature and power than the body in which it is embedded, the theory is that the quality of the atoms of the body may be so reorganized that it becomes a finer instrument for the spirit to function within. When through intense physical labor, fasting and elaborate exercises the physical machine is made perfectly obedient and responsible to the will, the individual becomes possessed of faculties far exceeding those of the average man. Clairvoyance, ability to see at a distance, power to know what another is thinking, capacity to telephone one’s thoughts to another’s mind without wires or words—these are some of the accomplishments, together with a larger vision of the universe.”⁹³

This description hinted at popular interests among the American intellectual and social elite at the time, who found methods of self-perfection that adopted cutting-edge scientific vocabulary most compelling.⁹⁴ Gurdjieff’s description of reorganizing one’s atoms to make way for a developing spirit certainly spoke to these popular interests. Offering the prospects of a level of consciousness that transcended the physical senses, Gurdjieff built upon recent scientific discoveries and psychological theories depicting the fascinating and previously

⁹² Tchekhovitch, *A Master in Life*, 44-45; Paul Taylor suggests that these “electrical equipment might have included an invention in 1919 by the Saint Petersburg Russian Lev Servevich Theremin (1896-1993) which consisted of a box with antennae, activated by hand movements about the antennae which altered frequency, or pitch, and volume.” Taylor, *A New Life*, 79.

⁹³ Brennecke, “Behind the Scenes.”

⁹⁴ See, for example, Leigh Eric Schmidt’s discussion of these dynamics at work in the New Thought movement, Christian Science, and related mind-cure philosophies and traditions in America. Schmidt, *Restless Souls*, 145-62.

hidden inner life of the human being. Innovative scientific and medical apparatuses like the microscope and X-Ray gave visual support to speculations about hidden entities (e.g. germs, the “invisible enemies”) and mechanisms underlying human experiences, while Sigmund Freud’s tripartite theory of psychic structure suggested that sub-threshold psychological entities shaped human thought, impulses, and behavior.⁹⁵ Gurdjieff echoed these discoveries in his emphasis on harmonizing the distinct physical, emotional, and intellectual centers operating outside everyday awareness. Furthermore, Fourth Way practice required pupils to develop *themselves* through individual efforts, and these methods fit well with a do-it-yourself theme that aroused popular interest beginning at least in the late-nineteenth century when manual-based methods like “how-to” lessons in hypnotism and animal magnetism began to circulate via mail-order networks.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ Leja, *Looking Askance*, 3-5; Also see Fred Nadis, *Wonder Shows: Performing Science, Magic, and Religion in America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 13-16, 155-57, 258; It is perhaps noteworthy that, as Louise Welch notes, Orage also demonstrated an interest in Freud’s early work. In 1912, he was the first to publish Freud’s work in England in a non-professional journal, and shortly thereafter formed a group of intellectuals in London to study Freud’s theories, and concluded that “what was now needed was ‘psycho-synthesis.’” Welch, *Orage with Gurdjieff in America*, 21.

⁹⁶ For more on popular interest in self-transformation and self-perfection guides in American history, see Lears, *No Place of Grace*; T. J. Jackson Lears *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1994); Schmidt, *Restless Souls*, 143-179; Robert C. Fuller, *Mesmerism and the American Cure of Souls* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982) [especially chapters 3-7, 48-183]; Catherine Albanese, “Homesteads of the Mind: Belief and Practice in Metaphysics,” in *America: Religions and Religion*, 5th ed. (Boston: Wadsworth, 2013) 183-203; For examples of American mind-cure and “mental science” traditions, see Warren Felt Evans, *The Mental-Cure: Illustrating the Influences of the Mind on the Body, Both in Health and Disease, And the Psychological Method of Treatment* (Boston: Banner of Light, 1869); Laroy Sunderland, *The Trance, and Correlative Phenomena* (Chicago: James Walker, 1868); Annie Besant and C. W. Leadbeater, *Thought-Forms* (Wheaton, IL: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1971); For more on mail-order how-to lessons and occult-based correspondence courses, see the extensive digitized collection available through the “Spiritualist and Occult Periodicals” archives of The International Association for the Preserving of Spiritualist and Occult Periodicals (IAPSOP), <http://www.iapsop.com/lessons/>. For examples, see Frances Lord, *Christian Science Healing: Its Principles and Practice with Full Explanations for Home Students* (Chicago: Lily Publishing House, 1888); M. Young, “25 Lessons in Hypnotism: How to Become an Expert Operator” (Aug. 1899); “Prof. L.A. Harraden’s Complete Mail Course of Twenty Illustrated Lessons in Hypnotism,” (Jackson, MI, 1899); Edmund Shaftesbury (pseud.)/Webster Edgerly, *Personal Magnetism Club of America: Organized to Exemplify in Public and Private Life the Principles of Personal Power* (Washington, D.C.: Ralston Publishing Co., 1901); Helen Wilmans, *Home Course in Mental Science* (Seabreeze, FL: Privately printed, c. 1900).

Through transcripts from the 1924 demonstrations, we can see how Gurdjieff framed the performances of sacred dances, bodily exercises, and “tricks, half-tricks, and real supernatural phenomena” as testaments to the practical methods and scientific nature of Fourth Way practice. A pupil standing in as Gurdjieff’s English translator told the audience that his teacher’s “detailed study—extended throughout many years of sacred gymnastics and sacred dances, gave practical proof of their great importance in connection with the all round development of man, one of the principle aims of Mr. Gurdjieff—the parallel development of all man’s powers.” Sacred dances and exercises were included in the program to demonstrate “one of the means for educating the student’s moral force, for developing his will, patience, capacity for thought, concentration and attention, hearing, sight, sense of touch, and so on.” Audiences were told that the finale, the series of “tricks, half-tricks, and real supernatural phenomena,” would furthermore, “give an idea of the possibility of developing the memory within a very short time.” But, the speaker noted, each dance, exercise, and phenomenon demonstrated was more than mere show—these were performances of Fourth Way praxis. For Institute pupils, each of these exercises was “designed for the development of quickness of mind and attention, which again have as their aim the fundamental one of the harmonious development of the pupil.” While the sacred dances and “movements” exercises demonstrated the pupils’ advanced “development of mechanical memory” and the series of “so-called supernatural phenomena” showed the “intuitive feeling and psychological judgment” pupils could master, the speaker assured the audience that at the Institute, “No special exercises are given for the development of memory; the results are obtained through general work and exercises which assist the development of the whole man.”⁹⁷

⁹⁷“Movements, Exercises, Demonstrations: New York 1924: General Introduction” transcript in Gurdjieff, *Gurdjieff’s Early Talks*, 277-87; Also see Nott, *Teachings of Gurdjieff*, 8-18; Reporting for the Massachusetts

While woven into the explanations and background information provided to audiences of the demonstrations, Gurdjieff's emphasis on the "practical" benefits of the Fourth Way was hardly consistent throughout his 1924 tour. Some press agents were given the impression that Gurdjieff led his pupils to self-perfection, that he would "produce perfect men," enabling writers to transform into "dramatists surpassing Shakespeare and likewise leaders in every art and craft."⁹⁸ To others, Gurdjieff obfuscated these claims, offering a more modest picture of himself guiding pupils to self-improvement, not perfection. While Gurdjieff claimed he could teach pupils to harness their own "innate abilities," he did not profess an ability to make masters of novices. "A writer will write better after he has been harmoniously developed than before," Gurdjieff insisted, but he would "not be a Shakespeare," nor would the Institute make Paderewskis of pianists or prodigies of painters.⁹⁹

Gurdjieff used the local press as a platform for horizontal mobility, alternating between conflicting perspectives as he (re)framed the aim of his Institute and what Fourth Way pupils could achieve through his teachings.¹⁰⁰ His audience's responses to these contradictory personas were by no means uniform. Some were fascinated, even won over, by the ambitious

North Adams Evening Transcript, Oscar K. Goll echoed these sentiments regarding the practical nature of Gurdjieff's Institute and teachings. Note especially the direct contradiction of Gurdjieff's mystical persona (reiterating what Alice Langelier reported back in 1923): "The Institute is not a 'cult.' Nor is Mr. Gurdjieff its 'master.' ... According to Mr. Gurdjieff, there is nothing mystic or occult about it. It is, in fact, intensely realistic. 'It is not only a system of education,' Mr. Gurdjieff said. It is a way of life.... intended to teach an individual how to live as completely and fully as he is capable of doing...[and] how to get a maximum of results with the least waste of energy." Oscar K. Goll, "Thought Transfer Not Done by Tricks," *North Adams Evening Transcript* (26 May 1924), cited in Taylor, *Gurdjieff in the Public Eye*, 155.

⁹⁸ "Superman Cult Founder Coming."

⁹⁹ "Thought Transfer Not Done by Tricks."

¹⁰⁰ Robert C. Fuller has explored how American mesmerists similarly cast their work as, ambiguously, something between spirituality and science. "Unable to decide whether psychology should be considered an extension of physiology or metaphysics, the mesmerists chose to blur the distinctions between the two. ... it was their very reluctance to make hard and fast distinctions between sacred and secular which enabled them to investigate psychological issues without thinking themselves to be undermining traditional religious values. Mesmerism's location midway between the religious and scientific paradigms competing for the allegiance of nineteenth-century Americans made psychological ideas appear as a way of shifting, not eradicating, traditional categories of self-understanding." Fuller, *Mesmerism and the American Cure of Souls*, 49-50.

mystic-scientist promising the best of both worlds. Many sensed something suspicious in a man who seemed to flaunt his mastery over the seemingly mutually exclusive teachings of both East and West. But wherever they fell between these two poles, Gurdjieff's observers seemed to agree—whether charlatanry or authentic spiritual power, there was something mysterious hiding behind his public personas.

Public Reception and Private Debate

By the time Gurdjieff arrived in America, popular notions of the self had become inextricably intertwined with the dangers of deceit. From the late nineteenth century, the previously noted psychological theories challenging the idea of the “self” as a unified entity brought into focus disturbing questions of identity, delusion, and self-deception. By the early twentieth century, popular psychology (inheriting no small amount of popular occultism) pointed to the self as the very generator of the “illusions and deceptions that permeated modern experience.” The human mind and sensory apparatuses could no longer be trusted for adequately “discerning truth in the modern world,” and new “understandings of the self as divided, conflicted, and harboring mysterious depths... rendered suspect the self present to consciousness.” Thus, even the “conscious self was yet another deceptive surface.”¹⁰¹ For some however, the inward turn these theories inspired brought to light the possibility that, if latent desires remained hidden from view prior to the discoveries of psychoanalysis, there may also be latent powers and abilities waiting to be explored, freed, tamed, and utilized for self-perfection.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ Leja, *Looking Askance*, 185-86; Also see Fuller, *Mesmerism and the American Cure of Souls*, 53-57.

¹⁰² See “The Mind Reader” in Nadis, *Wonder Shows*, 138-75; Also see Schmidt, *Restless Souls*, 148-49.

Drawing on popular themes in late nineteenth-century occult literature and stage magic, Gurdjieff's methods for developing mental and perceptual capacities promised pupils a new potential for gaining control over the unknown as they navigated a world of uncertain surface appearances.¹⁰³ While Gurdjieff alternated between personas of the mystical Oriental adept and the "objective" and scientific instructor, American popular interests often blended components of the two in renditions of scientific and technological innovations as both magical and spiritually significant. Engaging with this "quasi-mystical status" of popular science thus allowed Gurdjieff and similar others to freely move between personas in ways that were supported by Americans who felt magic might dwell within innovative approaches to self-development.¹⁰⁴

Riding the momentum of popular science in early twentieth-century America, Gurdjieff emphasized the practical benefits of his teachings by rendering the self an inner space within which Americans could question, imagine, even attempt the possibility of becoming

¹⁰³ As Gurdjieff engaged with new interest in the nature of the hidden self, he also drew on popular themes in 19th century occult literature. Occult publications, from pamphlets to journals, "challenged the supreme standing of the rational waking mind by advocating techniques that tapped into the hidden realms of the self, a domain that would soon be termed 'the unconscious.'" Julia Mannherz, *Modern Occultism in Late Imperial Russia* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2012), 80; Gurdjieff's teachings were fundamentally concerned with such issues, frequently addressing his tenet that mankind is, in fact, always in a state of "waking sleep," unconscious to the three distinct "centers"—thinking, moving, and feeling—that yield what is typically perceived as the self. Fourth Way practices were, in effect, designed to shake pupils from the "illusion" of a unified self by forcing them to observe the activity in each of these independent and often mutually conflicting centers. I am grateful to Ann Taves for pointing me to key works on late-nineteenth to early-twentieth century practices of hypnotism and theories of the unconscious mind: Henri F. Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious: The History and Evolution of Dynamic Psychiatry* (New York: Basic Books, 1970); and Alan Gauld, *A History of Hypnotism* (Cambridge University Press, 1992).

¹⁰⁴ From the late nineteenth to the early twentieth-century, technological developments interwoven with commercial interests rendered a "populist science that encouraged a belief in science and magic," with scientific innovations taking on a new "quasi-mystical status." From advertisements and press to the public imagination, famed scientists and inventors were cast as mythic giants, prophets, and wizards. Thomas Edison became "a homespun Titan," Nikola Tesla acquired the image of "a dapper yet otherworldly seer," and Charles Steinmetz was cast as "General Electric's crippled genius who tamed lightning." These scientist-magicians often took to self-fashioning as well, imbibing the mystical attributions society ascribed to them as tools for self-promotion to aid their research efforts through public support. Nadis, *Wonder Shows*, 49-53.

supermen.¹⁰⁵ But if hidden mechanisms of the human body and mind operated outside awareness, as Gurdjieff taught, their subliminal nature implied their vulnerability to unconscious manipulation by hypnotic “suggestion,” or deception more broadly. Similarly triggering awareness of deception, the many public lecturers and spiritual guides also offering provisions for self-perfection at the time meant Gurdjieff was inevitably associated with quack fads and opportunistic charlatanry. His American audiences could hardly ignore the lingering possibility that deception of some sort was afoot.¹⁰⁶

In emphasizing the “practical” nature of his teachings, Gurdjieff followed a path previously travelled by other proponents of East-meets-West teachings. Swami Vivekananda, for example, gained a considerable following around the turn of the century offering American audiences his Hindu-inspired “Raja Yoga” teachings. The title of his 1900 lecture to Los Angeles seekers, “Hints on Practical Spirituality,” speaks to the way he framed his foreign teachings to appeal to an emergent business class that had little time to devote to intensive theological study. A regular fixture on the American cosmopolitan lecture circuit, Vivekananda taught accessible techniques for meditation, breathing exercises, and postural control that America’s spiritual seekers could easily incorporate into their daily lives.¹⁰⁷

A “practical” approach was also a common theme associated with the new turn in popular occultism throughout Russia toward the end of the 19th century—a context in which we can

¹⁰⁵ “The conception of the superman has for America been taken from poetry and given a psychological setting.” Gorham Munson, “Orange in America”; As Simon During notes, nineteenth-century illusionists and stage magicians also drew on public intrigue regarding the hidden aspects of the self. “Experts endorsed performers like [illusionist Washington Irving] Bishop so quickly, then, because their performances were consistent with the widespread use of close reading in the study of objects, bodies, and minds—the minute attention paid to the subliminal in the order of things.” Simon During, *Modern Enchantments: The Cultural Power of Secular Magic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 163-64.

¹⁰⁶ For a broad examination of the many methods for self-perfection available at the time, see Schmidt, *Restless Souls* (especially chapters 4-6, 143-268).

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 162-175.

easily locate Gurdjieff, both historically and thematically. From how-to manuals to pamphlets and periodicals, occult literature highlighted the ways readers could apply occult techniques to “issues such as self-identity, autonomy, self-assertion, and mastery over the surrounding world.”¹⁰⁸ Chief among these was willpower and the practical development of authority with which the will was associated—a topic Gurdjieff frequently addressed in his teachings.¹⁰⁹ For his more skeptical observers, Gurdjieff represented an isomorph of similar figures promoting methods for self-development. Poet Christopher Morley’s assessment speaks to how skeptical observers voiced their suspicions of Gurdjieff by conflating him with similar contemporary figures, like Émile Coué, the French proponent of healing through auto-suggestion whose own lecture tour in America coincided with Gurdjieff’s arrival:

“We seem to see a small but interesting cloud rising over the skyline, and we gird up our typewriter ribbon to utter a modest prophecy. After consulting the stars, poking round in the back corners of foreign newspapers and going into a pensive brief tranquility, we are moved to say that we think we have spotted the next ‘sensation’ in the intellectual world. By which we mean the newspaper Feature which will succeed M. Coué and various other horizon-seeking movements that have been specially busy since the war.”

Commenting on the London *New Statesman* article by a “Mr. C” [the skeptical journalist Raymond Carroll], Morley then turned to convey his suspicions of this most recent “sensation.” The purported difficulty of Gurdjieff’s teachings provided Morley an opportunity not only to question Gurdjieff’s authenticity and motives in America, but to segue into broader cultural criticism:

¹⁰⁸ Mannherz, *Modern Occultism*, 80.

¹⁰⁹ “This equation of willpower with authority was furthered by the semantics of the Russian *volia*, which translates into English as willpower, power, and freedom from external interference.” Mannherz, *Modern Occultism*, 88.

“...we are rather relieved to learn that there is no immediate likelihood of Gurdjieff becoming another Coué. The movement, Mr. C. says, ‘has no appeal to the million. The general public will never be able to grasp the meaning of the work.’ This is the right way to go about getting us all interested. If anyone tells us that there is something we can’t possibly understand, naturally we are on fire to disprove the suggestion. ...There are many fascinating things going on nowadays, and humanity evidently has hold of the bear’s tail, even if it is whirling us round the stump rather rapidly and bewilderingly.”¹¹⁰

Looking askance, Morley viewed Gurdjieff’s challenges to his audience’s intellectual capacity as an effective promotional strategy. In this case, Morley was not far off in perceiving an underlying promotional tool at work. Through the demonstrations and various lectures for select audience members, Gurdjieff indeed emphasized the difficulty of his teachings and practices, often implying that only a select few had the capacity to grasp his Fourth Way. By challenging not only his audience’s intellectual capacity but also its perceptive abilities to discern “trick” from “real supernatural phenomena,” Gurdjieff conjured his observers’ desires to transcend the “general public” by outwitting their challenger and discovering for themselves the methods and mechanisms behind his “tricks.”

“Tricks” and “Real Phenomena” in Gurdjieff’s Early Career

“The age of realism,” as Fred Nadis has suggested, “was also the age of deceptions.” And in its call for science and technology, alongside its interest in discovering the techniques and mechanisms behind illusions, this “age” was “ripe for the stage magician.” Through the 1924 demonstrations of “tricks, half-tricks, and real supernatural phenomena,” Gurdjieff redeployed a performative framework from his past as a professional hypnotist and master of

¹¹⁰ Christopher Morley, “Fontainebleau and Vesey Street,” in *Inward Ho!* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1923), 55-62.

occult phenomena. In the process, Gurdjieff crafted for himself a persona akin to those adopted by nineteenth-century secular stage magicians, whose “stance as ‘honest tricksters’ who only simulated occult wonders with natural means enabled them to offer the public a glimpse of the apparatus of deception enveloping them.”¹¹¹ Forged in the crucible of his self-making and self-masking, Gurdjieff’s series of “tricks” marked a public articulation of his invitation to skepticism and debate. This provocation was put in bold relief when spectators were told that, while all three types of phenomena would be performed as if genuinely supernatural, their classification would be left to the audience’s own discernment.¹¹² Like nineteenth-century stage magicians who “demanded the audience decode their acts and search for the physical explanation,” Gurdjieff asked his audience to discern for themselves the degree of “trickery” his pupils performed in demonstrations of “tricks, half-tricks, and real supernatural phenomena.”¹¹³ In so doing, he guided his audience to adopt a hermeneutic of suspicion as they observed and interpreted the performances.

In addition to modeling the rhetoric of the stage magician, particularly the invitation to the audiences’ own investigation, Gurdjieff drew a handful of illusionist techniques from the stage magician’s repertoire for producing his series of phenomena. Like the late nineteenth-century “Second Sight” acts of French magician Jean Eugene Robert-Houdin, Gurdjieff taught his pupils to perform mystifying acts of “thought transmission” by communicating via secret codes.¹¹⁴ For these demonstrations, Gurdjieff instructed his pupils in various

¹¹¹ Nadis, *Wonder Shows*, 136.

¹¹² Nott, *Teachings of Gurdjieff*, 16.

¹¹³ Nadis, *Wonder Shows*, 118.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 140; In 1880, Washington Irving Bishop—known for his “muscle reading” acts—published an exposé of the “Second Sight,” or “Clairvoyant,” acts performed by Robert-Houdin and later adopted and elaborated upon by Robert Heller. The exposé, *Second Sight Explained*, included detailed descriptions of how the tricks were performed, including the codes these magicians employed and examples of how the act might play out should readers decide to craft “Second Sight” skills themselves. Washington Irving Bishop, *Second Sight Explained: A Complete Exposition of Clairvoyance or Second Sight, as Exhibited by the Late Robert Houdin*

combinations of Morse code and sign language, “so subtly constructed, that when skillfully done [they] could communicate numbers to one another in the middle of a large crowd without being observed.”¹¹⁵ In a demonstration of “transmission by suggestion,” for instance, senior pupil Olga de Hartmann wandered among audience members asking them to volunteer by telling her any number of their choosing. She then turned to face the pupils who remained on stage out of earshot, and after a few minutes had passed under de Hartmann’s fixed gaze, the pupils on stage began to repeat the numbers back to their audience. De Hartmann then asked the audience to show or describe an object on their person to one of a few pupils seated among the crowd. Again, pupils who remained on stage guessed the objects with awe-inspiring accuracy.¹¹⁶ In another variation of this act, audience members were asked to tell pupils among them the name of any opera, from any era or place. Spectators in the front row were asked to “keep very quiet” as Olga de Hartmann transmitted this information “by suggestion” to her husband seated at a piano on the stage. Shortly thereafter, Thomas de Hartmann proceeded to play extracts from those operas. Similarly, audience members were asked to name “any creature, from the tiniest microbe to the largest beast, existing or prehistoric—fish, flesh, or fowl.” This information was transmitted to “the artist on the stage,” senior pupil Alexander de Salzmann, who then sketched the creatures transmitted to him on sheets of white paper propped on an easel.¹¹⁷

and Robert Heller, *Showing How the Supposed Phenomena May Be Produced* (Edinburgh: John Menzies & Co., 1880).

¹¹⁵ Mary C. Bell, “Some Memories of the Prieuré.” *Gurdjieff International Review* (Summer 1998) 1, no. 4, <http://www.gurdjieff.org/bell.htm>.

¹¹⁶ Nott, *Teachings of Gurdjieff*, 17; Jungian psychologist James Carruthers Young spent time at the Prieuré in 1923 and recalls how pupils practiced identifying arithmetical patterns: “A series of statements was made, such as $2 \times 1 = 6$, $2 \times 2 = 12$, $2 \times 3 = 22$, $2 \times 4 = 40$, $2 \times 5 = 74$. Find the process by which these results are arrived at. In this case to the first product 4 is added, to the next 8, to the next 16, and so on.” James C. Young, “An Experiment at Fontainebleau: A Personal Reminiscence,” *The New Adelphi* 1, no. 1 (London, September 1927): 26-40, reprinted in *Gurdjieff International Review* 1, no. 4 (Summer 1998), <https://www.gurdjieff.org/young.htm>.

¹¹⁷ Nott, *Teachings of Gurdjieff*, 17-18.

Audience member (and later, pupil) Charles Stanley Nott was “completely baffled” by these phenomena, speculating that the pupils must have been trained in stage magic since the difficulty of their tricks eclipsed all the acts he’d seen performed by professionals.¹¹⁸ A true mark of success for any stage magician, Nott recalled that the series of tricks held the entire audience “completely mystified,” their attention fixed on the stage as they struggled to figure out how these phenomena were produced.¹¹⁹ In hindsight, we can see a strategic deployment of diversion at work: while the audience was fixated by the pupils onstage, those who wandered among the crowd could easily communicate their coded messages, undetected by the distracted spectators.

These demonstrations of “tricks” were inspired by Gurdjieff’s early interest in “phenomena-of-the-beyond.”¹²⁰ He claimed to have spent his youth exploring these phenomena, researching them alongside the explanations supported by Western science, and studying performances of hypnotic suggestion and clairvoyance to determine how these phenomena were produced. At one point during these early investigations, Gurdjieff and his friends pursued their shared interests in “the nature of hypnotic séances performed for audiences, as well as telepathic sight, reading of thoughts and so forth,” and having learned

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 18; One of the performing pupils indeed spoke to a connection between their “tricks” and the magician’s craft, even referring to the “tricks” as demonstrations of “parapsychology” and “magic.” He gathered from the packed audience that “everyone was expecting something sensational,” and that their excitement seemed to grow “in anticipation of a great theatrical event.” The audience saw what appeared to be a “preliminary setting for an experiment in magic” when the curtains dramatically lifted to reveal Gurdjieff, “simply standing motionless on the stage surrounded by thirty of us who were sitting cross-legged without moving.” Tchekhovitch, *A Master in Life*, 128.

¹¹⁹ Nott, *Teachings of Gurdjieff*, 17-18.

¹²⁰ Gurdjieff, *Herald of the Coming Good: First Appeal to Contemporary Humanity* (Paris: Private Printing, 1933), 12; Gurdjieff similarly recalled his early investigations into supernatural phenomena in a 1922 lecture, dictated in Paris, in which he claimed to have spent his youth exploring paranormal phenomena that, while “inexplicable to European science,” could not be proven false nor explained away as “religious superstition.” As Gurdjieff explained, his “critical, incredulous and at the same time enquiring mind... could not pass by such phenomena without finding their explanation.” G. I. Gurdjieff, lecture dictated in Paris, 1922, in *Gurdjieff’s Early Talks*, 150.

how to produce these phenomena, performed them for a public audience.¹²¹ Once Gurdjieff established his proto-Institute in Essentuki, The International Fellowship for Realization Through Work, he began to incorporate his discoveries into Fourth Way practices by introducing his pupils to methods of producing “psychic phenomena.”

Whether or not we take Gurdjieff’s autobiographical claims at face value, there is evidence to suggest that Gurdjieff’s familiarity with popular occultism predated his introduction of “psychic phenomena” to pupils in Russia. Around 1908-1910, Gurdjieff spent time in Tashkent, the capital city of Uzbekistan. Buzzing with international travelers, Tashkent could provide access to news from abroad on current developments in popular occultism and performances of supernatural phenomena, if indeed Gurdjieff sought this information as voraciously as he claimed.¹²² It was here in Tashkent that he claimed to have first attempted to establish a permanent center for his Institute. Yet it was also the site for a different sort of career that brought him into the world of wonder and stage magic.

A photograph taken during his time in Tashkent shows Gurdjieff “dressed as a professional magician.” At this point in his career, he began practicing professional

¹²¹ Having attended a séance with his wife Olga in Kislovodsk, pupil Thomas de Hartmann related their impressions to Gurdjieff: “On the stage several doctors were present to try to determine whether the person in the hypnotic trance was a partner of the hypnotist, who walked about among the audience asking repeatedly, ‘So-and-so, are you asleep?’ His voice was somehow nasal, not a normal voice. The hypnotized person, blindfolded, was able to locate and identify objects hidden by the public, among them a needle.” Gurdjieff replied that he, in fact, knew how the trick was done. He then shared the story of his early investigations and his own public performances of psychic phenomena. De Hartmann speculated that this conversation inspired Gurdjieff to formalize practices for the demonstration of “tricks.” De Hartmann, *Our Life*, 216.

¹²² Gurdjieff described Tashkent to John G. Bennett as “a convenient centre for meetings of people from the different Khanates of Turkestan, and also for visitors from the East and West.” John G. Bennett, *Gurdjieff: Making a New World* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1976), 112; On Gurdjieff’s research into occultism and supernatural phenomena, see his account in *Herald of the Coming Good* (20-23). This text is one of the most debated of his writings in terms of its reliability and likely one that Taylor and others would caution us to read as “parable” or “metaphor.” After its publication, he subsequently advised pupils *not* to read it. This raises a number of questions, particularly the possibility that his advice was actually intended to provoke curiosity and thus compel pupils to read it. Gurdjieff’s tone is remarkably frank, almost caustic, in his admitting to using his pupils “like Guinea pigs,” and some speculate this was directed specifically at Ouspensky, who had previously broken his relationship with Gurdjieff. For more on *Herald* and related debates, see Wellbeloved, *Key Concepts*, 92-94.

hypnotism, advertising his skills as a “healer” and “wonder worker.”¹²³ In autobiographical reflections on this early career path, Gurdjieff claimed to have used hypnosis for healing the sick and curing addicts, a practice common throughout Russia’s more cosmopolitan districts around the turn of the century.¹²⁴ However, it seems his interests had less to do with healing than with a lifelong fascination with investigations into the occult:

“This time my reflections, which recurred periodically during the two years of my wanderings on the continents of Asia, Europe and Africa, resulted in a decision to make use of my exceptional, for the modern man, knowledge of the so-called ‘supernatural sciences’, as well as of my skill in producing different ‘tricks’ in the domain of these so-called ‘sciences’, and to give myself out to be, in these pseudo-scientific domains, a so-called ‘professor-instructor.’”¹²⁵

The rhetoric he employed in discussing the “so-called ‘sciences’” indicated a desire to distance himself from what he elsewhere described as “spheres of quasi-human knowledge,” like Theosophy and spiritualism. Perhaps this was an effort to demote spiritual and religious traditions with which his observers (and later, scholars) were tempted to associate him. Or, perhaps it had more to do with efforts to fashion himself as more truly scientific than his competitors—a strategy also frequently employed by stage magicians.¹²⁶ The latter seems

¹²³ Bennett, *Making a New World*, 90. (For photograph of Gurdjieff as professional hypnotist, see Plate 1)

¹²⁴ Julia Mannherz, *Modern Occultism*, 76.

¹²⁵ Gurdjieff, *Herald of the Coming Good*, 11.

¹²⁶ By the turn of the century, this sort of differentiation was common among stage magicians who defined “themselves in opposition to mediums, conjurers, mesmerists, and spiritualists, who carried on the older enchanted, supernaturalist forms of magic.” Leja, *Looking Askance*, 155; Fred Nadis notes that nineteenth-century illusionist and stage magicians “gained additional insights from nineteenth-century science popularizes” who “often defined themselves by taking a strong stance against ‘superstition’” and “frequently relied on the device of debunking superstition or ‘correcting error’ as a prelude to their own explanations of scientific phenomena. . . . Magicians found that adopting a similar ‘anti-superstition’ stance, as well as teaching audiences how to avoid cardsharps and confidence men, could align their craft with progressive forces while releasing them from the strain of directly imitating a scientist or natural philosopher while on stage.” Their “efforts pitted them against their stage rivals—the era’s mesmerists and Spiritualists. To debunk these popular movements, magicians duplicated the effects that Spiritualists and mesmerists supposedly achieved through occult powers at séances. Magicians launched ‘Second Sight’ acts as early as the 1830s to imitate the performances of mesmerized subjects who exhibited clairvoyance and described objects or places apparently out of view.” Nadis, *Wonder Shows*, 118.

probable when taking into account the frankness with which Gurdjieff describes his early expertise in self-fashioning to attract public attention. The occult fervor and growing presence of heterodox spiritual organizations inspired him to craft a persona of “professor-instructor” in such “pseudo-scientific domains.” He boasted elsewhere (with a bit of mock-surprise) that “within six months, I succeeded...in being accepted as a well known ‘expert’ and guide in evoking so-called ‘phenomena-of-the-beyond,’” even gaining a reputation among theosophical circles as “a great ‘maestro’ in all that comprised supernatural knowledge.” It was within these spiritualist and theosophical circles—“workshops-for-the-perfection-of-psychopathism,” as he called them—that Gurdjieff “began to observe and study...these trained and freely moving ‘Guinea-Pigs’, allotted to [him] by Destiny for [his] experiments.” Gurdjieff claimed that these observations became data for his new teachings on human behavior and emotional reactivity, and that they inspired him to establish his own “circle,” not of “Guinea-Pigs” *per se* but of pupils, in what would come to be known as the Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man.¹²⁷

The timing and location of this period in Gurdjieff’s career fit well within the era of Russia’s late nineteenth century “occult revival,” a period of marked public interest—widespread regionally and across social and economic classes—in ideas and practices of thought-transference, spiritualist séances, animal magnetism, and hypnotism (as variously understood). Whether through personal interests, academic journals and lectures, stage magic demonstrations, séances open to the public, casual gossip, or the sensationalized press, knowledge of popular occultism was ubiquitous throughout Russia, from the metropolitan

¹²⁷ Gurdjieff, *Herald*, 12; Gurdjieff’s pejorative tone in reference to Theosophists is perhaps his way of differentiating himself from the teachings of Helena Blavatsky, with whom he had been frequently associated by the time he published *Herald* in 1933 (and this comparison is evidently still of interest to Gurdjieff scholars; see for example, Petsche, “Gurdjieff and Blavatsky”).

centers of Moscow and St. Petersburg to the provinces that lay outside these hubs of cultural production.¹²⁸ Even for those unacquainted with the subject, popular occultism crept into public awareness through advertisements for occult-based how-to manuals posted in Russia's most popular broadsheets.¹²⁹ Popular interests in performances of occult phenomena were further nourished by the proliferating genre of exposés detailing the mechanics behind popular stage magic tricks. These publications served not only to satisfy public curiosity, but also as vehicles for creativity among illusionists and magicians who built upon the exposed techniques in new and innovative ways. In this light, exposés became training manuals for those who hoped to learn the tricks of the trade so that they might perform these phenomena themselves, professionally upon the stage or casually to impress intimate audiences with parlor tricks.

As the turn of the century approached, the occult took on a new, more expanded, and ambiguous quality—not only in Russia but throughout Western Europe and North America as well. It became more sensational in cultural productions as it infused public performances of magic, more accessible and multivocal as it veered toward practical applications through how-to manuals, and more slippery, by definition, in this flux. “Hypnotism” had become the starlet of occultism throughout Russia and Europe more broadly. For all its prominence, hypnotism remained entangled and often synonymous with a variety of distinct practices, like its therapeutic predecessors, “mesmerism” and “animal magnetism,” as well as the broader category of “suggestion” that had become associated less with healing than with entertaining

¹²⁸ Maria Carlson, *No Religion Higher Than Truth: A History of the Theosophical Movement in Russia, 1875-1922* (Princeton University Press, 1993), 4-5.

¹²⁹ Mannherz, *Modern Occultism*, 82; According to Maria Carlson's history of occultism in Russia and its surrounding provinces, the region was dripping with occult societies and publications. The numbers, by Carlson's count, are staggering: “Hundreds of occult societies and circles, registered and unregistered, were formed in every major city and in the provinces. More than eight hundred occult titles (excluding belles lettres) were published in Russia” between 1881 and 1918. Carlson, *No Religion Higher Than Truth*, 22.

parlor tricks and the stage magician's mental illusions. And in its entanglement, hypnotism took on new connotations as well, variously associated with medicine and healing, physiology and physics, witchcraft and spells, and inevitably, deception and crime.¹³⁰

Like popular occultism itself, Gurdjieff began to take on a variety of identities and subsequent associations in his early career. As a “hypnotist,” “healer,” “maestro,” and “professor-instructor,” he moved fluidly through categories of varying definitions. While practicing hypnotism, he “dressed as a professional magician,” embodying that 19th century turn in popular occultism that allowed the hypnotist to freely traverse identities from healer to stage magician.¹³¹ Gurdjieff's self-proclaimed “exceptional... knowledge of the so-called ‘supernatural sciences’” was indeed attractive to early pupils like Thomas and Olga de Hartmann, whose broad “interest in magic and all other phenomena of this sort” spoke to the seamless blending of stage magic, hypnotism, and supernatural phenomena during the modern turn of occultism in late imperial Russia.¹³² And, as he took his own “tricks” and “real supernatural phenomena” to the stage in 1924, Gurdjieff assumed a new persona that marshaled the efforts and discoveries of his storied history of inquiry into, and mastery of, a dynamic range of occult phenomena. This new persona was a magician of sorts, though whether he represented a stage magician peddling deception or an authentic practitioner of

¹³⁰ Ibid., 65-79; According to his biographer, Gurdjieff “approved wholeheartedly of Mesmer and the early theorists of animal magnetism and poured scorn on James Braid, Charcot, and other specialists who denied the material basis of hypnotic phenomena.” Webb, *Harmonious Circle*, 79.

¹³¹ Though an admittedly pseudo-autobiographical account, Gurdjieff's *Meetings with Remarkable Men* speaks to his knowledge of and interest in performing magic. He claims that as a young man, he was an associate member of a society in Tabriz organized around the study of ancient magic. Yet what is more compelling is that one of the “Remarkable Men” through which Gurdjieff organizes his life story was Ekim Bey, a “highly skilled and professional hypnotist and magician.” Through the character of Ekim Bey, Gurdjieff demonstrates not only his familiarity with stage magic tricks and strategies of deception, but also his awareness of the common threads of practice and presentation shared by professional magicians and hypnotists that could allow one to shift between identities. Gurdjieff, *Meetings*, 252.

¹³² De Hartmann, *Our Life*, 70.

sacred magic, his audiences could not be sure. Gurdjieff once again left the challenge of discernment up to his audience, promoting an air of ambiguity and mystery for those concerned to categorize him as either Pythagoras or charlatan.

Generating Ambiguity: Artifice, Authenticity, and Operational Aesthetic

Hindsight helps us to deconstruct the mystifying phenomena that Gurdjieff's pupils performed in 1924 as we identify similarities between these performances and the techniques popular among stage magicians of the nineteenth century. However, attempting to draw tentative conclusions about what was *really* going on behind the scenes of these “tricks, half-tricks, and real supernatural phenomena” can only take us as far as Gurdjieff's spectators could go in their own attempts at discernment. Rather than dwell in the techniques Gurdjieff taught his pupils to perform *in* these demonstrations, we can construct a more dynamic picture of these performances by focusing on what Gurdjieff did *through* these demonstrations. Deploying a number of “tricks” from the stage magician's tool box to devise his own demonstration of illusions, and calling upon his audience's skepticism through strategic rhetorical framing, Gurdjieff promoted an air of ambiguity, plunging his audience into that hazy negative space where the unknown rendered artifice and authenticity indistinguishable. Take, for example, the introduction to this series of phenomena that pupil A.R. Orage translated for audience members:

“We shall now present some of the *so-called* ‘supernatural phenomena’ also studied at the Institute. Mr. Gurdjieff puts all such phenomena into three categories: tricks, semi-tricks [i.e. “half-tricks”], and real supernatural phenomena. Tricks are done artificially, the *performer pretending* that they result from some source of natural force; semi-tricks are *not produced by sleight of hand*, such as finding a hidden object

blindfold; the third category, real phenomena, has as its basis *laws which official science does not explain.*”¹³³

From the very start, these phenomena were framed by rhetoric that invited the audience’s skepticism—they were “supernatural,” *so-called*. With Orage’s help, Gurdjieff distanced Fourth Way insiders from unmediated belief in the supernatural. The brief introduction to “tricks” similarly elicited skepticism vis-à-vis terms of artifice, performance, and pretense. Defined by negation through the introduction of “half-tricks,” “tricks” were framed in the vocabulary of traditional stage magic—as sleight-of-hand illusions rooted in mechanical deception.

In contrast to the thoroughgoing artifice of “tricks,” the audience learned that “half-tricks” were “produced through laws different from those to which they are ascribed and at the same time not artificial in their essence.” As one example, the audience was reminded of the “well-known one” in which an object is “hidden without the knowledge of a person who, though blindfolded, finds it, through holding the hand of a member of the audience.” The audience “is deceived,” believing this to be evidence of “transmission of thought,” while in reality, the hand of the blindfolded performer’s guide “responds unconsciously to its owner’s knowledge of the hiding-place; its slight, almost imperceptible changes are a language which the medium interprets...and which leads him to guess where the object is hidden.”¹³⁴

This explanation of “half-tricks” was offered through the lens of *exposé*, revealing the techniques behind the “muscle-reading” act developed by magician J. Randall Brown in the 1870s and later modified by his assistant, William Irving Bishop.¹³⁵ These phenomena thus

¹³³ Nott, *Teachings of Gurdjieff*, 15 (emphasis added).

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 15-16.

¹³⁵ Nadis, *Wonder Shows*, 140-42.

suggested further more subtle associations with stage magic. Beyond its explanatory power, the detailed description of the *real* mechanisms behind “muscle-reading” coopted the structure and strategy of stage magic’s exposé manuals (as well as the performative exposés employed by magicians on stage, as previously noted). Dating back to the sixteenth century, these manuals have served a variety of historical purposes, from dispelling myths of sorcery by demonstrating the artistry of illusions to revealing the techniques of competitors for the magician’s commercial advantage.¹³⁶ For novice performers, exposé manuals offered instructional value, enabling readers to develop their own illusions by adopting and adapting accessible methods. Whatever the author’s or reader’s purpose, the commercial success of the genre thrived on the consumer’s curiosity in the mechanics and techniques at work behind mystifying illusions.¹³⁷

Tugging at the audience’s curiosity to discover the techniques behind Gurdjieff’s tricks, the exposé, when embedded in explanatory introductions to the series of phenomena, served moreover, as a strategic distraction. Its detailed explanation of the mechanisms behind muscle-reading acts provided audience members with a false analytical tool for uncovering the “tricks” to come. Calling attention to evidence like the exploitation of “slight, almost imperceptible” physiological cues ensured a diversion, guiding spectators to search for signs along the lines of those exposed. In other words, the exposé of this particular illusion set the parameters for salient evidence, focusing the audience’s gaze and thereby allowing Gurdjieff’s pupils to more easily communicate their codes to one another without detection.

¹³⁶ One of the earliest exposés of magic is Reginald Scot’s *Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584) which sought to dispel public belief in, and persecution, of witchcraft by exposing illusions as such.

¹³⁷ Simon During notes that “among the very first to profit from the pleasures of unresolved puzzlement over natural or supernatural agency were show-business figures like the stage magician Giovanni Pinetti (1750-1800).” During, *Modern Enchantments*, 31.

Like Gurdjieff's public personas, the "real supernatural phenomena" he proposed to demonstrate necessarily rode the fence between supernatural and scientific modes of engaging with the unknown. They were explained, not by direct definition, concrete examples, or exposé, but via differentiation—based on "laws unexplained by official science," yet having "nothing to do with spiritualism, ghosts, and so forth."¹³⁸ While the explanatory modes of "official science" were ostensibly powerless in the face of these phenomena, critical spectators were assured that as part of the Institute's curriculum, these phenomena were explored "very seriously and in full accordance with the methods of Western science."

Differentiated from spiritualism, transcending scientific explanation, yet nonetheless studied with scientific rigor, "real supernatural phenomena" were cast as comprehensibly novel.¹³⁹ Yet more to the point, by defining them only in terms of their negation of familiar categories, Gurdjieff rendered this class of phenomena an amorphous unknown. In the absence of positive descriptors, their nature was *conspicuously* concealed, bringing secrecy to the forefront and thereby enshrouding the entire series of performed phenomena in mystery. Like Gurdjieff himself, the series of "tricks," "half-tricks," and "real supernatural phenomena" resisted categorization, such that anyone who took seriously their task of discernment inevitably did so in vain.¹⁴⁰ An illusory goal was set for spectators who

¹³⁸ Nott, *Teachings of Gurdjieff*, 16; On matters of differentiation from apparently similar others, as well as the anti-superstitionist stances adopted by nineteenth-century performers of magic and illusion, see Leja, *Looking Askance*, 155; and Nadis, *Wonder Shows*, 118.

¹³⁹ In her work on Oriental personas in America, Susan Nance explains how various methods of individuation allowed "professional entertainers and salespeople to make themselves comprehensibly novel to domestic audiences." Nance, *Arabian Nights*, 138-9; Ann Taves has also brought to my attention that this claim to comprehensible novelty was typical among psychical researchers of the early twentieth-century and later, among parapsychical researchers as well. See Ann Taves, "A Tale of Two Congresses: The Psychological Study of Psychical, Occult, and Religious Phenomena, 1900-1909," *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 50, no. 4 (Fall 2014): 376-399.

¹⁴⁰ Nott, *Teachings of Gurdjieff*, 16.

attempted to classify them as either “real supernatural phenomena” or mere “tricks,” and as Gurdjieff shifted between his own performed personas, his observers carried a hermeneutic of suspicion from the performance halls of the demonstrations to the social spaces of skeptical debate.

By challenging them to discern the class of phenomena demonstrated, Gurdjieff assigned a task for his audience not unlike the “middle-class play” provoked by the artful deceptions of Phineas T. Barnum. Like the famous “Prince of Humbugs,” Gurdjieff’s own artful deceptions were part of an ongoing engagement with his audience’s skepticism. Barnum understood that “perfection and absolute conviction in exhibits made them less valuable. Spectators required some hint of a problem, some suggestion of difficulty.”¹⁴¹ Similarly, Gurdjieff knew that “people do not value what is easily come by,” and that for his demonstrations to have meaningful impact, they required an air of illusion.¹⁴² Barnum promoted his “humbugs” by artfully hinting at their artificiality without disclosing the exact nature of the deceptions involved in producing the illusions. He thereby provided his audience an opportunity to debate issues of truth and deception within exhibits and hoaxes that, for all their “moral ambiguity and epistemological flexibility,” resisted such categorizations.¹⁴³ Gurdjieff’s deliberate juxtaposition of “tricks, half-tricks, and *real* supernatural phenomena” modeled Barnum’s own “deliberate juxtaposition of relatively obvious forms of representation,” figures and curiosities that were obviously hoaxes, “with feats and images whose illusions were momentarily plausible—or even undetectable.”¹⁴⁴

¹⁴¹ Harris, *Humbug*, 89.

¹⁴² P. D. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1977), 31.

¹⁴³ Cook, *Arts of Deception*, 28.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

Provoking his audience's curiosity by hinting at his own deceptive techniques allowed Gurdjieff to stimulate their desire to debate his authenticity and artifice, to unmask the man and his "tricks" in order to uncover the truth they concealed.

The demonstrations of "tricks" were, as one press agent quipped, "indeed 'tricky,'" holding "all spell-bound." The reviewer added, "there were not a few remarks and conjectures about the 'girl Psychic' from Kansas, who took New York's interest and dollars by storm several weeks ago. In fact many questioned whether her powers were very different from those displayed upon the stage today by several of the students of the Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man."¹⁴⁵ The "girl Psychic" referenced was eighteen year-old Eugenia Dennis, a figure of recent public scandal who had demonstrated her self-proclaimed psychic powers to audiences and scientific investigators in New York in late 1923, just a few months shy of Gurdjieff's own arrival. Eugenia and her mother, Mary Dennis, were tried and convicted of fraudulent fortune-telling in New York City two months prior to this review of Gurdjieff's demonstrations.¹⁴⁶ Those "spell-bound" audience members who found the demonstrations articulable as a reiteration of the recently convicted "girl Psychic" brought a variety of assumptions to the fore, from the far reach of spiritualist techniques to the fraudulent swindling that critics believed such mystifying feats concealed. And as we have seen, Gurdjieff invited such speculations, fashioned himself as a stage magician demonstrating "tricks" and "half-tricks," while simultaneously presenting himself through

¹⁴⁵ "Thought Transfer Not Done by Tricks."

¹⁴⁶ The scandal arose when a woman named Mary Foley paid Eugenia Dennis \$25 to learn the whereabouts of her missing son. Dennis conducted a séance for Foley and claimed her son was in Los Angeles, CA. But as the disconcerted client was to learn from her son, who returned soon after the séance, he was actually in Pittsburgh the whole time. "Girl's Psychic Power Lands Her in Court," *The Washington Post* (6 March 1924); Curiously, prominent actor, escape artist, and staunch anti-spiritualist Harry Houdini appeared in court with the defendants, and was named by the *New York Times* as a "student of the psychic." "Girl Psychic Guilty of Fortune Telling," *New York Times* (22 March 1924).

interviews and lectures as the enlightened explorer and scientist of practical methods of self-development with real knowledge of “supernatural phenomena.”

P. T. Barnum’s “humbugs” and promotional techniques may provide a useful lens for understanding Gurdjieff’s appeal to audiences who wavered on whether or not he was a charlatan, fraud, or hustler. As Neil Harris has argued, Barnum’s hoaxes were successful insofar as he “developed techniques of advertising and exhibiting that glorified doubt and celebrated individual judgment.”¹⁴⁷ His appeal was centered on an “operational aesthetic,” which Harris has defined as “a delight in observing process and examining for literal truth.”¹⁴⁸ Barnum’s audience delighted in his complicated hoaxes “because of the competition between victim and hoaxer, each seeking to outmaneuver the other, to catch him off-balance and detect the critical weakness.” For those who paid their well-earned money to see what they suspected to be a fraud—take Barnum’s famous “Feejee Mermaid” attraction, for example—they did so in order to determine “how the frauds were committed.”¹⁴⁹

Gurdjieff’s demonstrations certainly drew comparisons to Barnum’s curiosities, particularly the sacred dances, which the press associated with the whirling dervish dances often featured by the Barnum & Bailey circus.¹⁵⁰ But more to the point, Gurdjieff embodied Barnum’s method of conjuring public skepticism, and frequently elicited comparisons to the “Prince of Humbugs” himself.¹⁵¹ Barnum was known for inserting anonymous exposés of his own exhibits into the press in order to generate public suspicion, which, in effect, “only

¹⁴⁷ Harris, *Humbug*, 4.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 79.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 77.

¹⁵⁰ Carroll, “Gurdjieff Heads the Newest Cult” (26 January 1924).

¹⁵¹ *Time Magazine* described Gurdjieff as “a remarkable blend of P.T. Barnum, Rasputin, Freud, Groucho Marx and everybody’s grandfather.” “Wise Man from the East,” *Time* 59 (28 January 1952), 100, quoted in David W. Levy, *Herbert Croly of The New Republic: The Life and Thought of an American Progressive* (Princeton University Press, 1985), 295.

added to the public's growing interest in the exhibition."¹⁵² For Barnum, the press allowed him to “play both sides of the authenticity question,” where contradictory images of his deceptive hoaxes alongside his representation of “family values”-centered exhibitions did more for his publicity than either image had the power to do alone.¹⁵³ Stage magicians and illusionists also employed this deliberate and strategic suggestion of fraudulence as a promotional tool during the nineteenth-century, as the “mental” phenomena of “modern magic” supplanted sleight-of-hand tricks, bringing the performer, rather than the trick, to center stage. The late-nineteenth century “psychic performer” Dr. S. S. Baldwin (“the White Mahatma”), for example, described himself in performance programs as a “deceptionist.”¹⁵⁴ Like Baldwin and Barnum, we have seen how Gurdjieff similarly portrayed himself as a charlatan in Essentuki by advertising his lecture under the pseudonym of the famous fictional fraud, “Dr. Black.”

David Walker has demonstrated that, like Barnum, nineteenth-century performers of spiritualist phenomena—both spiritualists and their debunkers—similarly encouraged their audience's skepticism. From the Fox sisters, whose table rapping launched spiritualism onto America's religious radar, to the category-defying Martin Van Buren Bly, who alternated between performances as a spiritualist medium and as a debunker of spiritualism, these figures welcomed audiences to debate their authenticity as they “performed ambiguities announced with ambivalence.” Promoters of each camp not only welcomed witnesses to doubt the veracity of their performances, whether séances or exposés of the techniques employed in them, but also offered them a performative space in which to do so. In effect,

¹⁵² Cook, *Arts of Deception*, 8-9.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Nadis, *Wonder Shows*, 140.

these performers provided audiences an opportunity to reach conclusions of their own as to the (il)legitimacy of Spiritualist phenomena, and to exercise their capacities for critical observation while entertaining and exploring the mystery evoked by ambiguity. For instance, Walker notes the curious case of the spiritualist/debunker Bly, who “defend[ed] both types of his demonstrations as useful, insofar as they afforded ever-unfolding opportunities to debate matters of truth, fiction, and deception,” and could potentially “induce people to consider the possibility and location of spiritual presence in the world and to reconsider continually how true spirit communication might look.”¹⁵⁵

What Walker’s analysis brings to light, and what Bly exemplifies in straddling both sides of the debates he orchestrated and indeed performed, is the critical role that performative ambiguity has historically played in matters of religious faith. For spiritualist performers, as for Gurdjieff, the ambiguity they performed inspired debate among their audiences, for whom “the ostensible certainty of either performance or interpretation was belied by the ambiguity of the other.” As Walker argues, these performances of ambiguity force us to acknowledge that neither belief nor purported lack thereof can be “explained satisfactorily as a matter of prescientific survival, of unthinking credulity, or the like.”¹⁵⁶ Audiences who debated the reality of the spiritualist’s professed communications with the dead faced the possibilities of the unknown, and perhaps the whereabouts of religious truth, if it was not indeed performed there before them.

Like Barnum and the spiritualist performers Walker has examined, Gurdjieff invited his audiences to exercise their capacity for critical observation. While inciting public debate over his authenticity, Gurdjieff also rendered his demonstrations a performative provision in

¹⁵⁵ David Walker, “The Humbug in American Religion,” 42-45.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 45.

which audiences could consider the sufficiency of their own perceptual and intellectual skills as they attempted to discern between “tricks, half-tricks, and real supernatural phenomena.” The study of these “tricks,” the audience learned, was “considered necessary both for the future investigators of genuine phenomena and for every pupil of the Institute; not only will their cognizance free a man from many superstitions, but it will also introduce in him a capacity for a critical observation indispensable to the study of real phenomena, which requires a perfectly impartial attitude and a judgment not burdened by pre-established beliefs.”¹⁵⁷ Taken at face-value, this statement indicated the types of tasks pupils encountered at the Institute and the perceptual abilities these tasks could help pupils develop. The possibilities of being freed from “superstitions” and developing a refined capacity for “critical observation indispensable to the study of real phenomena” were certainly attractive to an audience accustomed to “looking askance,” always aware of deception afoot in the swindling of con-artists and the seductions of advertising. That the study of these phenomena was “considered necessary...for the future investigators of genuine phenomena” would have hit home with some of the notable academics and psychologists in the audience—many of whom were involved in the study of paranormal phenomena and some of whom, like Harvard’s William McDougall who attended a Boston demonstration, were pioneers in the field of psychical research.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁷ Nott, *Teachings of Gurdjieff*, 8-18.

¹⁵⁸ The *Boston Post* reported: “the master of the Fontainebleau Institute for the Harmonious development of Man had a select audience of writers, poets, psychologists hurling over their distinguished approbation with spontaneity. ...It was something new for the fashionable audience which filled half the pit of the theatre. ... Among the leaders who were interested in the demonstration were Professor William McDougall, head of Harvard’s Department of Psychology, Mrs. William E. Hockley, Mrs. Walter Dewey, Mrs. Professor Comstock, Professor Niles Carpenter, Mrs. Basil King and Max Gysl.” “Gurdjieff Rites Amaze Boston,” *The Boston Post* (6 March 1924); The next day, *The Post* followed up on the second demonstration, again emphasizing McDougall’s interest. Gurdjieff “will leave for Chicago today, with a promise to return to this city, if possible, and give a third demonstration of his method, and to appear before the students of Harvard as the guest of Professor William McDougall, eminent psychology. An audience of more than 400 nearly filled the seats in the

The possibility of freeing oneself from superstition in addition to the requirement of “a perfectly impartial attitude and a judgment not burdened by pre-established beliefs” also brought questions of identity and capacity into the mix.¹⁵⁹ Audience members likely identified with these requirements or at least fancied themselves independent thinkers (recall that many audience members were recruited from the social and academic hubs of the intellectual elite). How, then, might they react when forced to reconcile the fact that even they could not clearly discern “trick” from “supernatural phenomenon”? Aside from any practical benefits of Institute membership that it suggested, this explanation posed a challenge for audience members who self-identified with that learned group of individuals who could lay claim to “a perfectly impartial attitude.”

Returning to the demonstration’s introduction to “half-tricks,” we might also understand the accompanying exposé of muscle-reading as something more than just a classic method taken from the stage magician’s toolbox. It also gave the audience a sense of going “behind-the-scenes” of illusions, similar to the strategic maneuvers Barnum often employed. Creating the “appearance of behind-the-scenes secrets” about hoaxes and deceptive curiosities allowed Barnum to offer his exhibits for “public evaluation, rather than simply disclosing the secrets/deceits themselves.”¹⁶⁰ The key here is the “appearance” of being behind-the-scenes.

small theatre last night, as on the night before, when but 100 distinguished celebrities witness the spectacle, they greeted the strange Asian dances and the weird musical accompaniments with hearty applaud. In the audience were groups of students from Harvard, Boston University, Radcliffe, Wellesley, Simmons and other education institutions of this city and its environs. And among these were a number of psychology professors and other educational instructors.” “Gurdjieff Work Well Received,” *The Boston Post* (7 March 1924); As Fred Nadis notes, McDougall was, at the time, intimately intertwined with the famous illusionist Harry Houdini. He served next to Houdini on a panel organized by the *Scientific American* magazine to test the psychic abilities of any medium willing to prove the legitimacy of their professed powers. The magazine offered a reward of \$2,500 to anyone who could pass the test of their trial séances. From late July to late August 1924—beginning just one month after Gurdjieff departed America for France—the panel tested the psychic powers of spiritualist mediums including “Margery the Medium” and Mina Crandon. Nadis, *Wonder Shows*, 132.

¹⁵⁹ Nott, *Teachings of Gurdjieff*, 8-18.

¹⁶⁰ Cook, *Arts of Deception*, 14.

For Gurdjieff's demonstrations of thought transmission, pupils used coded communication in the style of Robert-Houdin's "Second Sight" acts—techniques that had no structural or physical relation to those exposed as muscle-reading. Rather than fulfilling the Enlightenment ideal of demystification, the provision of insider's access was itself an illusion, such that unmasking the act effectively generated *more* mystery.¹⁶¹

Beyond the exposé itself, Gurdjieff's deployment of the magician's terminology of "tricks" only compounded the mystery attributed to him, bringing it into focus by putting it on display. Rather than a microscope, which reveals details hidden to the naked eye, this new focus arose more like tunnel-vision—mystery as far as the focused eye can see. A trick, as Michael Taussig has argued, "highlights nature's mysteries as well as displaying them." The conspicuous concealment of the true classification of phenomena performed amounted to what Taussig calls "the skin of the secret," which "announc[es] the existence of secrecy through marvelously ritualized permutations of concealment and revelation concerning the known unknown."¹⁶² In offering "tricks as public forums for problem-solving," Barnum's hoaxes "also served virtually the opposite function," suggesting to his audience—as Gurdjieff's did as well—that "the older Enlightenment ideals of reasoned analysis, exposé, and perceptual mastery were still possible; that somewhere—buried beneath all the playful

¹⁶¹ We might also think of the exposé of muscle-reading acts in terms of Erving Goffman's theory of front and back stage regions, where the "front" indicates a region of impression management to constrain audience reception of the actor, while "back" regions indicate a space for actors to relax their efforts of impression management, taking off the social mask, as it were. In his work on tourism, Dean MacCannell problematizes the distinction between front and back stage regions: "What is being shown to tourists is not the institutional *back stage*, as Goffman defined this term. Rather, it is a staged back region, a kind of living museum for which we have no analytical terms." He modifies Goffman's regions, treating them instead as "ideal poles of a continuum, poles linked by a series of front regions decorated to appear as back regions, and back regions set up to accommodate outsiders." MacCannell, *The Tourist*, 99-105. For our purposes here, the exposé stages a peek behind the curtains, ostensibly providing audience members with insider's access. Insofar as the exposé had staged strategic value, designed to manage audience impressions like Goffman's "front" region through the appearance of a "back" region, it approximates what MacCannell identifies as a front region, staged to *appear* as a back region.

¹⁶² Taussig, "Viscerality, Faith, and Skepticism," 250.

misrepresentations and promotional teases—there still was a truth to be uncovered.”¹⁶³ To discover the utterly banal truth behind “tricks”—that “thought-transference” was merely muscle-reading, or that the “Feejee Mermaid” was nothing but a grotesque suturing of the head of a monkey to the body of a fish—provokes the sense of even greater mystery. It is the revelation of trickery—as it is in the revelation of secrecy Gurdjieff performed through his conspicuous concealment of his “true” self from his American observers—that we find “the peculiar mix of craft and *mysterium tremendum* that lies at the basis of magical efficacy.”¹⁶⁴

“Secrecy is infinitely mysterious,” Taussig has argued, “because it is allied with and creative of what we might call the sacredness of a hiddenness within the theatricality that mediates between the real and the really made up.”¹⁶⁵ When the mask has been torn off, when the presence of secrecy and trickery are not only announced but funneled into an explicit challenge for the audience’s discernment, we feel—as I suspect Gurdjieff’s audience also felt— “a peculiarly empty space charged with expectant presence.” It is this “expectant presence” that feels so mysterious (thus perpetuating the public debate Gurdjieff raised among his spectators), such that unmasking “tricks,” even unmasking Gurdjieff’s mysterious persona as a contrived performance, “consecrates that which it so spectacularly destroys,” namely, the lingering possibility of his authenticity.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶³ Cook, *Arts of Deception*, 28.

¹⁶⁴ Taussig, “Viscerality, Faith, and Skepticism,” 221-22; Taussig continues, adding that “The real skill of the practitioner lies not in skilled concealment but in the skilled revelation of skilled concealment. Magic is efficacious not despite the trick but on account of its exposure. the mystery is heightened, not dissipated, by unmasking, and in various ways, direct and oblique, ritual serves as a stage for so many unmaskings. Hence power flows not from masking but from an unmasking which masks more than masking does” (222).

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 234.

¹⁶⁶ Taussig, *Defacement*, 147. The comparisons drawn thus far demonstrate the similarities between Gurdjieff’s demonstrations, stage magic, and occult literature. I am reminded here of Jonathan Z. Smith’s understanding of comparison as “an active, at times even a playful, enterprise of deconstruction and reconstitution which, kaleidoscope-like, gives the scholar a shifting set of characteristics with which to negotiate the relations between his or her theoretical interests and data stipulated as exemplary.” Comparing “does not necessarily tell us how things ‘are,’” but rather, “like models and metaphors, comparison tells us how things might be conceived, how they might be ‘re-described,’” and “provides the means by which *we* ‘re-vision’ phenomena as

Conclusion: Revelation, Concealment, and Fourth Way Praxis

“Pythagoras or charlatan?” These were the terms of the debate over Gurdjieff’s *real* identity, but why these terms? To address Gurdjieff’s provocation of mystery, skepticism, and debate, I have drawn comparisons that set his demonstrations and public personas against a backdrop of similar figures like Barnum, professional stage magicians, and America’s own self-fashioned Cagliostros. These comparisons are admittedly controversial, bringing images of charlatanry and fraud to the forefront in ways that not only pupils but also sympathetic scholars may find problematic. Take for example Taylor’s assessment of the issue: “The Gurdjieff others accused of being a ‘charlatan’ is a simulation of the ‘other,’ an alien, if you will, a role assigned him by a large number of people who traversed his story.”¹⁶⁷ I think Taylor gets to the heart of the matter here but neglects the ways in which the alien Other can be more than a source of negative sentiment. The mysterious Other Gurdjieff represented to so many observers throughout the 1924 tour was not necessarily a demonized Other. Certainly some of his observers associated him with Eastern Others stereotyped as swindling frauds, but this seems to flatten the dynamic debate that Gurdjieff sparked. As we look to the 1924 demonstrations in America, however, we can see how the debate over Gurdjieff’s authenticity seems to have emerged around his performances of conspicuous secrecy. His mysterious personas and baffling demonstrations—like the spiritualist’s séances, or Barnum’s exhibitions of his “humbugs”—offered observers a space for considering deeply religious concerns, issues of truth and deception no less than magic and metaphysical

our data in order to solve *our* theoretical problems.” Thus, by comparing Gurdjieff’s teachings and methods to popular occultism, stage magic, and the hoaxes of P.T. Barnum, I am not suggesting that he was in any way *merely* modeling his career on these themes. I am, instead, attempting “a disciplined exaggeration in the service of knowledge.” Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 52-3.

¹⁶⁷ Taylor, *Gurdjieff’s America*, 264-65.

realities that creep dangerously close to the illusions of “tricks and half-tricks” (and so close as to resist discernment).¹⁶⁸

From the classification of phenomena left to the audience’s discernment, to his own past, so “veiled in mystery,” Gurdjieff flaunted secrecy.¹⁶⁹ As wrapping paper conspicuously conceals a gift, he made the presence of the *unknown* known to his audience, drawing attention to secrecy itself, and thereby manifesting the “magical force” of mystery that beckons us to question what lies beneath.¹⁷⁰ In effect, he staged a drama of secrecy, pointing to a carefully crafted curtain to reveal the *presence* of the secrets it concealed, then pulling it aside to reveal—alas!—yet another curtain. And it was this clever play with revelation and concealment that intimated for his observers that, whether true wisdom or pure con-artistry, “real supernatural phenomena” or mere “tricks,” something significant lay hidden behind surface appearances.¹⁷¹

When each curtain seemed to conceal yet another curtain, each persona negated by the presence of yet another mask, Gurdjieff’s observers were left adrift in this ambiguous tension between the revelation and concealment of his *real* identity. And it is worth noting again how that very attempt to uncover who Gurdjieff *really* was and what he was *really* doing in America was in itself an effort in unmasking. Efforts to reveal the conspicuous secrecy

¹⁶⁸ As Michael Taussig has argued, “the magic of the Other is more truly magical and faith lies in distance and therefore difference.” Taussig, “Viscerality, Faith, and Skepticism,” 247; We can see these issues surfacing in Nott’s reflections on the demonstrations, which, to him, “seemed like magic; and, as [he] was to discover, it was magic—but *real* magic.” The distinction Nott makes between magic and *real* magic is more than mere categorization. To highlight “real” magic is to consequently separate it from the implied category of artifice, to make an epistemological statement about the nature and experience of real magic, and ultimately, to draw a line separating distinct elements of serious religious concern. Nott, *Teachings of Gurdjieff*, 18 (emphasis added).

¹⁶⁹ Munson, “Black Sheep Philosophers,” 2.

¹⁷⁰ Taussig, *Defacement*, 176.

¹⁷¹ Michael Taussig argues that “the secret magnifies reality and creates a vivid sense of mysterious other worlds of magic and witchcraft, sorcery and religion.” Taussig, “Viscerality, Faith, and Skepticism,” 250; Elsewhere, he identifies “the ineffable *presence that behindness itself generates*,” and I think the conspicuous secrecy Gurdjieff performed signaled this sort of “behindness” and indeed rendered an “ineffable presence” salient. Taussig, *Defacement*, 54.

Gurdjieff performed through his demonstrations and public personas led his observers (and continue to lead scholars today) to consider their questions within a dual-layered reality of surface and depth, of deceptive appearances belying hidden truth—a world of symbols, “dripping with mystery,” where no answer felt like *the real* answer.¹⁷² And it is the generative power of this verge of revelation where skepticism may beget faith, where conspicuous concealment may compel us to entertain the possibilities raised by the ambiguous space of the mysterious unknown. This seems to suggest why debates over the *real* Gurdjieff continue to find their way into contemporary scholarship, where scholars continue in their painstaking efforts to distinguish truth from fiction in ongoing attempts to unmask this mysterious figure and settle that interminable question. And I am adrift here, too, suspecting that the truth is that it’s only masks all the way down. Nonetheless, I take the debate itself to reflect the possibility that the mystery surrounding Gurdjieff signaled the invisible presence of *something else*.¹⁷³

That Gurdjieff intentionally and strategically rendered salient the presence of *something else* is evident in the recollections of one of his earliest pupils, the Russian mathematician and esoteric philosopher Pyotr Demianovich Ouspensky.¹⁷⁴ Speaking to an early group of

¹⁷² Ibid., 93.

¹⁷³ For more on this discussion of secrecy, transgression, and “the presence of presence itself,” see Taussig, *Defacement*, 209.

¹⁷⁴ Ouspensky may be better known by some as the author of the widely read and highly influential metaphysical work, *Tertium Organum*. Though originally published in Russian in 1912, this work was not translated into English until 1920. This is noteworthy, insofar as the publisher Claude Bragdon brought the work to the attention of members of his literary and social network including Margaret Anderson and Jane Heap. Anderson and Heap founded the avant-garde journal *The Little Review*, and their own social network led them to share their interest in Ouspensky with a number of individuals who would later attend the 1924 demonstrations based on the connection between Ouspensky and Gurdjieff. P.D. Ouspensky, *Tertium Organum: The Third Canon of Thought, a Key to the Enigmas of the World*, trans. by Nicholas Bessaraboff and Claude Bragdon (Rochester, New York: Manas Press, 1920/ New York: Knopf, 1922/ London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1923, 1934/ 3rd American edition, New York: Knopf, 1945).

pupils in St. Petersburg (c. 1915), Gurdjieff advised them to reconsider their approach to generating interest in Fourth Way teachings and attracting new pupils:

“You must understand that a man should have, first, a certain preparation, certain luggage. He should know what it is possible to know through *ordinary channels* about the ideas of esotericism, about hidden knowledge, about possibilities of the inner evolution of man, and so on. What I mean is that these ideas ought not to appear to him as something entirely new. Otherwise it is difficult to speak to him. ...In order to approach this system seriously, people must be *disappointed*, first of all in themselves, that is to say, in their powers, and secondly in all the old ways. A man cannot feel what is most valuable in the system unless he is disappointed in what he has been doing, disappointed in what he has been searching for. ...for instance...a religious man should be disappointed in religion. This does not mean that he should lose his faith. On the contrary, it means being ‘disappointed’ *in the teaching and the methods only*, realizing that the religious teaching he knows is not enough for him, can lead him nowhere. All religious teachings... consist of two parts, the visible and the hidden. To be disappointed in religion means being disappointed in the visible, and to feel the necessity for finding the hidden and unknown part of religion. To be disappointed in science does not mean losing interest in knowledge. It means being convinced that the usual scientific methods are not only useless but lead to the construction of absurd and self-contradictory theories, and, having become convinced of this, to begin to search for others. ... To be disappointed in occultism does not mean losing faith in the miraculous, it is merely being convinced that ordinary, accessible, and even advertised occultism, under whatever name it may pass, is simply charlatanism and self-deception and that, although *somewhere something* does exist, everything that man knows or is able to learn in the ordinary way is not what he needs. ...This system is for those who have already sought and have burned themselves. Those who have not sought and who are not seeking do not need it. And those who have not yet burned themselves do not need it either.”¹⁷⁵

As framed by Ouspensky, this excerpt recalls the helpful advice Gurdjieff gave to pupils struggling to generate interest in Fourth Way teachings. Their unsuccessful attempts to recruit friends and acquaintances had little to do with the legitimacy of Fourth Way teachings or the pupils’ approaches, Gurdjieff implied. Rather, the problem could be traced to the audience members, who were unreceptive because they had either “not yet burned themselves” in their search for truth, or were not seeking truth at all. However, when read alongside narratives of

¹⁷⁵ Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, 242-44.

pupils explaining how *they* came to “feel what is most valuable in the system,” we can identify parallels that suggest an underlying rhetorical strategy (see appendix for complete narrative analysis). Pupils like A.R. Orage, C.S. Nott, Charles Daly King, and Louise Welch, to name a few, modeled the rhetoric of *disappointment* “in all the old ways” as they reflected on their lives prior to the Fourth Way. These narrators thus cast themselves in the role of the *disappointed seeker* that Gurdjieff first sketched through the image of the ideal recruit.

But these personal narratives also depict a critical transformation, from disappointed seeker to Fourth Way pupil. Having recognized that “everything that man knows or is able to learn in the ordinary way is not what [s]he needs,” and holding fast to the conviction that “*somewhere something* does exist,” the *disappointed seeker* is transformed upon finally discovering this “something” in Gurdjieff’s Fourth Way teachings. Pupils who have adopted this model in telling their own stories have narrated their transformation from a follower of “the ordinary way,” to a *disappointed seeker*, and finally, to a pupil of the Fourth Way. Rendering salient a state of disappointment through the narrator’s history as the *disappointed seeker*, these narratives thereby situate non-pupil audiences as the distressed and untransformed narrator. Narrators thus invite audiences to recognize themselves as similarly disappointed seekers, as *those who have already sought and have burned themselves*, and by implication, those with an opportunity for self-transformation through the Fourth Way.¹⁷⁶

As Susan Harding discovered in her study of Fundamental Baptist witnessing, so too do we find that this narrative of transformation—from disappointed seeker to Fourth Way pupil—

¹⁷⁶ I draw inspiration for the rhetorical aspect of my analysis from Susan Harding’s work on fundamental Baptists and the rhetorical strategies of “born-again” witnessing. While acknowledging that the religious traditions Harding engages in her work are undeniably distinct from Gurdjieff’s teachings, similarities between narratives of transformation (from “lost” souls to “saved” gospel speakers) in evangelical witnessing and the rhetorical features I identify here help to articulate Gurdjieff’s strategies of self-fashioning in their connection to narratives of disappointment. Susan Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton University Press, 2000), 33-60.

is more than “just a monologue that constitutes its speaker as a culturally specific person; it is also a dialogue that reconstitutes its listeners.¹⁷⁷ And, as the “born again” narratives of evangelical witnesses guide their listeners to recognize themselves as “lost souls,” Fourth Way narratives of self-transformation similarly guide audiences to recognize their own “disappointment” in “all the old ways.” We can begin to see the connections between Gurdjieff’s public personas and these narratives of transformation by analyzing how his American observers interpreted his appearance as indicative of that mysterious “something” they had been seeking in the ultimately disappointing “ordinary channels.”

Having spotted Gurdjieff at one of the 1924 demonstrations in New York, audience member Louise Welch described him as “incomprehensible” in his mysterious identity and behavior, “a stocky, swarthy, shaven-headed, heavily-mustached Georgian, handsome in his way but *definitely not Western*.”¹⁷⁸ While Welch found Gurdjieff to be “incomprehensible,” the one thing she seemed certain of was his non-Western identity, his Eastern Otherness. In this, Welch was not alone—this linking of Gurdjieff’s Otherness with mystery practically inundated early accounts from his American observers.¹⁷⁹ Many of these accounts speak to an association of Gurdjieff’s mysterious and exotic persona with mystical attributions.

Margaret Anderson, co-founder of the *avant-garde* literature and arts journal *The Little Review*, recalled from Gurdjieff’s first public demonstration that she “had just time to look

¹⁷⁷ Harding, *Book of Jerry Falwell*, 35.

¹⁷⁸ Welch, *Orage with Gurdjieff in America*, xi (emphasis added); Welch attended the demonstrations and a number of Gurdjieff’s lectures. She was so impressed that she later began following him as a pupil. I note this for the reader’s consideration, insofar as Welch’s account must be considered in light of her affiliation. Throughout this study, I have attempted to clarify other insider affiliations for the same purpose.

¹⁷⁹ For more examples of this, see Munson, *The Awakening Twenties* (1985); Gorham Munson, “Black Sheep Philosophers”; C.S. Nott, *Teachings of Gurdjieff*; Margaret Anderson, *The Unknowable Gurdjieff*; For scholarly works, Paul Beekman Taylor’s are indispensable for their references to Gurdjieff’s reception in America: Taylor, *Gurdjieff’s America* (2004); Taylor, *Gurdjieff and Orage*; Taylor, *A New Life*; For press reports, see Taylor’s thorough survey in *Gurdjieff in the Public Eye*.

carefully at a dark man with an oriental face, whose life seemed to reside in his eyes. He had a presence impossible to describe because I had never encountered another with which to compare it. In other words, as one would immediately recognize Einstein as a ‘great man’, we immediately recognized Gurdjieff as the kind of man we had never seen—a seer, a prophet, a messiah?”¹⁸⁰

Anderson’s inability to describe a figure who seemingly defied comparison led her to conclude that what she sensed in Gurdjieff’s Otherness was evidence of supernatural power. Similarly, pupil Fritz Peters reflected on his assessment of Gurdjieff: “He was generally credible to me because he was sufficiently ‘different’ from other people—from anyone I had ever known—to be a convincing ‘super’ man.”¹⁸¹ In the echoes of these reflections, we glean something critical to the success of Gurdjieff’s mysterious personas, namely the modes by which mystery—so entangled in identities of Otherness—can actually mobilize assessments of authenticity. While debate and skepticism generated audiences for his demonstrations, those moved by Gurdjieff’s multiply masked identity viewed his mystery and Otherness as signaling his difference from the familiar gurus and swamis. His “incomprehensible” public persona suggested that the teachings he offered might actually be distinct from all the “ordinary ways” of finding truth. “Sufficiently different” as he seemed, Gurdjieff embodied that *something else* for which the *disappointed seekers* in his audience had long been searching.

¹⁸⁰ Anderson, *The Unknowable Gurdjieff*, 77-78. Like Anderson, C. S. Nott was taken aback by Gurdjieff’s “piercing dark eyes,” and similarly found no words to describe the man. “He fitted into no type that I had known: certainly not the ‘mystic’ type, or yogi, or philosopher, or ‘master’; he might have been a man who made archaeological expeditions in Central Asia.” Nott, *Teachings of Gurdjieff*, 13.

¹⁸¹ Fritz Peters, *My Journey with a Mystic* (Laguna Niguel, CA: Tale Weaver Publishing, 1986), 146.

We can also see how this rhetorical strategy extended to the experiences of audience members who witnessed the demonstrations. Louise Welch, who attended the first public demonstration at the Neighborhood Playhouse in New York City, recalled how effectively the performance forced those in attendance to question the frameworks that previously served to explain the world around them. “The number of people who returned night after night to watch and to wonder,” she determined, “gave evidence that the dances had awakened questions for which modern thought had few answers.” Welch recalled how many of Gurdjieff’s spectators “began to question their professional and artistic lives,” and how a “realization grew that self-expression,” the purpose ascribed to dance and movement performances among New York’s *avant-garde* scene, “was not the answer to their profounder needs.” Those for whom the demonstrations “awakened questions” claimed “they felt the need for quite another kind of life, one with more and clearer meaning.” The movements Gurdjieff’s pupils performed, no less than the teachings they embodied, “seemed to offer a new way of being alive.”¹⁸²

For some, this “new way of being alive” triggered fear and anxiety. Following one of the Chicago demonstrations, Gurdjieff remained on stage surrounded by his pupils and invited

¹⁸² Welch, *Orage with Gurdjieff in America*, 8; For a similar example of how this rhetoric can be observed in the narratives of Gurdjieff’s pupils, see Adele Kafian’s account of her life at the Prieuré. As a commemorative piece dedicated to Katherine Mansfield—who went to Gurdjieff seeking relief from tuberculosis but unfortunately succumbed to her illness and died at the Prieuré—Kafian’s account focuses more on her experiences with Mansfield than anything else. Nonetheless, her narrative reiterates the “dissatisfaction with the old ways” that Orage, Nott, Welch, Daly King, and others have similarly expressed: “In effect, to the Prieuré went those who did not find satisfaction in the old ways and means of achievement then current in Europe. The ordinary human spirit demands classification, a label—people do not like unnamed things; that is why the group we formed was stamped with the name ‘theosophists.’ I do not know if such were there. Our leader Gurdjieff did not consider himself one, and was angry at hearing the term. . . . In order to live there one must have an invincible need of ‘something else.’ . . . Disappointment at every moment, almost every instant made me conscious of a soul which I had not obtained.”¹⁸² Adele Kafian, “Looking Back to the Last Days of Katherine Mansfield,” trans. R. Bernstein, *The Adelphi* (London, October 1946). This article is also available online via J. Walter Driscoll’s webpage, “Gurdjieff: A Reading Guide” (3rd ed.), http://www.gurdjieff-bibliography.com/Current/KM_05_2006_02_KAFIAN_Last_Days_KM.pdf.

his audience to stay for a lecture. Pupil Tcheslaw Tchekhovitch recalled the particularly emotional response of an audience member who had previously attended several lectures and demonstrations. The man “expressed his fear” to Gurdjieff with “a voice that betrayed his emotion.” He was invited to stand, and “trembling,” he confessed:

‘Sir, you have shaken my inner world. My opinions, my points of view, are crumbling. Soon there will be nothing left of my long-standing convictions and I am afraid—afraid of finding myself in front of a great void. I am afraid of not finding the elements that would enable me to rebuild my world on a new basis. I feel lost, and dread the prospect of the unhappiness and suffering that await me. Is the ground that I once felt so solid under my feet going to give way completely? Why,’ he added almost accusingly, ‘do you deprive me and the others of our moral and psychic equilibrium?’

As Tchekhovitch observed the interaction, he felt that Gurdjieff “seemed to have expected just such a reaction, and one could even detect a hint of satisfaction on his face.” It was perhaps just the response Gurdjieff had hoped for, perhaps one he planted himself—one of disappointment, bemoaned by a man “realizing that the religious teaching he knows is not enough for him, can lead him nowhere.”¹⁸³ He assured the man that his “fear and anxiety are not without reason,” that his reaction was evidence that “these new ideas have penetrated into your subconscious more rapidly than the intellectual knowledge needed for understanding man’s situation in the world. No one can live without believing in something; therefore, each of us believes in the solidity of the ground beneath his feet.” While the fearful man dreaded the loss of this solid ground and felt his “moral and psychic equilibrium” threatened, Gurdjieff argued that such a perceived balance was but an illusion “due to a misunderstanding of the spiritual world,” and that such a fear “comes from everything that must be abandoned, everything that wants to cling to automatic habits,” to the *old ways*. Rather than flee from such fear, Gurdjieff urged him to appreciate it as a signpost on his *new*

¹⁸³ Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, 242-44.

path: “Only he who is convinced that he is heading directly over a precipice toward annihilation understands the vital necessity of following a path that leads somewhere.” With a powerful assertion of authority, he concluded, “I know this path.”¹⁸⁴

Donning masks that invited skepticism and debate, Gurdjieff primed his observers to recognize the prevalence of charlatanry and the inherent problem of “self-deception” in their own lives. In other words, Gurdjieff introduced a Barnumesque “operational aesthetic” into his conspicuous secrecy by provoking his audience to ponder the secret truths concealed by surface appearances. Revealing hidden truths about oneself and the world was, in fact, a primary component of Fourth Way teachings and practice. This parallel between his pupils and public audiences suggests that Gurdjieff’s mystery-making process of self-fashioning and provoking skepticism in America was an invitation to engage in Fourth Way praxis. Like potential pupils, he guided his audience to question the “visible” part of religion, and to realize how all “the ordinary ways” of perceiving the world around them were insufficient for distinguishing truth from illusion, reality from deception. Bringing his observers to recognize their own disappointment “in all the old ways” allowed Gurdjieff to clear a path for introducing a new way—the Fourth Way—that presented a new teaching and method to replace those previously valued but now recognized as lacking. Disappointed in what they *had been doing* and what they *had been searching for*, Gurdjieff’s audience would be prepared to *feel what was most valuable in the system* he offered. Through his self-masking and demonstrations of “tricks,” Gurdjieff led his observers to question their own methods of discernment and capacities for critical observation. He thereby embodied the method depicted in his advice to St. Petersburg pupils—a method of inciting skepticism as a means

¹⁸⁴ Tchekhovitch, *A Master in Life*, 133.

of encouraging his observers to recognize their disappointment in “the ordinary ways” of discerning truth from deception.

As Gurdjieff oscillated between the personas he presented to his American audience, he defined himself by the no-place of his ambiguous identity, by mystery itself. He marked the bridge between East and West as he straddled both sides: one, a Western scientific approach that exposed the real truth behind muscle-reading acts as he performed methods of Enlightenment-bred demystification, and the other, an ancient Eastern wisdom still brimming with secrecy and (thus) magic that, in a contradictory process of remystification, suggested the presence of *real* supernatural phenomena. Leaving his audience to distinguish, not only between “tricks” and “real supernatural phenomena,” but moreover, to discern which of his personas portrayed the *real* Gurdjieff, he plunged them into the ambiguous gap between these categories. He required them to join in the very mystery he provoked, to oscillate as he did between unveiling, enlightenment, demystification, unmasking, and the remystification that accompanies the possibility of “real” supernatural phenomena. He invited them to draw comparisons and to conflate possibilities as they attempted to categorize him and his teachings, not only to better understand what they witnessed, but also to locate their own identities and affiliations. Perhaps as they gazed upon his performances of conspicuous secrecy, they also gazed into a mirror, asking of themselves the same mystery-making question they asked of Gurdjieff: *Pythagoras or Charlatan?*

Appendix

We can see Gurdjieff's rhetorical strategy at work in pupil A.R. Orage's explanation to an intrigued audience member, C. S. Nott, as to the purposes for Gurdjieff's 1924 visit to America. Responding to Nott's inquiry, Orage claimed that the "demonstrations, the meetings and talks, are a kind of net thrown out. Of the hundreds of people who see and hear, only a few, in a state of dissatisfaction with themselves and with life, will feel that we have something they are looking for." Through his demonstrations and lectures in America, Gurdjieff meant to mobilize these dissatisfactions, "offering people an opportunity of having a purpose in life of using their suffering—the dissatisfactions they feel—for their own good." While not necessarily unhappy, these people "will feel that there is something else besides the round of ordinary existence."¹⁸⁵ Nott asked whether Orage was in such a state of dissatisfaction prior to meeting Gurdjieff, and Orage replied that he was and indeed had been for over ten years. Orage recalled feeling "disillusioned with the purely literary and cultural life," recognizing with "profound disappointment" that his "intellectual life, with which was associated all that was highest and best in Western culture, was leading [him] nowhere."¹⁸⁶

American psychologist Charles Daly King, who would later join Orage's New York branch of the Institute established at the end of Gurdjieff's 1924 visit, related with striking similarity his own state of mind prior to learning of Gurdjieff's teachings: "Certainly I was far from unhappy but I was definitely dissatisfied with my business life and I was seriously seeking another activity which would occupy me more seriously and to which my growing

¹⁸⁵ Note the parallel in terminology evident in Nott's own narrative of conversion when he attributes his "inner emptiness," "inner restlessness," and "dissatisfaction" to the "ceaseless round of the social, cultural, and business activity of New York." Nott, *Teachings of Gurdjieff*, xiv.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.

interest in the so-called science of psychology would possibly furnish the answer.”¹⁸⁷ Beyond simple anecdotes, Nott’s conversation with Orage and Daly King’s personal reflections reveal what I take to be a creative and strategic rhetoric at work. Both pupils related the dual theme of disappointment that Gurdjieff outlined to his pupils in St. Petersburg—each felt disappointed in himself and, additionally, “in all the old ways.” Daly King was “dissatisfied with [his] business life” and sought something to “occupy [him] more seriously,” potentially something that employed a new method (i.e. “the so-called science of psychology”). Orage felt “profound disappointment” in an “intellectual life” that “was leading [him] nowhere,” recognizing that his *old ways* of attempting to find fulfillment in a “purely literary and cultural life” only left him feeling “disillusioned.”

Audience member Gorham Munson similarly indicated the dissatisfaction of those drawn to the Fourth Way by what Gurdjieff often called their “magnetic center”: “Those who have acquired a magnetic center are men on a quest for hidden knowledge. Restlessly, they read esoteric literature; they travel abroad in search of teachers; they test schools of philosophy and religion for enlightenment. Always they are dissatisfied and always they are expectant of discovery of new-old keys to a greater knowledge of life.”¹⁸⁸

Additionally, consider audience member (and soon after, pupil) Margaret Anderson’s detailed narrative of disappointment: “All our lives our questions had been, we thought, everyman’s questions; but everyman seemed satisfied with answers which didn’t satisfy us. If a great scientist said, ‘We can erect a coherent system dealing with all aspects of human knowledge and behaviour by the refinement, extension and continued application of the methods which have been so successful in the exact sciences,’ we said, ‘No, you can’t,

¹⁸⁷ Charles Daly King, *The Oragean Version* (New York: Privately printed by C. D. King, 1951), 6.

¹⁸⁸ Munson, *The Awakening Twenties*, 204.

there's something you won't be able to get at with those methods.' If a great doctor said, 'Prayer is power,' we said, 'Yes, it must be, but why?' [c.f. Émile Coué and his prayerful mantra for self-healing] If a great philosopher based his doctrine on the 'incalculable forces of the spirit', we knew what he was talking about, but the phrase was vague. What *are* those forces? What more, if anything, can be learned about them? We found more meat in Hermes: 'For the Lord appeareth through the whole world. Thou mayest see the intelligence, and take it in thy hands, and contemplate the image of God. But if that which is in thee be not known or apparent to thee, how shall He in thee be seen, and appear unto thee by the eyes? But if thou wilt see Him, consider and understand the sun, consider the course of the moon, consider the order of the stars.'¹⁸⁹ But since astronomers had no revelations to make (except physical ones), and since no philosopher had ever spoken so clearly about what it is to 'know thyself', we were left stranded. All we could do was to reiterate: in that region between physics and philosopher is there no firm ground for the mind's construction of a faith? Gurdjieff's statement was that there does exist a super-knowledge, a super-science; and what he had to say about it convinced us that we would never hear anything else to compare with it, never find anything else which could illuminate the great texts to which we had always wanted to give a reverent investigation.'¹⁹⁰

In the early days of Gurdjieff's proto-Institute in Essentuki, the Fellowship, he assigned pupils the task to write a summary of the Institute's origin story, which was largely a reiteration of his autobiographical story of the "Seekers of Truth." He would choose the best

¹⁸⁹ Presumably, this quote is taken from Mead's translation that was popular at this time (and read by Orage as well). As Fourth Way builds upon Hermetic tradition in its understanding of immanence of the Absolute and looking within to know the divine, it is reasonable to assume that Gurdjieff's teachings either felt familiar and were thus appreciated, or else rang true with unconscious connection to Mead's work. George Robert Stowe Mead, *Thrice Great Hermes*, 3 Volumes (London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1906).

¹⁹⁰ Anderson, *The Unknowable Gurdjieff*, 81.

to be presented at the Fellowship's first public lecture. Olga de Hartmann's version was selected, and it is worth noting in this short excerpt the stylized emphasis on the notion that *somewhere something does exist*: "Before their meeting, all three had spent many long years searching, and that is why they had all arrived at the same conclusion—that 'something' absolute existed, but they did not have enough knowledge to come to an understanding of it..."¹⁹¹

Prior to opening his teachings to the public by establishing a formal organization, Gurdjieff and his early followers mused over the plans for an official Institute. When someone inquired as to the benefits of such an organization, Gurdjieff replied: "The Institute opens new horizons for a man and gives a durable sense to man's existence. A man begins to see clearly that everything that he previously counted so precious and big is only a house of cards, only ideals artificially built by him or by others, and from this nothing stays." In other words, that man is disappointed by the artifice of his ideals and recognizes the precious things in his life as mere fetishes (c.f. Tchekhovitch's recollection of the fearful audience member, trembling at what he felt to be the loss of solid ground beneath his feet upon realizing the truth of Gurdjieff's teachings). "But," he continued, "a man clings to it all because he is afraid to stay in front of an emptiness, an abyss... He understands clearly that it is necessary to throw all this away, to blow down this house of cards and then, brick by brick, to build something that nothing can blow away." He sees that something more substantial and meaningful must be possible, though what that *something* is, he cannot quite guess. While he knows he must leave all the old ways behind in order to make way for something new, even hopes to achieve this supplanting of the old and artificial life he leads, "he is afraid

¹⁹¹ De Hartmann, *Our Life*, 70-72.

to give up all his past; perhaps he will not even find a brick! What then? What will happen? He thinks it is better to have an actual house of cards than nothing... But a risk is necessary. Without having blown away the old, nothing new can begin. Sometimes in a sudden flash one sees all this nonentity so clearly! And then a man who feels it has the right—no, he is *obliged*—to throw all that past away, even to stamp it all under his feet, because it is no longer necessary for him. And then how insignificant do all people appear to him, with their little ideals, strivings, sufferings, passions and so on. How he wishes to shout to them that all that does not exist: there is no such suffering, no such love, nothing of it, all this is invented by themselves! And it seems then to him that wings grow on his back, and he does not know why he begins to love everyone, understand everyone, and wishes to tell other people, to explain to them all that he understands and thinks.”¹⁹²

¹⁹² Ibid., 56-57.