An Intersection of Interests:

Gurdjieff's Rope Group as a Site of Literary Production

As Shari Benstock and others have pointed out, Paris between the two world wars was home to a number of prominent American women writers, including Gertrude Stein, Janet Flanner and Djuna Barnes. But within this context, a unique subgroup of American women writers has largely escaped critical attention. Margaret Anderson, Jane Heap, Solita Solano and Kathryn Hulme were all students of expatriate Armenian and self-proclaimed spiritual teacher George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff. Anderson's French lover, Georgette LeBlanc, and her subsequent partner, American Dorothy Caruso, also published books and studied with Gurdjieff. These women (together with Louise Davidson, a New Englander, and Elizabeth Gordon, a British follower) comprised the Gurdjieff study group known as "The Rope." (Likening his program to a high mountain climb, Gurdjieff told participants they would need to be roped together for safety—hence the group's name [*Undiscovered* 92]). Among them, the group's writers published seventeen books after beginning to grapple seriously with Gurdjieff's teachings. While a number of these works may deserve the obscurity that has claimed them, several others received substantial contemporary praise and continue to warrant critical attention.

To my knowledge, no one has yet examined this body of work as a discrete literary phenomenon, much less tried to determine the conditions of its emergence from the larger expatriate literary community.[1] In her introduction to *Dear Tiny Heart: The Letters of Jane Heap*

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[1] Margaret Anderson has lately received some attention from feminist critics. Nina Van Gessel's "Margaret Anderson's Last Laugh: The Victory of *My Thirty Years' War*" (*English Studies in Canada* 25.1 [1999]; 67-88) suggests that Anderson's funny, pugnacious memoir of her *Little Review* years can be read as an attempt to counter clichés of the lesbian as tormented misfit. A 1996 dissertation by Julia Willis discusses Anderson's aesthetics in connection with the aesthetics of Marianne Moore (*Critics and Connoisseurs, Editors and Aesthetes: Marianne Moore, Margaret Anderson, and the Aesthetic.* Dissertation. Rutgers, 1996. 9711151.) Fascinating as these are, they don't mention Anderson's connection with Gurdjieff. Mathilda Hill's very informative introduction to Anderson's recently-published novel, *Forbidden Fires* (Tallahassee: Naiad Press, 1996) does discuss Anderson's connection with Gurdjieff, as does Baggett's excellent introduction to the Heap/Reynolds letters, but neither takes it as a primary topic.

and Florence Reynolds, Holly Baggett notes that "In addition to an artistic avant-garde in Paris during the interwar period, there was a spiritual one as well, and unfortunately the connection between the two has not been adequately scrutinized." After a partial roll call of those "mesmerized" by Gurdjieff, including Heap, Anderson, Katherine Mansfield, Mabel Dodge Luhan, Jean Toomer, Waldo Frank, Gorham Munson, Herbert Croly, Muriel Draper and architect Frank Lloyd Wright, Baggett says, "With few exceptions . . . the biographers and critics of those listed above fail to deal with this aspect of their subject's experience" (15).[2] Rob Baker, a former editor of *Parabola Magazine*, did begin a book that might have partially addressed this scholarly void. Tentatively titling the project *Gurdjieff and the Women of the Rope*, Baker wrote that he hoped to "bridge the gap that has always existed between literary chroniclers of the Stein circle and historians of the Gurdjieff movement" (Baker, par.13). Unfortunately, Baker was unable to complete the book before his death in 1996. Recently contemporary Gurdjieff follower William Patrick Patterson adopted a similar project, but Patterson's *Ladies of the Rope: Gurdjieff's Special Left Bank Women's Group* focuses on the group as a spiritual phenomenon, emphasizing the "unprecedented" nature of Gurdjieff's decision to work with lesbian women. To date, people who consider the phenomenon of Gurdjieff's community have either chosen to address it as a specifically spiritual phenomenon, or to address the works of its writers as if their association with Gurdjieff was not a factor. Neither approach alone can begin to present a complete picture of the writers involved.

This then is a preliminary survey of the Rope group as a site of literary production. Very much a product of its specific time and place, the group distinctly marked the works of its members. The behavioral model Gurdjieff provided, the literary aesthetic he articulated, the various practices he encouraged, and the attitudes he espoused all helped to shape the texts produced by his students. While Gurdjieff's impact on the work of two of his male pupils, Jean

[2] Another significant literary pupil was A.R. Orage. For years one of Gurdjieff's staunchest supporters, Orage edited the *New Age*, a British magazine devoted to politics, literature and the arts, from 1907 to 1922.

Toomer and Rene Daumal, was in several respects less than positive, his influence on the women in the Rope group appears to have been largely beneficial. These writers were able to use what they learned from Gurdjieff to enhance their productivity, release their dependency on the male-dominated avant-garde, and create their own text-producing 'apparatus' with features very different from the traditional model.

The Rope Group and Gurdjieff

Before considering the Rope group as a site of literary production, it is necessary to sketch a brief history of the people who comprised it—beginning with the teacher himself. (A chronology of major events in the lives of the group's core members is appended.) Born in Russian Armenia early in 1866,[3] Gurdjieff enjoyed the benefit of supportive parents. To provide him with the best education possible, they sent him to the Kars military cathedral, where in his teenage years, he studied to be a priest (Moore 16). Instead of following that career path, however, he chose a more colorful route. Openly sympathetic biographer James Moore admits that from Gurdjieff's youth he was a con man. Moore likens the teacher and his early companions to "sharks." (An example: Gurdjieff, knowing in advance that a railway would be laid to particular towns, persuaded local dignitaries to "pay him a small fortune to 'arrange' it" [19]). James Webb, who attempts in *The Harmonious Circle* to provide an "independent" account of the Gurdjieff phenomenon, actually gives a more positive account of the teacher's character, noting that while Gurdjieff could "on one level" be described as a fraud, liar and cheat, he also exhibited compassion, charity and adherence to his own eccentric code of honor (13).[4] But Webb's account does its best to illuminate the underside of Gurdjieff's activities. Among other things, he devotes several chapters to an elaborate theory that the young Gurdjieff may have

[3] Gurdjieff's exact birthday is unknown. Though he claimed to have been born in 1866, scholars debate both the year and the day. All that is clear is that he celebrated it on January 13.
[4] Basically, whatever served the aims of the Work was good; what hindered it, evil (Webb 179).

been the spy Ushe Narzunoff, a player in "The Great Game"—the clandestine struggle between Imperial Russia and Britain for control of India.[5]

For whatever reason or combination of reasons, Gurdjieff's travels did take him to Tibet, where he claims to have studied for a time (Moore 33).[6] Webb identifies elements of Tibetan Buddhism in the Gurdjieffian System, together with traces of Jewish mysticism, esoteric Christianity and behaviorist psychology. The result of these diverse influences is a metaphysical stew that is not easily digested, and to make matters more challenging, there is no concise, officially-sanctioned summary of Gurdjieff's thought. Part of the problem was Gurdjieff's method of revealing his ideas. Webb says they were "released piecemeal, in a manner deliberately self-contradictory or misleading, and had to be fitted together by his pupils" (139). In her memoir, Dorothy Caruso describes the frustration of trying to coax longtime students to explain the doctrine. The followers asserted that one could only experience the teachings by meeting Gurdjieff in person. When she protested, she was told, "He purposely makes it hard. In his book he says that the key is always hidden far from the lock" (*Dorothy* 153-154). *Beelzebub's Tales to his Grandson* presents Gurdjieff's doctrine in camouflage, but the casual reader will agree with Webb that the book is "frankly impenetrable" (331).[7] Leaving aside the System's abundance of esoteric paraphernalia (the enneagram, the Cosmic Octave, and the Table of Hydrogens are just some of the occult notions it employs), the teachings basically contend that too many humans are asleep, mechanical, with no "I" of their own. Only by dint of intense self-observation and self-remembering, carried out under the supervision of a Man Who Knows, can

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[5] Narzunoff and his sponsors shared an interest in mysticism, specifically Tibetan Buddhism (57).

[6] The early 1900s were a time in the West of a certain openness to ideas previously considered unconventional. Before Gurdjieff reached Paris to attract a following that represented some of the period's prominent artists and writers, for example, Madame Blavatsky's Theosophical Society was already well-established in England and the U.S., and Indian gurus like Vivekananda and Yogananda had toured the West and been well received. For a discussion of this phenomenon, including the influence of Hindu philosophy on Blavatsky's Theosophy, one source is Vivian Worthington's *A History of Yoga.* (Loundon: Routledge & Kegan, 1982.) Julie Kane's article, "Varieties of Mystical Experience in the Writings of Virginia Woolf" also provides a good summary of the popularity of "the occult" in the early 1900s (*Twentieth Century Literature* 41.4 [1995]: 328-50.)

[7] Ouspensky's *In Search of the Miraculous* is probably the most readable long account of the teachings, though it was published after Ouspensky's death, and after his split with Gurdjieff.

one have any chance of waking from the hypnotic trance that is waking life, and cease to be just another machine in a world of "mad machines" (Webb 140).

This was a message that already had some resonance in the tumultuous years immediately prior to and during World War I. In 1908, after traveling extensively, Gurdjieff began advertising his services as a "maestro" of supernatural science in Tashkent (Moore 36). He founded a study group, and his work blossomed in St. Petersburg, where he stayed from 1911 to 1914. He lived in various Russian cities until 1918, when he and about 40 followers, then in Essentuki, were forced by political upheaval to flee. The band's journey began by rail, but included a grueling segment on foot over the northern Caucasus mountain range to the Black Sea. There, in Sochi, Gurdjieff announced to his followers that he no longer had money to support them, and all but about six or seven disbanded. The remaining nucleus followed him to Tiflis, where he again began to attract pupils. In 1920, when he deemed the situation in Tiflis too precarious, about 30 people accompanied him out of that city. They found their way eventually to France, entering Paris in July of 1922. By August they had located a promising chateau on property near Fontainebleau and 40 miles outside the city. They leased the Prieure (Gurdjieff would later arrange to buy it) and prepared to put down roots (Moore 169).[8]

Gurdjieff's reasons for settling in Paris were in part practical. He and his followers had made already made a stop in Constantinople, leaving in 1921 when Gurdjieff decided that the political climate was becoming too threatening (Webb 184). They then spent a year in Germany, but abandoned that country after losing a legal battle over a potential site for an institute in Hellerau.[9] Next Gurdjieff considered London as a base. Ouspensky had preceded them, and had already established a group there. However, Gurdjieff's application for a visa was denied. Webb

[8] Gurdjieff amassed funds for the purchase of the Prieure by a series of "frenetic business deals"—when he wasn't at Fontainebleau, he was in Paris exercising his talents as restauranteur, as a hypnotist who served a clientele of alcoholics and drug addicts, and as a "consultant" on the Middle East. Moore reports that he "made a killing" in oil-field shares (Moore 175).

[9] The property's owner, Harold Dohrn, claimed to have been hypnotized when he violated a pre-existing agreement to lease the property to Gurdjieff (Webb 189).

suggests this may have been due to the prevailing 'Bolshevophobia,' and Gurdjieff's Russian followers (224). Whatever the reason for the British refusal, Gurdjieff was able to obtain a permit to settle in Paris (225).

However, more than purely utilitarian considerations may have made France attractive to the teacher. Gurdjieff admitted that at one point in his life, he had been "sick for art" (Webb 39). Like so many others, he might have been drawn to Paris by what Edith Wharton described in *French Ways and Their Meaning* as that city's "long artistic supremacy" (55). He must also have appreciated the disinterested tolerance with which the French received even their most eccentric guests. Gurdjieff's institute at Fontainebleau could not have survived in a too attentive or repressive environment, but as Frederick Hoffman observed, "the French traditionally accepted foreigners with little stir or curiosity" (44). Finally, though French society was based on inheritance rather than self-invention, and though the French possessed what Wharton termed a "reverence" for tradition, the notion of 'work on self' so central Gurdjieff's teaching was slowly beginning to find acceptance in France. Not only did an influx of Americans flood Paris with their self-improving notions, but beginning in the 1930s philosopher Alexandre Kojeve began giving a series of lectures on Hegel that broached ideas very similar to those Sartre would later set forth in *Being and Nothingness.*[10] Existentialism, though a far cry from the optimistic American belief that it was possible to invent oneself from scratch, nevertheless stressed the importance of individual choice and action. The intellectual climate emerging in France would prove more hospitable to Gurdjieff's teachings than that prevalent only a decade earlier.

Even so, the Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man got off to a rocky start. A tubercular Katherine Mansfield joined the group in October, and died four days before the

[10]Georges Bataille was one of the regular attendees at the College of Sociology lectures. The concept of sovereignty he would later develop bears at least some superficial similarity to Gurdjieff's system of self-mastery.

Institute's official opening on January 13, 1923.[11] Press coverage of Mansfield's death completely overshadowed the opening. "From the ordinary viewpoint, the Institute's French debut . . . proved disastrous," Moore says (189). In January 1924, Gurdjieff made a trip to New York that was part missionary effort, part gamble to restore the Institute's already failing fortunes. It worked. Among those Gurdjieff managed to impress were Anderson, Heap, and Leblanc (an actress and singer, Leblanc was Maurice Maeterlinck's former lover). He also caught the interest of Jean Toomer, writer Hart Crane, and critic Gorham Munson[12] (Moore 200). Despite headlines like *The American Weekly's*, which read, "'Dr.' Gurdjieff and his Magical Secret of Life—How to Be a Superman or Superwoman by Feeding Pigs, Dancing Weird Dances All Night and Other Fantastic Antics," the New York visit prompted no fewer than eighty Americans to apply to come work at the Prieure (Moore 199, 204). Among the transplants were Anderson, Heap, and Leblanc.

My Thirty Years' War recounts the colorful story of how Anderson, with no money and a great deal more spunk than experience, founded the *Little Review*. In 1915 in Chicago she met Heap, then a writer and painter. The two joined forces, becoming both literary partners and lovers. In 1917 they moved to New York. Over the years Heap's editorial judgment strengthened the magazine's reputation, but by the time Gurdjieff arrived in the U.S., Anderson was tired of the *Little Review* project, and ready to let it go. It had been a constant financial struggle. It had dragged them to court to defend their serial publication of Joyce's *Ulysses*. After

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[11] Moore supplies Mansfield's own account of her bizarre lodgings, a supposedly healthful "bower" above the stable: "It's simply too lovely. There is a small steep staircase to a little railed-off gallery above the cows. On the little gallery are divans covered with Persian carpets….And all so gay, so simple, reminding one of summer grasses and the kind of flowers that smell like milk" (181-2).

[12] Between 1922 and 1924, Munson put out a literary magazine called *Secession*, meant to steer a course between what he saw as the mistakes of the too-successful (i.e. sellout) *Dial*, and the too-obscure *Little Review* (Munson 1.22-23). The magazine's editorial policy hints at a sensibility that would have made Munson a good candidate for study with Gurdjieff: "The primary task of the critic is…to examine the relation between a writer and his dynamic reality (subject matter), and to ascertain the quality of the state of mind induced by the precipitate of this relationship. Catholicity may be a vice for a poet or fiction writer: it is always a virtue for the critic" (1.16). Before its demise, *Secession* published the likes of Waldo Frank, Hart Crane, William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, and Malcolm Cowley.

dedicating ten years of her life to the project, Anderson, in the habit of trusting her instincts, was ready for something new. But Heap disagreed. Near the end of *My Thirty Years' War*, Anderson reproduces one of their arguments:

> I am definitely giving up the *Little Review*, I told Jane.
> You can't give it up. You started it…..
> I can certainly give it up. I'll give it to you.
> (I considered this just—as well as interesting, but Jane stopped saying good morning to me) 239.

Rather than stopping publication of the magazine, they moved its base of operation to Paris. Anderson gives contradictory reasons for this decision. *My Thirty Years' War* suggests it was a logical step, since all their friends were moving overseas. *The Fiery Fountains* explains that the move was the result of an art endowment given to Leblanc, with whom Anderson had fallen in love: "I had always felt that the type of physical life for which I am best fitted was to be found, made to order, in a French chateau" (16). *The Unknowable Gurdjieff* claims that Anderson and her friends went to France specifically to study at Gurdjieff's Institute (2). Anderson herself may not have known which version was truest.

Baggett is unambiguous about the reason for Heap's move to Paris. In the introduction to *Dear Tiny Heart* she writes, "Heap's life was forever changed by Gurdjieff and his ideas" (5). The letters themselves are more matter-of-fact. Heap merely notes that she plans to be "on the front row of the show" for the Gurdjieff troop's first dance performance (90). A few days later she told Reynolds, "Let the man be a Charlatan or a devil . . . I don't rave about this—I have been waiting for it and it comes in a highly satisfactory way—that's all" (94).

Baggett expresses surprise that Heap and her friends, confirmed lesbians, would embrace the philosophy of a man who condemned homosexuality. Gurdjieff was an undeniable male chauvinist, to boot. To damn him in his own words: "Nature of woman is very different from that of man. Woman is from ground and only hope for her to arise to another stage of development—to go the (sic) Heaven as you say—is *with* man . . . If woman can find real man, then woman become real woman without necessity work (sic)" (Moore 68). Baggett suggests that Heap

simply "embraced aspects of Gurdjieff's philosophy she found personally empowering and ignored the rest" (*Dear* 18). As editors of the *Little Review*, both Heap and Anderson were doubtless accustomed to holding their own in a male-dominated field by adopting just such a strategy. They were equipped to deal with Gurdjieff.

Upon arrival in Paris, Leblanc and Anderson reported together to Gurdjieff's Institute. Their timing was poor. After a serious car accident in July 1924, the quixotic teacher had decided that all the Institute's resident students should be sent packing.[13] The sweep included Anderson and Leblanc, "never exactly model pupils" (Moore 226). When Heap showed up from New York, Gurdjieff turned her away as well. Nevertheless the three persisted in their determination to spend time at Fontainebleau, as regular visitors if not as residents. Heap and Anderson managed in 1927 to persuade their friend Solita Solano to visit the Institute with them. Solano, a journalist, had settled in Paris in 1922 with her lover, *New Yorker* correspondent Janet Flanner. Despite the publicity generated by Gurdjieff's teaching techniques, which included ritual music, dance and readings from his work-in-progress, Solano was not impressed by her first encounter with the man. "I listened to a reading from his vaunted book. It bored me," she says. She was equally unimpressed by "the famous music." She didn't like Gurdjieff's table manners, or the fact that women weren't allowed to smoke in the study-house (Anderson, *Unknowable* 28).

What Solano did like, according to Anderson scholar Mathilda Hills, was Margaret herself. In the introduction to Anderson's recently-published novel, *Forbidden Fires,* Hill explains that around the time of Solano's excursion to the Prieure, "Margaret gave in to Solita's great magnetism, and Solita fell wildly in love" (Anderson, *Forbidden* 12). Solano took Anderson to visit Chartres, because the spire of the cathedral was a central symbol of her newly-published novel, *This Way Up*. Leblanc and Flanner were tolerant of the affair; however, Solano's relationship with Anderson broke up in the early thirties. In 1934, in "a crisis of

[13] Webb explores the idea that the crash may have been a deliberate, in light of what appears to have been Gurdjieff's eerie foreknowledge of the event. However, he concedes that it is difficult to believe any teacher would go to such life-threatening lengths simply to test his followers (296-97).

misery," Solano turned to Gurdjieff. She says, "I suddenly knew that I had long been waiting to go to him and that he was expecting me" (Anderson, *Unknowable*, 29).

Though a faithful member of the Rope group, Hulme was not initially part of the tight-knit literary community to which Solano, Anderson, Heap, and to some extent Leblanc, belonged. Raised in San Francisco by a single mother, Hulme had moved to New York by the time of Gurdjieff's first visit, but did not attend the performances and lectures (*Undiscovered* 19). Far from moving in Heap and Anderson's circles, she was employed as a salesgirl in the Ladies' Neckwear Department at B. Altman. Though she had longed from childhood to be a writer, her connection to the literary world consisted of gazing at the buildings that housed the offices of well-known publishing companies (17). Hulme's move to Europe was the result of the fact that she'd landed a job as companion to a successful milliner who wanted to tour the Continent. When Hulme finally met Solano in Paris in 1930, their encounter concerned, not writing, but a transaction about a car. (Hulme and her employer had decided to sell theirs; a traveling-companion mentioned that Solano and Flanner were in the market.) "My heart jumped as I took (their) card. Writers! Two of them! I had never met a writer in the flesh," Hulme says (37).[14]

Solano eventually invited Hulme to a study group led by Heap. The group, which began holding regular meetings in 1932, was designed as a sort of introduction to Gurdjieff's ideas and methods of self-study. Anderson and Leblanc were then living in Vernet, but the two attended the group from time to time, and later moved back to the city to participate more fully. Webb suggests that Flanner and Djuna Barnes may also have attended (432), but their attitude toward Gurdjieff was skeptical, and if they did participate their presence was probably due more to respect for Heap's intelligence than to any interest in the teachings. Hulme claims that it was

[14] This sort of self-effacing language pervades Hulme's memoir. Soon after her arrival in Europe, one of her stories was accepted for publication by *transition.* She notes that it appeared with works by Stein and Boyle, but adds, "It was of course one of those freakish acceptances that sometimes happen to novice writers" (33). At a festive Christmas Day musical reception at Anderson and Leblanc's rented chateau outside Paris in 1931, Hulme felt lucky to be allowed to "look out on the sparkling scene" from behind the bar, where she had been assigned to serve drinks (56).

largely due to Heap's influence that Gurdjieff's reputation "loomed in Left Bank conversations in a persistent hush-hush way, like a cloud enveloping a Jehovah" (*Undiscovered* 44). Hulme herself was mesmerized by the ideas she heard in the course of Heap's meetings. For that reason, when her employer returned to the U.S. she stayed in Paris, "counting each sou" (47).

Perhaps because she always worked for a living, Hulme was the only member of the Rope who seemed to be aware of the financial difficulties that dogged Gurdjieff during the 1930s. Members of Heap's study group rarely encountered Gurdjieff, but when one day in 1932 Hulme spotted him in a café, she introduced herself and he unexpectedly invited her to accompany him to Fontainebleau to visit the Institute, by then deserted. She describes the occasion as a melancholy one, and the Prieure itself as "a haunted house" (*Undiscovered* 69). Of Gurdjieff himself she says, "I thought he looked like the loneliest man in the world" (70). As Hulme noticed, the future of the Institute—and the future of Gurjeiff's teachings—did seem shaky, even to him. In 1926 he'd had a chance at a generous endowment from Mabel Dodge Luhan, the wealthy Taos literary patron who later helped D.H. Lawrence, but Gurdjieff turned her down.[15] Instead, in winter 1931, he made another brief trip to New York to "restock his wallet" (Moore 244). But bills had gone unpaid for too long. In April 1932, The Prieure's mortgagees foreclosed.[16] From 1933 to 1935 Gurdjieff spent much of his time in the U.S., where, Webb says, he attempted to "reestablish himself in the style to which he had become accustomed" (430). But by the late summer of 1935 he had returned to Paris, living in a series of flats and using the Café de la Paix as a sort of unofficial office. It was here in that members of the as-yet-unnamed Rope group sought him out.

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[15] Moore reports that she had a "dilettante" interest in Gurdjieff's work, and had concluded that "her sharp spiritual and sexual necessities could be reconciled only if Gurdjieff set up a branch of his Institute at Taos—with virile and handsome Jean Toomer as principal" (215). Later Toomer would start a Prieure-style experiment at Portage, Wisconsin, and garner his own share of lurid newspaper publicity (244).

[16] Webb points out that the immediate reason for the sale came down to a bill from a local coal merchant, and that the loss of the Institute could no doubt have been avoided if Gurdjieff had been interested in doing so. It was yet another instance of the teacher's occasionally incomprehensible behavior (426).

Because Gurdjieff worked there, Solano, Hulme, Anderson, Leblanc and Davidson began to frequent the café. Sipping coffee at a discreet distance, they watched his every move. Hulme describes them as "five highly vibrating beggars, waiting for a crumb from the master's table" (73). Heap departed Paris for London in October of that year. Baggett explains that Gurdjieff was "sufficiently impressed with her mastery of his ideas that he instructed her to move to London to begin her own study group" (6). Unfortunately, Hulme wrote, Heap's departure left the Paris students "high and dry." Hulme was distressed by the idea that the group would have to meet without a leader. So, after seeing Heap off on the boat train, she proceeded to Gurdjieff's table at the Café de la Paix, where a mixture of audacity and luck netted an invitation to dinner with the teacher (*Undiscovered* 74-76). Hulme brought Davidson and Solano along for the meal, which led to a second invitation, and then to regular meetings with the full group. In the beginning, manuscript readings seemed to supply the raison d'etre for the sessions. Gurdjieff was at work on *Beelzebub's Tales to his Grandson*, and he used the women as sounding boards (85). Later Gurdjieff began to speak of "work on the self," and to outline exercises for the women to follow. Hulme declines to describe the exercises directly, but adds, "I believe that anyone who has struggled to shut off the mechanically racing mind through a sleepless night, or who has tried to pray for even half a minute without having associations drag one's attention away, has had a taste, however small, of the kind of self-discipline into which he initiated us" (90).

Just as there were reasons why Paris proved hospitable to the Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man, there are distinct features of the French culture that fostered and made possible the phenomenon of the Rope study group. The women who comprised it were no different from other women artists who abandoned the U.S. for France. They wanted, Benstock says, to find "the necessary cultural, sexual and personal freedom to explore their creative intuitions" (10). She contends that women expatriates shared "a whole subterrain of resistance" to restrictions then prevalent in the U.S., from its prohibition laws to its Protestant work ethic, not to mention its hostility to sexual experimentation (13). By contrast, Paris

represented sophistication and freedom. Exactly the sort of independent-mindedness and openness to experimentation that attracted the women Paris would have been prerequisite for working with Gurdjieff. In addition, the group's unique dynamic could not have emerged without the sexual freedom that Rope members enjoyed in Paris. Its members were not just friends, but in some cases lovers, and this contributed to the strong cohesion of the group. Their relationships might have developed very differently in the more repressive United States. As Gertrude Stein remarked, "It was not what France gave you but what it did not take away from you that was important" (Benstock 13).

The Rope group met for two years, and finally disbanded in spring of 1938, with growing pressure from the war. After this point its members had only very limited contact with Gurdjieff; their tutelage was essentially over. Webb devotes less than two pages in his long book to the Rope, characterizing the group as something akin to an unsavory secret. "It was a group which Gurdjieff kept strictly to itself, a group composed of women of a certain type—literary, sophisticated, and single—whether divorced, deserted, unmarried, or frankly Lesbian. Casual visitors who asked to be allowed to join the Work were met with a blank refusal" (432). Moore says that the Rope group was "over virtually before it had begun," and adds that in terms of value to Gurdjieff's mission, only Solano and Heap survived "the burnt-out landscape of Gurdjieff's singular lesbian experiment" (267). However, these dismissals do not begin to take into account the salutary effect the group had on its members' work as writers, nor the courage and generosity with which they met subsequent challenges. After the women scattered, Anderson selflessly nursed Leblanc, who was dying of breast cancer, through the height of the war danger in France. Leblanc made "prodigious efforts to 'die consciously'—to watch the core of her being through death" (Webb 466).[17] Anderson's next partner, Dorothy Caruso, also died of breast cancer, and

[17] At the end of *The Strange Necessity*, the final volume of her autobiography, Anderson imagines Leblanc returning from death to encourage her. "Always she speaks of Gurdjieff, always in the same words that eased my heart and encouraged my effort: You will go on, you will not forget all that we learned from him, all that we saw him accomplish" (221).

again Anderson rose to the challenge of nursing her companion until the end. Hulme returned to America to express her patriotism by working as a welder at a shipyard. Later she worked for an international relief organization, assisting displaced war victims. She performed so well that she was made director over several Ukranian camps, replacing two men (*Undiscovered* 266). Solano, a fine editor, unstintingly supported the literary efforts of her friends, and was instrumental in helping Anderson return to the U.S. after Leblanc's death. Heap remained a key leader in the Gurdjieff movement in Britain. Director Peter Brook, one of her students, wrote, "When she spoke . . . she would open greater vistas of understanding, linking the tiniest detail of everyday life to the laws and the forces that condition humanity" (Baggett 8). Anderson recalls Gurdjieff's saying, "I cannot develop you; I can only create conditions in which you can develop yourselves" (*Unknowable* 98). Whether or not their striving can be attributed to Gurdjieff, Rope members seem to have taken the task of self-development seriously until the end of their lives.

Of Love and Hate: The Literary Community's Response to Gurdjieff

From the beginning, the general assessment of Gurdjieff's effect on authors—indeed, on anyone at all—was hardly flattering. Some made fun of the phenomenon. Kay Boyle recalls hearing Robert McAlmon say of the Institute, "It's a mass hypnotism of some kind . . . . They live on their hallucinations" (McAlmon 86-7). For Ezra Pound, one meal's worth of talk about spiritual development was enough; he liked Gurdjieff's bright yellow, delicately flavored Persian soup far better than his ideas. "If he had had more of that sort of thing in his (culinary) repertoire he could . . . have worked on towards at least one further conversation," Pound joked (Moore 191). Other opinions regarding the teacher suggested something more sinister. Before Mansfield died, Wyndham Lewis noted that she had fallen "in the grip of the Levantine psychic shark" (Moore 188). After her death, Murry wondered if her move "into the spiritual quackery of Gurdjieff" had sealed her death (Moore 189). Rom Landau's *God is My Adventure*, published in 1935, embraced Gurdjieff's teachings—but repudiated Gurdjieff. An Ouspensky devotee,

Landau spoke of Gurdjieff's "hypnotic aggression" and "telepathic rage" (Moore 259). [18] W.B. Yeats told the husband of the medium Georgie Lees, "I have had a lot of experience of that sort of thing in my time, and my advice to you is—leave it alone" (Byrd 68). According to Webb, suspicions that Gurdjieff might be unprincipled, even dangerous, were to some extent borne out by subsequent events. His influence appears to have prompted several suicides (332). He had sexual relations with some of his female pupils, and fathered a number of illegitimate children. At one point he was accused of near rape (335). Whether Gurdjieff was viewed as joke or a threat, Moore tells us, "Between Gurdjieff and the world of cultural *bon ton* there was to be no conciliation, no giving and no asking of quarter" (288).

What, then was the teacher's attraction for members of the Rope group and other of his writer pupils? An answer to that question may be found in three separate aspects of Gurdjieff's enterprise: the content of his teachings, the model he provided for his students, and the aesthetic he endorsed. To each of these he added a stamp with potential appeal to literary minds.

The Teachings.

Gurdjieff's stress on individual growth and empowerment was unique among the strains of mysticism that flourished during the early decades of the 1900s. Moore writes that Gurdjieff himself had a "sense of 'I' so powerful and discrete it almost seemed to rattle inside him" (124). While other teachers under the influence of the east stressed self-abnegation and eventual self-dissolution, Gurdjieff taught pupils to look for the "*real* I" among the multiple, mechanical I's that directed their lives (*Undiscovered* 41). Perhaps it was this emphasis on strengthening the self, rather than subjugating it, that attracted certain writers and artists.[19] Visiting the Prieure before she became a pupil herself, Solano observed of its inhabitants that "each was an egoist,

[18] Both Ouspensky and A.R. Orage began as loyal disciples and later broke with Gurdjieff—complicated stories that would require many pages to recount.

[19] Yeats is one example of an artist who turned to themes of personal growth and identity in response to the 20th Century's increasing alienation. This can be seen particularly in his poems of the 1920s and 30s, with their links to his philosophy of history and personality, and their imagery of life as a spiraling ascent.

studying for himself alone" (Ford 278). Anderson, who frequently remarked that she was a creature of ego, found herself attracted by Gurdjieff's promise to teach his students to "act rather than be acted upon" (Ford 262). The writer recalls a conversation with Madame de Salzmann (who came to be regarded, Moore says, as Gurdjieff's most advanced disciple). Anderson complained, "If I must give up my self-induced moods I will have nothing to write about, I'll lose all the thoughts and feelings that make a good book." Salzmann replied, "Why do you want to have thoughts and feelings like everyone else's? I wait for the time when what you say to me will be different from what everyone else says to me—authentic—your own" (*Unknowable* 200-201). The search for the authentic 'I' made a good project for writers already disposed to view their own lives as their primary material. Reference to the practice of self-observation appears in many of his students' accounts.

A related aspect of Gurdjieff's system was its emphasis on self-responsibility. Toomer admitted to "a deep-seated unwillingness to put my life under the direction of anyone other than myself" (Byrd 72). He was able to learn from Gurdjieff because of the teacher's insistence that his students were responsible for their own progress. Hulme, noticing that "a major inner change" had taken place in her even though she was not in physical proximity with Gurdjieff, exclaimed, "There must be, in this Work, a factor of self-initiation that could appear after a certain period of apprenticeship. *You initiate yourself!"* (*Undiscovered* 164).

Gurjieff's tolerance of vice and his colorful shock tactics certainly also appealed to the avant-garde community. He not only taught through esoteric dance, diagrams and symbols, but also "through money, through alcohol, and through the preparation, cooking and eating of food" (Moore 41). Gurdjieff's Fourth Way, the way of the sly man, demands no rejection of sex, no dying to the world (Moore 57). Moore laments the public misperception of what went on at Gurdjieff's Institute, but in terms of publicity it might have done more good than harm when Sinclair Lewis wrote, "It must be a hell of a place to live…they have built their own 'gymnasium' . . . a cross between a cabaret and a harem" (Moore 192), or when Vivienne Eliot called the

Prieure "that asylum for the insane . . . where (Lady Rothmere) does religious dances naked with Katherine Mansfield" (188). While these are exaggerations, Prieure students were required to participate in the nightly ritual of toasts to various categories of idiots, where alcohol flowed freely and the jokes could become quite off-color. In theory Gurdjieff condemned homosexuality, but in practice he was no prude. Hills reports that he shocked Margaret Anderson "with allusions to bodily functions she had never in her life mentioned and with gross references to lesbian lovemaking" (Anderson, *Forbidden* 18). In an unpublished letter to Jane Heap, Hulme recounts the story of a day when Gurdjieff took her out for Perrier—at a brothel. "Naked girls brushing buttocks past our table, and men reaching out to them—that sort of thing. He watched everything. I never felt so safe or so secure in all my life—and yet, all the while, he was baiting me," she recalls (Baker, par. 3). One of Gurdjeiff's more conventional students, Hulme took the experience in stride.

The Model.

Gurdjieff also appealed to writers because he was a writer himself, and modeled the commitment that the writing process entails. For most writers time and solitude are what the process demands above all else, and in September of 1924, just weeks after his near-fatal car crash, Gurdjieff moved to claim these precious commodities. On hand for the occasion, Toomer recalls the way that Gurdjieff without warning "called every person at the Institute to gather around him and simply announced…that he would close the Institute—'liquidate' it was his word" (76). Instead, he told stunned students, the Prieure would become his personal home, where friends and students might visit by invitation. But the formal structure of the Institute had been permanently dissolved. A brush with death in a car crash (Gurdjieff was a notoriously bad driver) had re-ordered his priorities. He told longtime student Olga de Hartmann, "I, who have lately been considered by very many people as a rather good teacher of temple dances, have now become today a professional writer" (Moore 211-12).

He set to work immediately on the manuscript that would later be published as *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*.[20] A good model, he made his writing process quite visible. Hulme's first impression of Gurdjieff, when she and her employer first glimpsed him at the Café de la Paix, was that of "a shaven-headed writer bent over his work" (*Undiscovered* 60). Not only did he make the act of working public, he gave public readings of his work-in-progress. In her *La Machine à Courage*, Leblanc recalls listening breathlessly on such occasions. "To know something of the stature of the man one had to listen to the reading of his manuscript—an enormous work in nine parts," she writes (*Unknowable* 137). These were still a feature of Gurdjieff's community when Caruso first met him in Paris in 1948. In her memoir she remarks at length on the practice, admitting that at first the nightly readings struck her as "interminable," though his other pupils seemed riveted by the teacher's work (*Dorothy* 173-175).[21]

Gurdjieff also demonstrated more humble writerly skills, including the ability to accept advice from others and persistence in face of failure. In 1928, after working for three years on *Beelzebub*, he realized that he had "missed the right tone of voice" (Moore 222). He turned to "his long-suffering editors" Jane Heap and A.R. Orage for help. At other times he neglected to ask for much-needed advice, but he knew how to admit a mistake. In 1932, perhaps impatient that his work had still not been published, he dashed off a book titled *The Herald of Coming Good: First Appeal to Contemporary Humanity*, and circulated it privately. Recipients were appalled. "If anything was calculated to drive an obstinate nail into the coffin of Gurdjieff's literary reputation, it was the ironically-titled *Herald*," Moore writes (247). Ouspensky burned the copies sent to him, assuming that Gurdjieff had contracted syphilis and gone mad. After a

[20]This book was published shortly after his death in 1949. Gurdjieff's other books were *Herald of the Coming Good* (1933), *Meetings with Remarkable Men* (1963), and a privately published *Third Series*, left at his death in a fragmentary state (Webb 544). Since Gurdjeiff repudiated the hastily-written *Herald of the Coming Good*, and since *Meetings with Remarkable Men* may have been heavily edited before its posthumous publication, *Beelzebub* remains the most representative sample of Gurdjieff's work.

[21] The readings, still from *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*, lacked continuity. "Chapters read the week before were repeated the following week, or sometimes a chapter read halfway through was never resumed," Caruso recalls (174).

few months, Gurdjieff, then in New York on a visit, admitted that the book was unacceptable, and suppressed it. However, no sooner had he done so than he began work on another project, getting up early to write at Child's Restaurant at Columbus Circle (Moore 254).

Gurdjieff continued to write and to construct himself publicly as an author for the rest of his life, even though the self-published *Herald* was the only book that saw in print in his lifetime. (The publisher's proofs of *Beelzebub* arrived in his hands eight days before his death [Moore 313]). If he was not a successful writer by traditional standards, nevertheless he consistently modeled habits and attitudes needed by pupils with a literary bent, and set an example that could prove useful to them at various points in their own careers.

The Aesthetic.

A chapter in *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson* titled "Art" gives the reader a glimpse of Gurdjieff in the role of literary critic. Beelzebub is a fallen angel, expounding upon the nature of human beings as he hurtles through space in a spaceship. Before art deteriorated, Beelzebub tells his grandchild, the artist was known as an "Orpheist." He continues: "This word is composed from two definite roots of words then in use, which in contemporary times would signify 'right' and 'essence.' If someone was called thus, it meant that he rightly sensed the essence" (495). Unfortunately, after several generations, practitioners of art lost track of the word's genuine sense and decided to call themselves artists, which simply meant, "he-who-is-occupied with art" (496). Literary fashions were invented to cover the emptiness of the activity, Beelzebub says. "The maleficent custom for them is that they periodically change the external form of what is called 'the-covering-of-their-nullity'" (501).

Beelzebub attributes the cause of true art's demise to humanity's progressive loss of the "sensibility of perception" that provided "the basis for the possibility of natural self-perfecting" (472). Like D.H. Lawrence and the earlier Romantics, Gurdjieff had the sense that the human race had somehow fallen from grace. He shared that writer's preoccupation with the problem of the unconscious, an interest that began for Gurdjieff in his early career as a hypnotist. "Like

some of his European contemporaries—Freud and Jung among them—he was trying to break through man's 'normal waking consciousness' to the subconscious mind," Webb writes (78). Lawrence believed that the way to cosmic awareness lay through the unconscious. While Gurdjieff propounded the ideology of expanded consciousness, both men believed that the unconscious was central to the problem of art, and that fiction should convey a message.[22]

There are further indications of Gurdjieff's aesthetic in the introduction to *Meetings With Remarkable Men*. He describes what he sees as the three categories of contemporary literature, then dismisses them all. Claiming to be quoting "an intelligent Persian" he writes, "To sum up everything that has been said about the literature of our times, I cannot find better words to describe it than the expression, 'it has no soul'" (Gurdjieff 14). Instead, the old man prefers "anecdotes and proverbs," by means of which "the quintessence of an idea can sometimes be very well transmitted." The formal qualities of the book that follows are very much in accord with this preference. Instead of straightforwardly setting forth his theories, Gurdjieff describes encounters with others who have "voluntarily and involuntarily, served as 'vivifying factors' for the complete formation of one or another aspect of my individuality" (109).

The Persian of Gurdjieff's introduction goes on to tell an anecdote about some sparrows sitting on a ledge and bemoaning the fact that for all their smoke and rattle, automobiles could not be counted upon to produce road apples (from which the sparrows had formerly been able to peck some nourishment) as horse-drawn carriages had. The old man concludes that in contemporary literature, "there is nothing substantial for our essential aim. It is all exterior: all only, as in the tale of the old sparrow, noise, rattling, and a nauseous smell" (Gurdjieff 16). The critical principles here espoused could be said to share certain modernist tendencies, such as those expressed by Virginia Woolf said in her 1925 "Modern Fiction," when she accuses Wells, Bennett and Galsworthy of wasting energy trying to make the trivial and the transitory appear

[22] Luhan tried hard to interest Lawrence in Gurdjieff's teachings, and Lawrences actually visited the Fontainebleau Institute briefly toward the end of January 1924. Lawrence remained firm in his dislike for all things Gurdjieffian (Webb 339).

true and enduring. "It is because they are concerned not with the spirit but with the body that they have disappointed us," Woolf says.

This story of the sparrows not only serves to reinforce Gurdjieff's primary point that literature should serve the reader's spiritual development, it also betrays a rather jaundiced view toward what Walter Benjamin terms the "production apparatus" of the literary world. In Gurdjieff's eyes, the publishing industry was no more interested in providing nourishment for readers than a horse and carriage moves forward in order to feed sparrows. This understanding of the literary apparatus overlaps interestingly with Benjamin's, as articulated in his "The Author as Producer." Whether he realizes it or not, the author is "working in the service of class interests," Benjamin asserts (Newton 93). He says that it is "all too easy to supply a production apparatus without changing it" (95), and by way of promoting change, he recommends that the writer should have the attitude of a teacher, instructing readers in the art of becoming producers themselves. Benjamin concludes, "This apparatus will be the better, the more consumers it brings in contact with the production process—in short, the more readers or spectators it turns into collaborators" (96). Gurdjieff had a genius for transforming his students into collaborators. Perhaps he understood that his reputation might depend to a large extent on their literary skill, and on what they had to say concerning his work.

Like Gurdjieff, his students were not interested in "art for art's sake," but rather in art as a means to communicate more profound aims. "Self-expression is not enough; experiment is not enough; the recording of special moments or cases is not enough," wrote Jane Heap in her 1929 editorial for the final issue of the *Little Review* (Anderson, *Little* 353).[23] Claiming that the self-expressive, experimental works published by the magazine had "lost connection with their origin….the legitimate and permanent material of art" Heap concludes, "The world-mind has to be changed, no doubt; but it's too big a job for art" (Anderson, *Little* 353). Toomer asked, "If art

[23] When Heap finally let the *Little Review* die, it may have been at Gurdjieff's instigation. Baggett says she did so "in order to pursue her spiritual studies" (*Dear* 6).

does not promote human development in those who produce it and in those who receive it, of what use art?" (Byrd 86).

Due to their emphasis on self-reflection and self-responsibility, Gurdjieff's teachings lent themselves to the writing process. Though many writers were put off by his outlandish teaching methods, the ones who worked with the teacher seemed at least in some way to enjoy them. Gurdjieff approached writers on their own terms. He wrote, and took it upon himself to assess the state of modern literature. Small wonder, then, that he polarized the literary community on both sides of the Atlantic. More writers reviled than embraced him, but few remained neutral.

The Rope Group as Site of Literary Production

Challenges attend the task of examining Gurdjieff's impact on the work of his literary pupils. How can one tell whether similarities among their works are the result of association with Gurdjieff, or occur simply because the writers who were drawn to his teachings shared certain character traits and interests independent of the master? Another difficulty is the existence of many subgroups, each with its own characteristics. The life of the central community at Fontainebleau was relatively short. Spinoff groups in Paris, New York and London were all very different from one another, and so could be expected to produce different literary results.[24] By restricting an investigation to a specific sub-site like the Rope group, one can avoid the problem of comparing sites with competing characteristics; unfortunately, such restrictions also tend to limit meaning. For example, most of the Rope's members wrote little or nothing before meeting Gurdjieff, making it impossible to draw any conclusions about how their work might have changed as a result of the encounter.

[24]Some of the writer-students in these sub-groups had only very limited contact with Gurdjieff. Gorham Munson and Waldo Frank for example, rarely saw the teacher himself, despite their association with Orage's New York group. In fact, according to Moore, Gurdjieff seemed "particularly keen to alienate Waldo Frank" (221).

Still, two preliminary observations about Gurdjieff's effect on his literary disciples seem significant. First, many became more productive after meeting him. This is certainly true of both of his well-known male pupils, Jean Toomer and Rene Daumal.[25] "It is not a well-known fact, but during the ten years that Toomer was most active in the Gurdjieff work, he wrote more novels, plays, poems, sketches, and essays than at any other period in his life. This was an enormously productive period for Toomer," writes Rudolph Byrd in a 1990 study, *Jean Toomer's Years with Gurdjieff* (perhaps the only thorough and even-handed investigation of the impact of Gurdjieff on an author's literary output) (86). Toomer completed the first draft of his novel *Transatlantic* during a single seventeen-day stint at the Prieure (Byrd 108). It is possible that Gurdjieff's theories kept Daumal from abandoning writing altogether. Roger Shattuck notes that in 1930, the French writer "was prepared to throw over everything he had worked to accomplish, just as Rimbaud had abandoned literature at a corresponding age" (Daumal 18).[26] It was at this juncture that Alexandre de Salzmann, one of Gurdjieff's most "arresting" and devoted pupils, intervened in his life. Instead of abandoning his work, Daumal went on to produce a series of essays on Nerval, Spinoza, Dalcroze, Hegel, Plato, Hindu philosophy, and other related subjects. For a season he was in charge of a department of the *Nouvelle Revue Francaise*; he translated *Hemingway's Death in the Afternoon;* and in 1935 he won the Jacques Doucet prize for his first volume of poems, *Le Contre-Ciel.* Three years later his philosophical satire, *La Grande Beuverie,* was published. He spent the last four years of his life hard at work on *Mount Analogue*, despite the fact that he had been diagnosed with tuberculosis, and despite the fact that his marriage into a Jewish family just before the fall of France to the Germans had doomed him to a life of uncertain resources and perpetual relocation (Daumal 19-20).

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[25]Daumal was one of Gurdjieff's first French pupils. It was only in the second part of the 1930s that Gurdjieff's ideas finally began to find acceptance with the Parisian intelligentsia (Webb 433).

[26] Up to this point, Daumal's primary literary accomplishment consisted of helping to found *Le Grand Jeu*, a journal that boasted of "a resolve to stop at nothing in its investigations of human consciousness" (Daumal 17).

Association with the teacher seems to have had a similarly invigorating effect on writers of the Rope group. *Little Review* founder Margaret Anderson didn't begin to write seriously until the summer of 1924, after she arrived at Fontainebleau. "One of Gurdjieff's exercises called for isolation for at least an hour of quietness, not permitting the mind to wander, but concentrating on 'the aim of life' . . . Out of this exercise came the idea of writing her own life," says Hills in her introduction to *Forbidden Fires* (11). *My Thirty Years' War* was the result of that early exercise. It was only the first of what would prove to be three volumes of an engaging and energetic autobiography. In addition to these works and the novel, Anderson also wrote an account of the impact of Gurdjieff's teaching on her own life, *The Unknowable Gurdjieff.*

Between 1928 and 1930, as Anderson worked on her autobiography, Anderson's lover Leblanc wrote *Souvenirs*, a candid, moving memoir of her years with playwright Maurice Maeterlinck. She was primarily a singer and actress, but in the heady atmosphere surrounding Gurdjieff, she recalled the playwright's earlier encouragement of her literary ability, and decided to put it to use (Leblanc 131). Later, as she was dying of breast cancer, she wrote a second book about her response Gurdjieff's teachings, the poetic *La Machine à Courage.* (Published in France, the second volume of her memoirs has never been translated into English.)

Rope member Kathryn Hulme credits Gurdjieff with improving not just her productivity, but also the quality of her writing. Following instructions for an exercise explained by Heap, Hulme began trying to picture herself in the day's events as the central figure on a roll of film (Hulme, *Undiscovered* 48). This led her to visualize childhood events in the same way, and to write down what she remembered (50). When Solano, who lived in an apartment upstairs, chanced across a page of these memories, she told Hulme, "*This*…is what you're to do. Right now. Drop everything else" (53). The resulting manuscript, *We Lived As Children*, was eventually published by Knopf, to Hulme's great amazement and joy. "…If an unknown man named Gurdjieff had not told someone, who told someone else who finally told me, how to unroll the reels and look at the shadow of forgotten selves buried in the unconscious memory, there

would never have been that start," she writes (54). Hulme went on to produce a number of highly readable, carefully crafted books, including three travel narratives, *Arab Interlude, Desert Night, and The Wild Place* (the latter won the *Atlantic* Nonfiction Prize Award in 1953), the novels *The Nun's Story* and *Annie's Captain*, and *Undiscovered Country*, the story of her encounter with Gurdjieff.

Even Dorothy Caruso, who met Gurdjieff only briefly after his health had begun to fail, used Gurdjieff's techniques as inspiration to write. Anderson encouraged her to record her memories of marriage to Enrico Caruso. When Caruso protested that she didn't know how to begin, Anderson pointed at a balcony above where they stood and told her, "Suppose there was a screen stretched across that balcony. Suppose you were looking at a motion-picture of your life with Enrico. Begin anywhere and tell what you see" (*Dorothy* 156). Caruso finished the first draft of the book in six weeks, "as if propelled by powers beyond [her] own." Soon after its completion, the simply-told love story was published by Simon and Schuster. This success inspired her, like Leblanc, to complete a second memoir, which was also published.

The two Rope members who seemed less encouraged by their association with the teacher to write books or commit their memories of him to paper were Solita Solano and Jane Heap, though both women came to play key roles in Gurdjieff's organization. As mentioned above, Heap was sent to London in the mid-1930s to found her own group. Always more renowned for her speaking ability than for words she committed to paper, [27] Heap remained in London as an active promoter of Gurdjieff's ideas. She also wrote letters in her role as spiritual leader, brusque missives that could have a strong effect on their recipients.[28] Solano had published three novels before beginning to work with the teacher: *The Uncertain Feast* (1924),

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[27] Anderson said of her, "There is no one in the modern world whose conversation I haven't sampled, I believe, except Picasso's. So I can't say it isn't better than Jane Heap's. But I doubt it in spite of his reputation. I felt in 1916 and I feel today that Jane Heap is the world's best talker (Anderson, *Thirty* 103).

[28] Her correspondence with Leblanc before Leblanc's death is an example. Heap wrote, "If we could only understand that it is the same Great Self in all of us; that we are only like beads strung on that Great Self…" Leblanc replied, "Wonderful Jane, you are so admirable, so courageous—you are alone in the strong life—alone in the large mind—alone in the unique and real sky…" (Anderson, *Fiery* 224).

The Happy Failure (1925), and *This Way Up* (1927).[29] All three were psychological studies dealing with the misery and unpredictability of romantic love. They were not well reviewed, and it may be that Solano, also a successful freelancer to magazines, had simply grown tired of writing (or of the cool reception to her fiction) by the time she turned to Gurdjieff. The collection of poems she did publish after the Rope group convened, the privately published 1934 *Statue in a Field*, reveals a greater degree of maturity than the novels, as well as a gift for using simple language to produce unusual effects. In 1937 Solano became Gurdjieff's secretary. Historians credit her with preserving vital information about his teaching methods. Baker, who was drawing on this "treasure trove of information" for his book (Baker, par. 12), made some of Solano's notes available on the Gurdjieff website before his death; among them are wonderful tidbits like the names of the group members' "inner animals"—Solano's was a canary, Hulme's was a crocodile, and Anderson's was a Tibetan yak (par. 17).

Given all the activity described above, it seems clear that in terms of productivity, the Rope group benefited no less than Daumal and Toomer from the Gurdjieff-endorsed practice of visualizing memories, then committing them to paper. A second way that writers appear to have been affected by association with Gurdjieff involves the form their work took, which mirrored the teacher's choices. Daumal and Toomer favored self-consciously instructive allegory, along the lines of *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson.* Daumal's unfinished fable *Mount Analogue* describes a sea voyage to a continent that contains the world's tallest mountain, which the narrator and his companions are intent on climbing. (The mountain remains mysteriously invisible to most of humanity.) Toomer's *Transatlantic* also recounts a sea-voyage. Both it and *The Gallonwerps* are fables that serve as vehicles for Gurdjieff's theories. Instead of allegories, Rope writers produced quest narratives and encomiums, forms also favored by Gurdjieff. Like *Meetings with Remarkable Men*, their stories focus on people who "served as vivifying factors" in

[29] At the time, Solano could have been seen as one of Gurdjieff's most successful pupils. As Moore points out, by 1937, "she had lived to the hilt as an actress, reporter and dramatic critic; she had published novels…and had enjoyed a catholicity of experiences" (267).

their lives. While Anderson, Hulme, Leblanc and Caruso all wrote book-length quest narratives centered around Gurdjieff's galvanizing presence, works by Rope members also celebrate people other than Gurdjieff. The first volume of Anderson's autobiography can be read in part as a tribute to the enlivening influence of Heap; the second praises Leblanc's spiritual wisdom, and the third makes frequent reference to Solano's lively intelligence. Anderson's novel *Forbidden Fruit* fictionalizes her relationship with still another commanding woman, Louise Davidson (Anderson, *Forbidden* 5). Leblanc's memoir of Maeterlinck downplays their breakup and dwells on the playwright's strengths. Caruso eulogized her husband, and Hulme's *Nun's Tale* is based on the fictionalized adventures of her life-partner Malou Habets, whom she greatly admired.

While the Rope writers often allowed their texts to serve as vehicles for Gurdjieff's theories, they did so in a way that is at once more direct and less heavy-handed than Gurdjieff's male pupils, avoiding both the self-valorization and didacticism that flawed Toomer's post-*Cane* novels, and the vagueness that allows a critic like Roger Shattuck to imply legitimately that Daumal never so much as came into contact with Gurdjieff. Shattuck's introduction to *Mount Analogue* in his own translation of the work contains no direct reference to the teacher, though it was written after Daumal became his student. Moore claims that this unfinished novel is "the first French testament to Gurdjieff's teaching" (273),[30] but Shattuck underplays the Gurdjieff connection, stressing instead Daumal's own lively intelligence, which he describes as "unquenchable, fearless, full of human sympathy, devoted to seeking and teaching truth" (Daumal 20). In a nine-page biographical sketch, Shattuck mentions Gurdjieff once, conceding that at a low point in his life, Daumal "regained his confidence and his sense of direction as a result of meeting a man [Gurdjieff's disciple Alexandre de Salzmann] who appeared to embody the goals which Daumal felt slipping from him" (18). However, Shattuck continues, "The

[30] It seems true that Gurdjieff's principles are in evidence throughout Daumal's book; for example the idea that "man achieves inner spiritual progress by his own efforts" (Daumal 27), and the notion that people tend to vibrate in a way that resonates with the influences around them—in Daumal's book, the phenomenon is termed "the cameleon law" (61).

meeting did not so much change Daumal's ideas as reconfirm all the thinking he had done in the previous five years and then begun to doubt" (18).

In the critical section of his essay, rather than mentioning Gurdjieff, Shattuck dwells on *Mount Analogue's* links to eastern philosophy (21), and its anticipation of the attempts of thinkers like Sartre "to trace the perpetual flight of consciousness" (25).[31] His decision to avoid mention of Gurdjieff seems indicative of a general feeling among critics that such a connection somehow serves to undermine the credibility of a literary work.

It would be impossible to obscure Toomer's ties to the teacher. Devoting 190 pages to the subject of their relationship, Byrd argues that almost all of Toomer's work can only be understood as expressive of a commitment to a particular "ideal of Man" inspired by Gurdjieff. He draws on excerpts from Toomer's novels *Caromb*, *The Gallonwerps* and *Transatlantic* to support the claim that Toomer's obsession with Gurdjieff's theories "weakened and then wasted his great talent" (Byrd 99). A sample passage from *The Gallonwerps* (Byrd 99-100) indeed rivals the worst of D.H. Lawrence for sheer didacticism. All written by Toomer after his decisive encounter with Gurdjieff, the novels remain unpublished to this day, though Toomer literally begged the publisher Harrison Smith to accept his work.[32] If we trust Byrd's reading, these were books with a thesis rather than a vision (98). And the novels have other features that open them to criticism. After meeting Gurdjieff, the issue of race virtually disappears from Toomer's work, despite the fact that his own partially black ancestry meant that it remained a sensitive issue in his life and potentially rich literary subject (Byrd 98).[33] The three unpublished novels also invite censure on feminist grounds. After detailing the ways in which they employ the sexist trope of

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[31] It is possible that rather than anticipating Sartre, Daumal was aware of Kojeve's lectures on Hegel. His work does embody some of the same ideas, particularly in its stress on the significance of "the revelatory act of negation" (Daumal 24).

[32] In a letter to Smith he wrote, "The publication of this book means everything to me" (Byrd 108).

[33] Byrd suggests that Toomer's silence was less due to the fact that he wanted to distance himself from the African-American part of his heritage than that he had come to believe that "the problems of man were not racial but spiritual and psychological" (98). Present-day Toomer critics like Alice Walker criticize Toomer's silence, however, being less inclined than he to believe that simply ignoring racial injustice can make it go away (Byrd 98).

"male savior come down to rescue and lead a helpless female," Byrd concludes that the blame rests with the influence of Gurdjieff's view that women are essentially emotional and men essentially intellectual. He writes, "Sensitive readers will be dismayed and disappointed…and will wonder whatever became of the perceptive, sensitive poet of *Cane"* (105)[34]

Despite their openness about Gurdjieff's influence on their lives, Leblanc, Anderson, Caruso and Hulme received a fair number of positive reviews. In *Strange Necessity*, Anderson records the French critical response to her friend's *Souvenirs*: "A book so tragic, so moving, constitutes an extremely rare event. Nothing so beautiful, so strong, has appeared in many years." Further: "A book Stendhal would have loved, for all that it contains of the rare and the true." And further still: "Genius overflows in this book—literary and psychological genius" (Anderson, *Strange* 109).[35] Hugh Ford reports that the contemporary response to *My Thirty Years' War* was favorable (272), and Anderson's work continued to interest critics throughout her long life. In a 1970 review (Anderson died in 1973), Alfred Kazin of the *New York Times Book Review* described her three-volume autobiography as a "highly charged, fascinatingly feminine monologue, rocking with the most intensely personal vibrations…" (1). While he denied that Anderson possessed genius, Kazin nonetheless compared her account of her love for Leblanc in *Fiery Fountains*, with its "furious idealism concentrated wholly on personal relationships," to the great "romantic tragedies in Fitzgerald and Hemingway" (29). *The Saturday Review* claimed that Caruso's *Dorothy Caruso: A Personal History*, published seven years after her book about her husband, was "an even better—a far better—book than *Enrico Caruso*." Reviewer Ann Wolfe acknowledges Dorothy Caruso's "discipleship" with Gurdjieff, but even so does not

[34] The study does refrain from dismissing all of Toomer's post-*Cane* efforts outright. Byrd asserts that a few of the Gurdjieff-inspired works possess genuine literary merit. He finds the plays *Kabnis*, *Balo*, and *The Sacred Factory* "deserving of serious study, production, and, in the last instance, revival" (150). He argues that the long poem "The Blue Meridian," which appeared in *The New Caravan* in 1936, comes close to matching the literary achievements of *Cane*, despite the fact that it went largely unnoticed at the time of its publication (153).

[35] As an added honor, the preface to the French edition of Leblanc's book was written by Cocteau (Anderson, *Unknowable* 136).

hesitate to credit the memoir with historical significance. "As a candle illuminates its sconce, so the story of [Caruso's] inner evolution throws light on the history of her era" (55-56). Hulme's *The Nun's Story*, which transposed the Gurdjieffian values of self-observation and self-reliance onto a Catholic protagonist, was a best seller—popular enough to be made into an Audrey Hepburn movie (Baker, par. 7).

Leaving aside Hulme's travel books and Solano's poetry, what remains of the Rope group's output is a cluster of narratives not only marked by similar forms but by similar styles as well. In *Strange Necessity*, Anderson describes the group's shared aesthetic, one that stressed the primacy of emotion over intellect, the particular over the general, and the personal over the public. The group's shared aesthetic, one expressed in stories that stressed the death or loss of a loved one, are undeniably moving. "To express the emotions of life is to live. To express the life of emotions is to make art," Anderson writes (19). Solano also privileged the emotions, praising Leblanc's *Souvenirs* as "a record of her unique valor and tragedy." She added, "It is special for people who react to a great, illumined nature of inner struggles, all of which are individual (personal) to her" (*Strange* 109).[36] Discounting intellectuals as "sentimental," Anderson lists the reasons why she began to view her more cerebral friends with distrust: "Their judgments (so wavering), the inexactitudes of their weights and measures, the irresponsibility and unreality of their opinions and their positions" (105).

Rope writers countered what Gurdjieff had taught them to see as the relentless mechanical activity of the mind with the use of imagery. Praising the work of her friends, Anderson says, "They seem not to think, but to *see;* and their thoughts are pictures" (116).

[36] Rope writers had no sympathy with an ateleological view of literature that asserts that one account is as good as another, and that all perspectives have equal validity. Exposed day after day to Gurdjieff's ideas of self-development and movement up a scale of consciousness, the women believed that only a rare person could make real art. This position often placed them at odds with the prevailing view. Anderson describes a comical encounter with a U.S. government official, when she tried to obtain a favor for a French singer who was having trouble with bureaucratic red tape. She was told, "I can grant no special favors . . . everyone is entitled to equal treatment." Anderson countered, "Who is everyone? There is no everyone. Is everyone created a Sarah Bernhardt?" The official stammered, "No, but. . ." "Will you ever find another Sarah Barnhardt?" "I don't know whether I will or not." "Well, you won't," Anderson said. "So you will have no problem" (*Strange* 114).

Leblanc: "It depends on a vision. I *see* a grief like an image traced by my nerves. It becomes more clear, more precise, it takes on a form, and then falls from me. The story of a fruit tree." Heap: "With my hands I take my brain and slowly uncrumple it . . . surprising how big it is smoothed out like melted silk. I will crumple it up again firmly and put it back after I have left it this way for a long time shining and clean" (117). In addition to vivid imagery, another shared stylistic trait is that of pastiche. (At least with regard to these two techniques, their work is consistent with much modernist poetry and art.) Rope narratives often incorporate old journal entries, aphorisms or significant scraps of remembered dialog. Caruso's memoir of Enrico Caruso includes cartoon sketches by the famous singer. The same inclusive tendency that prompted Rope writers to choose others as the subject of so many of their books also seems to have inspired them to open their texts to admit the words and work of others.

Though she frequently asserted that she was not a writer, Anderson was in fact the most accomplished and inventive of the group. Her work, which became increasingly experimental as she aged, remained grounded in lived experience. In her last book she wrote, "I must write no single sentence that doesn't present an experienced fact—real or that *really* took place in my imagination" (*Strange* 174). The stress in Rope narratives on affectivity, particularity, and everyday experience may be more current now than when the books were written. They invite the exploration of a variety of open questions, among them the relationship of the memoir to issues of self-representation, self-creation and performance, the role of writing in the constitution of the everyday, and the function of narrative in relation to affect. As such, they constitute a rich resource that is so far almost entirely unmined.

Conclusion: The Rope Group as Literary Community

Surprisingly, despite his chauvinism, Gurdjieff created an environment that fostered bonds among women. The teacher encouraged communal feeling among the Rope members to a much greater extent than with his male pupils. The November before her death, Katherine

Mansfield wrote in a letter to her husband John Middleton Murry: "I remember I used to think—if there was one thing I could not bear in a community, it would be the women. But now the women are nearer and far dearer than the men" (Webb 248). Hulme recalls being told to regard the Rope group's "inner-world journey" as a sort of team effort. "Each must think of the others on the rope, all for one and one for all," she says. They were instructed to help each other "'as hand washes hand,' each contributing to the company according to her lights, according to her means" (*Undiscovered* 92).

The group's literary members took seriously the direction to help each other, not just in terms of their spiritual quest, but also with respect to their other shared vocation, that of writing. Heap prescribed writing exercises. Leblanc and Caruso wrote their books as a direct result of Anderson's prodding. Solano played a key role in producing texts by both Anderson and Hulme. The published version of Anderson's *My Thirty Years' War*—like the two autobiographical volumes that would follow—was the product of Solano's "expert editing" (Anderson, *Forbidden* 12). Baker notes that Solano probably saved Hulme's *Undiscovered Country*, which might otherwise have collapsed under the weight of its own "purple prose" (Baker, par. 22).[37] She was not just a skilled editor, but also a supportive one. To help Anderson in the last stages of writing *My Thirty Years' War*, she actually reserved a room in a quiet hotel for her, and had tulips sent up every three days (Ford 269-70).

The more successful women in the group did their best to see that the newcomers to the literary scene were published.[38] Anderson in particular grew frustrated by her friends' difficulty in placing their work. "I often wonder why some publisher doesn't announce to the world, 'I shall publish only books which are ART. Help!!' This is what the *Little Review* did, and a

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[37] One example of Hulme's unedited writing is this description of how the group felt after Gurdjieff sent Jane Heap off to London: "Not like light-bearing Lucifers but like wingless orphans with inner lights too newly-kindled, too frail still to survive the windy draft" (Baker, par. 23). After ruthlessly excising such phrases, Solano would pencil in comments like "Katie, you are my despair!" (Baker, par. 23).

[38] The collaborative community sometimes extended further than those directly associated with Gurdjieff; for example, Solano's longtime companion, Janet Flanner, translated Leblanc's *Souvenirs* from French to English.

valiant new publisher would be as surprised as we were at the response—aesthetic and financial—he would receive" (*Strange* 111). When publishers failed to materialize quickly (and sometimes even when they did) Anderson spliced her friends' words into her own projects. *Unknown Gurdjieff* is a veritable patchwork of her own writing, sections from books by Leblanc and Caruso, and letters from Heap. *The Strange Necessity* includes poems by Solano and Leblanc, as well as a number of other writing samples by her friends. The result is very different from the self-conscious use of pastiche for its formal qualities. Instead, the effect is more like that of a dinner conversation where everyone is energized and wants to talk at once.

Within the Rope group, letters played an important role. The women corresponded all their lives, using written contact as a means of maintaining connection and providing emotional (and sometimes more practical) means of support. An indication of how their correspondence functioned can be seen in a 1941 letter to Heap from her longtime correspondent Florence Reynolds, who, like Caruso, became an honorary member of the Rope circle:

> I wrote you that Solita sent me the manuscript [Anderson's *Fiery Fountains*].…Some of it is so exquisite with the fragile quality Marty has herself had these last years…[But] to take out all the G stuff—my dear—do you realize how little would be left, I mean how few actual pages? His name is mentioned fifty-five times by actual count and whole sections are nothing but a discussion of ideas and their impact upon her. You suggest in your letter that 'Solita select the stories or pieces that might get published.' She didn't comment on this suggestion in her letter, so I'll write her and see if she is amenable…." (Heap 141)

This passage suggests how all the group's members, even members of the extended community like Reynolds, assumed ownership of the texts the group produced. They worked together to convey those texts safely through the publishing process and into the hands of discriminating readers. The reference to Anderson's fragility also hints at what is present more overtly in other letters: the group members' concern for one another's physical safety and well-being. The letter is Reynolds' text about Anderson's text about Gurdjieff's text, and is written in response to a text by Heap. The web of language constituted an important part of their mutual safety net.

As time went on and their friendships deepened, Rope members appear to have become less interested in catering to a wide audience. At a significant point in Anderson's *Forbidden Fruit,* the novel's heroine accuses her love interest of worrying too much about the public. "The public is an 'unconscious monster' . . . Why consider it?" she asks (81), with a disdain that echoes sentiments expressed by fellow American expatriates Pound and Stein. Nevertheless, much of the group's writing did find its way to appreciative readers. The acceptance members enjoyed during their lifetimes is probably linked in no small measure to the personal freedom and artistic inspiration that Paris offered. The liberal Parisian environment also afforded them the chance to work with Gurdjieff, whose unorthodox mentorship clearly seems to have contributed to their success. Formed at an intersection of interests—literary, sexual and spiritual—the Rope study group functioned as a fertile site for self-invention, self-revision and self-empowerment. It privileged the private and personal over the public and the impersonal, the collaboration over the individual 'work of genius.' Whether or not its meetings produced higher consciousness, they did engender a politically autonomous feminist literary community whose members gave birth to a sincere and searching body of work. In keeping with the values expressed by Gurdjieff's 'parable of the road apples', the Rope group seems to have remained relatively unaffected by the "noise, rattling, and nauseous smell" of the industry their work fueled, their attention focused instead on self-reflection, self-responsibility, and a desire to provide nourishment for fellow "sparrows."

Chronology

1866?	Gurdjieff born in Alexandropol in Russian Armenia to a Greek father and an Armenian mother.
1887-1907	Gurdjieff's "missing years," possibly the inspiration for the wanderings detailed in *Meetings with Remarkable Men.*
1911	Arriving in St. Petersburg, Gurdjieff takes his first pupils.
1914	Margaret Anderson founds the *Little Review*.
1916	Anderson meets Jane Heap. They become lovers and co-publishers, and in 1917 move to New York.
1918	Gurdjieff and a group of about 40 followers are displaced by political upheaval.
1922	Journalist Solita Solano settles in Paris with *New Yorker* correspondent Janet Flanner.
	Gurdjieff, now with a band of about 25, enters Paris. In August he founds the Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man near Fontainebleau.
1924	Anderson and Heap are among those impressed by Gurdjieff during his visit to New York. Anderson and her new lover Georgette Leblanc move to Paris and begin to frequent the Fontainebleau Institute. Heap follows soon after.
	Writer Kathryn Hulme, working at a New York department store, is unaware of Gurdjieff's visit.
1927	Heap and Anderson take Solano to visit the Institute. Solano is not impressed.
1929	The final issue of the *Little Review* appears.
1930	Hulme, traveling in Europe as a paid companion, meets Solano.
1932	Due to unpaid bills, the Institute's mortgagees foreclose. Gurdjieff spends much of the next few years in the U.S.
	A study group, led by Heap, begins to hold regular meetings. Hulme attends, and her interest in Gurdjieff's teachings prompts her to remain in Paris.
1935	Gurdjieff returns to Paris. Heap is sent to London to found a new study group.
1936	The Rope group is officially constituted. In addition to Anderson, Leblanc, Solano and Hulme, attendees include New Englander Louise Davidson and British follower Elizabeth Gordon.
1938	The group disbands under threat of war.

1941	Leblanc dies of breast cancer, nursed by Anderson. On her way back to the states, (where Solano has already returned) Anderson meets Dorothy Caruso.
1943	Hulme serves the war effort as a welder in a San Francisco shipyard. Beginning in 1945, she works as a supervisor in the international relief effort.
1948	Anderson travels to Paris with Caruso, who meets Gurdjieff for the first time. Solano, Hulme, Heap, and a number of other students return to spend time with the aging teacher.
1949	Gurdjieff dies in Paris.

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