Appendix A

The Movements and Music for Movements

Gurdjieff’s Movements are dances and exercises characterised by unusual and symbolic gestures of the body that are intended to highlight and challenge the body’s mechanical nature.¹ Gurdjieff taught that the three centres of the individual are closely bound to each other so that if one’s mechanical forms of moving are altered through Movements, changes in one’s mechanical forms of thinking and feeling will follow.² The Movements were fundamental to Gurdjieff’s first and third teaching phases (see Chapter 2), though between these phases the Movements were practiced and taught regularly by Gurdjieff’s pupils. From 1925 onwards the Movements were practiced by Orage’s groups in New York, and from 1936 to 1938 they were practiced by Ouspensky’s groups in England, and by de Salzmann’s groups in Paris.³

Gurdjieff first taught Movements between 1917 and August 1924. De Hartmann refers to the earliest Movements as ‘Sacred Gymnastics’ and ‘Sacred Dances’ as if they were precursors to the ‘Movements,’ a term that he employs in relation to Gurdjieff’s dances from 1922.⁴ Nowadays all of these are collectively referred to as Movements, as has been the convention throughout this book. The Movements of this first period include the six “Obligatories,” which are preparatory Movements traditionally practiced at the beginning of Movements classes,⁵ rhythmic ‘dervish’ dances, graceful ‘women’s’ dances, several elaborate ritual Movements like “The Great Prayer” and “Initiation of the Priestess,” as well as ‘occupational,’ which emulate traditional occupations of peasant communities like shoemaking, carpet weaving, and spinning wool. Around twenty-seven of these Movements are remembered and practiced today.⁶

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⁴ Thomas de Hartmann and Olga de Hartmann, Our Life with Mr. Gurdjieff, eds Thomas C. Daly and Thomas A.G. Daly (London: Arkana Penguin Books, 1992 [1964]), 51, 122, 168.
⁵ Dushka Howarth and Jessmin Howarth, It’s Up To Ourselves: A Mother, A Daughter, and Gurdjieff (New York: Gurdjieff Heritage Society, 2009), 53.
In an advertisement for Gurdjieff’s Paris Movements demonstrations of 1923 he was specific about the apparent Eastern sources of his early Movements. According to the advertisement some came from 'The Seers,' an ancient school located in large artificial caves in Kafiristan, while his ritual Movements came from three monasteries: the Kisiljan Monastery of the Matchna Monks in Keril Oasis or Chinese Turkestan, the Monastery of the Takmur-Bogaeddin Order in Kafiristan, and the monastery, ‘In the name of the Most Holy Lord Alia Son of Abu-Fhalibes’ in Mazari-Sherif, Afghanistan. None of these monasteries have been located, though James Webb argues that the etymology of some of their names is consistent with the languages of these areas. Webb deduces that Gurdjieff had either been to these regions as he had claimed, or was closely associated with people who had travelled there. However, pupil J.G. Bennett stated that some of the Islamic orders specified in the advertisement traditionally eschewed dance in religious practice and, according to James Moore, no contemporary Central Asian geographer or anthropologist has reported any dances structured like Gurdjieff’s Movements.

The early Movements contrast with the more abstract and geometrical Movements of Gurdjieff’s third teaching phase, which are between one and two hundred in number. They were choreographed between 1940 and 11 October 1949, eighteen days before Gurdjieff’s death. The thirty-nine Movements of this later phase that Gurdjieff regarded as complete became known as the 39 Series, though on his last trips to America he added seven new Movements to this list. These forty-six Movements are known playfully as the ‘American 39,’ though in Europe only the original thirty-nine Movements are recognised as a part of the set. Foundation groups today almost only teach the Movements of this later phase.

Gurdjieff added singing exercises to some of the later Movements. Dushka Howarth recalled a time when Gurdjieff required pupils to add a vocal accompaniment to one Movement, repeating “Alleluia” on each note of an ascending and descending scale.

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7 Blom, Oriental Suite, 105.