

GURDJIEFF

A FATHER OF PSYCHOSYNTHESIS

In the beginning was...

Carl Gustav Jung, in a letter of April 1909 to Freud had to say, disagreed with the Viennese master, that “if there is a psychoanalysis, there must also be a psychosynthesis,” oriented to the future-of psyche and not simply to its past. This indicates that the expression ‘psychosynthesis’, although established as the work of Roberto Assagioli cannot be limited to the movement of the same name opened by the florentine psychiatrist, as well as the term ‘psychoanalysis’ - which now has countless approaches to its internal - certainly cannot be reduced to the classical method developed by Freud.

Assagioli, for the preparation of his thesis in medicine, moved at the end of 1907 (he was just 19 years old!) to the psychiatric university clinic in Zurich, the Burgholzli, where he met Jung. It is entirely plausible that the assumption of the term ‘psychosynthesis’ by Assagioli is to be due to the friendly attendance in subsequent years with the swiss psychiatrist - all the more so in that period Assagioli used the term “psychagogy” to refer to his new orientation.

Some years later, in 1926, Assagioli published a pamphlet in English, *Psychosynthesis - A new method of Healing*, and, finally, in 1933, the school he founded in Rome took the official name of the Institute of. Many years later, in 1966, in a lecture at the Institute, the florentine psychiatrist affirmed that “Jung is among all psychotherapists one that is most similar and close to the positions and the practice of Psychosynthesis.”

Psychosynthesis, the first stage of inner growth

The ‘psychosynthesis’, in the end, is not so much a particular psychological school, as a determined stage of the work of inner growth. Jung was the first to observe that, after an analytical stage, when treatment come to a standstill, the “care of the soul” has to open to a new psychosynthetic phase. This idea has the whole brilliant

work of swiss psychiatrist, who once remarked during a lecture, “what I have to say begins where the care ends and development begins.”

Here, the ‘psychosynthesis’, by itself, does not deal with treatment in the strict sense, but with everything has to do with the inner evolution of human beings, that is the full development of their potential, the realization of their Essence. It is evident, therefore, as the ‘psychosynthesis’ represents a very large container in which apparently very diverse schools can be brought within.

Now, if the relationship between Jung and Assagioli, in order for the psychosynthetic theory and practice, is out of the question, not many know that in England in the early Twenties, the “world of psychosynthesis” - as it is reported by James Moore - gathered around a character of first importance, that is to say the ineffable armenian teacher George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff. Especially noteworthy is the figure of the psychiatrist Maurice Nicoll, who had previously been a close friend, collaborator and likely successor to Jung, but later moved to the Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man, founded by Gurdjieff near Paris, becoming a student for a full year (1922-1923). It may be also interesting to note that Jung himself - according to H. J. Sharp - seems to have entertained at least one occasion a private conversation with Gurdjieff, although there are no literary documents that bear witness to the relationship between the two.

These historical introductory notes, so to speak, are useful to investigate the inner meaning of the term ‘psychosynthesis’. To this end, we first observe that the fundamental ideas of Gurdjieff respect to the ‘Work’ find themselves in a surprising way within the Transpersonal Psychology, in Assagioli’s processing of Psychosynthesis. Let’s better this point.

Gurdjieff, the union between psychosynthesis and spirituality

Gurdjieff never speaks, in reference to his “Work”, of spirituality. He just says that the ordinary man is deeply asleep and needs of a range of alarm clocks, more and more powerful, to be able to tap into some degree of self-awareness. To do this, human being needs to work within a group, under the direction of someone who, ba-

sed on his/her experience of previous work on him/herself, is able to organize the activity. "The work usually begins with a small group. This group is generally in a relationship with a whole series of similar groups of different levels which are, taken together, what can be called a preparatory school".

A 'preparatory school' is what constitutes the necessary commitment to be able to access the real spiritual work. Even a preparatory school is not allowed to everybody, but only to those who prove to be sufficiently 'adult'. Gurdjieff, in a lecture to the students of the Priory in 1923, reminded them that "here we only do things that appeal to adults," meaning that the school was reserved only for those who are able to maintain the gap - of themselves and their own neuroses - necessary to maintain the proper motivation and the commitment to carry on the Work. One who manifests infantile attitudes is more suited to therapy, at least until he/she becomes sufficiently centered.

To indicate this preparatory phase of the spiritual work itself, Assagioli speaks of "self-formative psychosynthesis", which - unlike the therapy - is aimed at those who, being sufficiently free from mental suffering, "want to become masters of their own inner realm".

In full agreement with the Gurdjieff's Work, Assagioli's psychosynthesis is, in itself, "a dynamic and, one might say, dramatic concept of mental life, such as a fight between a multitude of rebel and conflicting forces and a unifying Center which tends to dominate, to compose them in harmony, to employ them in the manner most useful and creative. Psychosynthesis is then a set of methods of psychological action aimed at encouraging and promoting that integration and harmony of the human personality".

This harmonization will make possible a further development on the spiritual plane, the goal of transpersonal psychosynthesis, what Gurdjieff simply defines the Way.

Language changes, as well as the emphasis of certain instruments rather than others, but the background model remains the same. This 'psychosynthetic model', following the psychoanalytic work and preparatory to

the spiritual one, can be summarized in short, dwelling on some substantial Gurdjieffian aspects of Assagioli's Psychosynthesis. Moreover, it is undisputed that the Florentine psychiatrist knew the Gurdjieff's Fourth Way, through the writings of his most brilliant displayer, Ouspensky.

The basic observation concerns the fundamental diversity of human beings. Gurdjieff is clear about it: "Man is a multiple being. Usually, talking about ourselves, we say "I". We say: I do this, I think that, I want to do that one. But it is a mistake. That "I" does not exist, or rather, in each of us there are hundreds, thousands of small "I". Assagioli, similarly, speaks of *sub-personalities* - a fundamental concept of Psychosynthesis - saying that, to wake us up, we must first make an act of courage and face the reality, it is necessary to recognize the psychological multiplicity that is in us, the various sub-personalities that coexist in us.

From the first observation is derived automatically the second one: the human being is a helpless being, unable to 'do' anything, until he/she develops a real will. Gurdjieff has not a special optimism of the ordinary man: "We are machines. We are totally conditioned by external circumstances. All our actions follow the line of least resistance to the pressure of external circumstances". Also for Assagioli is not possible to speak of will, if before the individual has not reached a sufficiently stable center. "The Ego and the will are intimately linked," he says, which means that in the absence of a central I (the Gurdjieff's "permanent center of gravity"), make their way only the countless impulses and desires of different and contrasting small I, or sub-personalities.

Know yourself and you will conquer the world

The first step to getting a real self-possession and inner freedom is to follow the motto of the Socratic "know thyself." "That which is closest to us is the man and of all men, you're the one closest to yourself. Begin to study yourself, remember the saying "Know thyself", "Gurdjieff reminds us, in the sense of careful and systematic observation of every aspect of our characterial influences. It is well known that the motto of Assagioli's Psychosynthesis is "know possess transform yourself"

and that, at its core, “the first step, therefore, is noticing everything that exists and stirs in us”. Only through self-knowledge we can aspire to the acquisition of an inner domain and, finally, to the transformation of our personality in accordance with the deepest Self.

The work on oneself provides a deep understanding of physical, emotional and mental elements of personality, in order to develop the deficiencies and subsequently integrate them around to a higher center. Gurdjieff describes these three elements (or “centers”) through the analogy of the coach: “Maybe you recollect that I had likened the man to a coach with a master, a coachman, a horse and a car. The master is out of the question because he is not there”. The car is the physical center, the horse the emotional center and the coachman the mental one. The master, who represents the true subjectivity, is not taken into account by Gurdjieff, as the ordinary man -as we have already had occasion to note- does not have a real I. Similarly, Assagioli divides human personality into its physical, emotional and mental components, to which is added the spiritual component, the deepest Self, which will assert itself only after having reached the development and harmonization of the first three aspects.

The essential nourishment is to one’s own self

Knowledge of the psychism laws must direct the whole of existence, since the “work” on ourselves cannot be limited to the exercise of certain activities and the practice of certain techniques. Gurdjieff calls us to put constant attention to everything that contributes to our ‘level of being’: “ The human body receives three types of food: the food we eat; the air we breathe; our impressions.

It is not difficult to understand that the air is a kind of food for the body, but it can seem difficult at first glance, to understand how impressions can be a nourishment. However, we must remember that for every external impression, whether it takes the shape of sound, vision, smell, we receive from the outside a certain amount [and quality, A/N] of energy, a number of vibrations. This energy that enters the body from the outside is a nourishment”.

Also Assagioli emphasizes the importance of cultivating “a general attitude towards everyday life” through the

skillful use of “psychological laws”. A real psych -ecological consciousness is aware of the energies that inevitably we absorb through people or environments that we frequent, is aware of images, music, and the information we receive, of the readings we do, of the influence of our bodily attitudes on our psyche, and so on.

Finally, any serious work that respects the preceding paragraphs, may with good reason be called ‘psychosynthesis’. Similarly, an intervention that is intended to be placed within the Assagiolian school and does not honor them, remains outside of the psychosynthetic spirit and is reduced to pure ‘imitation’, an empty shell.