

The guru and the poet: understanding René Daumal in the context of Gurdjieffian philosophy

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The first seeds of para-surrealism in literature were sown by the pataphysical plays of Alfred Jarry and the allegorical writings of mystic G.I. Gurdjieff. These two figures towered separately over the creative and intellectual milieu of early 1900s Paris and their influence on contemporary art across all genres cannot be overstated. Para-surrealism began to take shape in the avant-garde journal *Le Grand Jeu* cofounded by french poet René Daumal (1908–1944), an admirer of Jarry and acolyte of Gurdjieff. Since his death in 1944, Daumal has been recognised as one of the most original philosophical voices of French literature. His writing allied itself with surrealism in its overthrowing of traditional metaphysics, the ‘cadavers of thought’ to which he brought ‘storms of doubt, blasphemes, and kerosene for the temples’ (Daumal 1995: 35). Daumal’s aesthetic differed, however, from surrealism in its insistence on the irreducibility of objects and experience—the ‘absurd’ wakefulness of Jarry’s ‘Pataphysics or Gurdjieffian ‘impartiality’. Where surrealism offers art as a substitute for religion, the para-surrealism, or psychonautica, of *Le Grand Jeu* insisted on art as a doorway to non-dogmatic religious experience.

Daumal’s literary thought was shaped, firstly, by Jarry’s transcendence of metaphysics, his access to the real by way of the hyper-real and, secondly, by Gurdjieff’s definitions of what such a ‘real’ could actually be. These two impetuses cut Daumal free of the prevailing surrealist thought of his time and sent him spinning into totally unknown territory. Had only one of these influences reached Daumal, that is only Jarry or only Gurdjieff, it is unlikely Daumal would have expanded his aesthetic beyond *Le Grand Jeu* in such an original direction. Replete with pataphysical and Gurdjieffian allegories, Daumal’s writing simply cannot be understood without reference to these influences.

Daumal as poet, novelist, philosopher, translator, pataphysician and psychonaut, remains on the periphery of the literary canon except in France where his work remains highly influential today. Occupying a neomystical and entheogenic position within the early 20th century avant-garde, Daumal’s death from tuberculosis at age 36 was precipitated by extreme drug experimentation. A childhood obsession with death and several early suicide attempts led a teenaged Daumal to seek mystical experience

by inhaling the carbon tetrachloride used in his beetle collection. The fledgling poet found himself ‘thrown brutally into another world’, a synesthetic and geometric dimension where his mind ‘traveled too fast to drag words along with it’ (Daumal 1991: 164). This experiment, repeated often and into adulthood, became Daumal’s ‘absurd evidence,’ proof that further worlds extend beyond the normal sensory experience (see: ‘Asphyxia and Absurd Evidence’ in *The powers of the word*, Daumal 1991: 70).

A later Daumal would write, somewhat prophetically, that if ‘in return for the acceptance of serious illness or disabilities, or of a very perceptible abbreviation of the physical life-span, we could acquire one certainty, it would not be too high a price to pay’ (Daumal 1991: 169). It would not be too bold a claim to say that Daumal’s entire literary and philosophical output belongs to psychonautica, in its broadest use.

While carbon tetrachloride certainly shaped Daumal’s earliest creative endeavors, his published and mature works were coloured by transcendental and mystical thought— influenced initially by the writings of pataphysician Alfred Jarry and later, more significantly, by the Armenian mystic G.I. Gurdjieff. It is perhaps worth noting that neither Jarry or Gurdjieff were strangers to the idea of hallucinogens as a means of transcending the normal limits of consciousness.

Daumal was an acolyte and devotee of Gurdjieff for most of his adult life. His two mature novels: *A night of serious drinking* (1938), and *Mount analogue: a novel of symbolically authentic non-Euclidean adventures in mountain climbing* (1952) are firmly rooted in Gurdjieffian philosophy. By 1930, Daumal’s entheogenic search had resulted in little more than rapidly deteriorating health. A sense of spiritual homelessness permeates all his writing from this time—for example, in ‘Nerval the Nyctalope’, where he speaks of death that sometimes ‘confounds the endless misery of my human tomb, sometimes troubles the sad, blind valley of my human skin, makes me doubt, and a veil of damp silk sips and floats tirelessly over my face, my eyes full of dust. And—at times—this terrible doubt ...’ (Daumal 1991: 50). It was soon after this that Daumal met Gurdjieff through the Ballet Russe set designer Alexander de Salzmann—an encounter so profound that he noted ‘*J’ai rencontré un être humain. Je ne l’aurais pas cru possible. Et pourtant j’ai dû abandonner de bien commodes désespoirs. C’est l’espérance qui est lourde à porter*’ (Daumal 1953: 130) ‘I have met

a human being. I would not have thought it possible. However, I have had to abandon some very convenient despairs. It is hope that is hard to bear’.

Daumal’s literary work is a record of an exploratory, and often desperate, mystical journey and much of his oeuvre cannot be fully understood without reference to basic pataphysical and Gurdjieffian thought. This paper aims to recontextualise Daumal’s writing in light of the philosophies that underpin it.

The influence of ’Pataphysics on Daumal’s early creative thought, although later overshadowed by Gurdjieffian philosophy, should not be understated. At 14 Daumal and his friends Roger Vailland, Robert Meyrat, and Roger Gilbert-Lecomte began a formal society called ‘The Simplists’. Their stated aim was to read poets like Baudelaire and Rimbaud, to study occultism and to perform experiments in parapsychology and magic, often assisted by opiates. By 1928 the Simplists had published the first issue of the short-lived *Le Grand Jeu* (The Great Game), a literary journal heavily influenced by Jarry’s ’Pataphysics. Alfred Jarry (1873–1907) was a French symbolist best known for his 1896 play *Ubu Roi*. During his life, Jarry’s reputation as a drunk eclipsed his reputation as a writer—he once painted his hands and face green and rode through Paris on a bicycle in honour of absinthe ‘the green goddess’ (Lanier 1995: 73). Jarry’s novel, *Exploits and Opinions of Dr. Faustroll, Pataphysician*, published posthumously in 1911, influenced everyone from Duchamp to Eco. The college of ’Pataphysics was established in Paris in 1948 and still exists there today.

Daumal was the first to bring ’Pataphysics to serious scholarly attention in a series of essays written between 1929 and 1941. This series included a landmark exposition on ’Pataphysics and his late essay, ‘The ’Pataphysics of Ghosts’. In *Dr. Faustroll* Jarry proposes several definitions of ’Pataphysics, including ‘the science of imaginary solutions’ and ‘the laws describing a universe supplementary to this one’ (Jarry 1996: 21). The seriousness of Jarry’s ’Pataphysics may have remained hidden, obscured by the writer’s absurd public image, were it not for Daumal’s essays. ’Pataphysics, for Daumal, proposes the concrete recognition of the void as a clear basis for consciousness. ‘The mind condemns itself’ he explains, ‘to the torture of contradictory realizations: my mind can conceive of boundlessness, but I know I am a finite individual. Laughter becomes the one means by which I can continue to live when I feel myself immersed in an absurd universe.’

It was from this 'Pataphysical terror, the absurdity that thinly veils existential dread, that Daumal emerged when he encountered Gurdjieff's ideas for the first time. In October 1930, Daumal was introduced to Alexandre de Salzmann, who was drinking calvados and drawing oriental pictures, in a Boulevard St Germain cafe by the painter Joseph Sima, a mutual friend. A close associate of Kandinsky and Rilke, de Salzmann, who had previously designed sets for the Ballet Russe, was working as an antique dealer and interior decorator. He was also a disciple of Gurdjieff in Paris.

Daumal became obsessed with Gurdjieff's ideas. He and his wife Vera moved into a communal house with Alexandre and Jeane de Salzmann in the Paris suburbs in order to experiment with Gurdjieff's method. During this time Daumal's health began to deteriorate rapidly. His teeth fell out and he became deaf in one ear. In 1938 he was invited to join the elite group of acolytes who met in Gurdjieff's tiny apartment on the Rue de Colonel Renards—he was also diagnosed with tuberculosis. For Daumal, the rescue would not take place. The very means by which he had hoped to deliver himself from a paralysing fear of death had appeared together with his terminal illness. In 1940, Germany invaded France. As Vera was Jewish, they were forced to flee Gestapo and the Vichy government. Tubercular arthritis in his left foot left Daumal unable to walk for the last six months of his life, like his hero Rimbaud. Malnourished and chain smoking, Daumal died in 1944 leaving an incomplete sentence in the manuscript of his magnum opus *Mount analogue*.

Previously an ardent mountain climber, the tuberculotic Daumal constructed his allegorical novel around the symbol of a mystical mountain, the unattainable mountain that he would never climb again. The novel explains how Professor of Mountaineering, Pierre Sogol (de Salzmann), convinced eight adventurers to board the ship *Impossible* and attempt to discover the invisible but 'absolutely real' Mount Analogue. Though hidden from ordinary sight, Prof. Sogol locates the mountain through non-Euclidean deductions (involving the curvature of space). Throughout the book Daumal refers to the *fraternité de la corde*, the brotherhood of the rope, which first appears in the French alpinist Gaston Rébuffat's 1954 climbing manual *Étoiles et tempêtes, Starlight and storm* (first published in English in 1956). Rébuffat, like Daumal, uses the term to signify the bond between climbers. 'Through this ascent, this snow and this storm,' he writes, 'we had come to recognize from the bottom of our inmost hearts a sense of fulfillment: of a life closely linked with the elements, a sense of comradeship, a taste of things which, once you have tasted them, can never

be replaced.’ (Rébuffat [1954] 1999:147). In the foreword to *Mount analogue*, Daumal explains ‘*Alpinism* is the art of climbing mountains by confronting the greatest dangers with the greatest prudence ... There is an art to finding your way in the lower regions by the memory of what you have seen when you were higher up. When you can no longer see, you can at least still know ...’ (Daumal 1971: 103)The novel breaks off mid-sentence: ‘Without them [wasps!], a great many plants that played an important role in stabilizing the shifting earth ...’ (1971: 99)

An existing outline of the unfinished chapters of *Mount analogue*, published with the main text, casts light on Daumal’s overarching theme. ‘At the end,’ he said, ‘I want to speak at length of one of the basic laws of Mount Analogue. To reach the summit, one must proceed from encampment to encampment. But before setting out for the next refuge, one must prepare those coming after to occupy the place one is leaving. Only after having prepared them, can one go on up.’ (Daumal 1971: 101)

Daumal’s connection with Gurdjieffian philosophy is perhaps most evident in his prose poem ‘The Holy War’. Written in the spring of 1940, as Nazi forces were entering France and the literary journals were closing down, ‘The Holy War’ was originally published as *La Guerre Sainte* in the collection *Poésie Noire, Poésie Blanche* (Daumal 1954). As Daumal was drafting this poem, Gurdjieff and the de Salzmanns were preparing to evacuate. Paris was invaded by the German army the following June. Despite the conditions in which it was written, Daumal’s ‘Holy War’ refers to an inner war such as those described in Hindu metaphysics and expanded on in the writings of Gurdjieff. This 2000-word prose poem can be understood as reaction and response to two central Gurdjieffian propositions, namely:

1. That a person’s inner world and the outer world that they inhabit are interdependent and symbiotic. As the inner world, the human condition cannot be understood separately from the wider function of organic life on earth, a person must try to understand what that function is. Without knowledge of this kind, human beings cannot participate consciously in the natural order, but rather, are used as an unconscious resource (as food) by the macrocosm of all earthly organic life. Gurdjieff proposes that humanity once possessed this knowledge but has lost it—and that, as a result, our species has become progressively incapable of fulfilling its natural duty which Gurdjieff sees as transforming one kind of energy into another. Organic life on earth is not nourished but depleted by human existence in our current form. Hence the

future evolution of the planet is entirely bound up with the possibility of inner evolution of human beings.

2. That a human being is an unfinished creation, an automaton—half evolved like the biblical golem. Although a person's thoughts, actions and emotions are nothing more than mechanical reactions to external and internal stimuli, they are ignorant of this fact because they believe themselves to be a fully integrated and conscious individual. Gurdjieff proposes that this belief is far from the truth and that a waking person exists in a semi-hypnotic state not far removed from sleep. A person creates a feeling of 'I' from their thoughts and will create thousands of these 'I's over the course of their lives. A person's ignorance of the fact that they do not possess only one 'I' but are comprised of many unconnected 'I's is the very factor that keeps them in this kaleidoscopic state. Each 'I', when it is at the forefront of consciousness, believes itself to be the entire person's identity. As each 'I' appears, a person will identify with it completely and will no longer apprehend the 'I' that preceded it. Hence it is this very identification that keeps a person separated, not only from their external world or other people, but from the truth of their own inner state. Gurdjieff's method can be seen as the search for a central observation point in the mind, a still place in the ever-shifting inner landscape, from which one may try to understand oneself in relation to the universe. It is worth noting that Gurdjieff argues that humanity's inability to function harmoniously within the natural order has made their enslavement via hypnosis necessary. Therefore the act of changing one's consciousness is against the natural order.

Even against the backdrop of war in Europe, the inner revolution was, for Daumal, the only serious struggle. 'The Holy War' begins by separating the author from the mythical 'true poet', the poet-priest of Daumal's essays who has transcended all inner divisions to become an integrated whole:

I am going to write a poem about war. Perhaps it will not be a real poem, but it will be about a real war.

It will not be a real poem, because if the real poet were here and if the news spread through the crowd that he was going to speak—then a great silence would fall; at the first glimpse, a heavy silence would swell up, a silence big with a thousand thunderbolts.

The poet would be visible; we would see him; seeing him, he would see us; and we would fade away into our own poor shadows, we would resent his being so real, we sickly ones, we troubled ones, we uneasy ones.

He would be here, full to bursting with the thousand thunderbolts of the multitude of enemies he contains—for he contains them, and satisfies them when he wishes—incandescent with pain and holy anger, yet as still as a man lighting a fuse, in the great silence he would open a little tap, the very small tap of the mill of words, and let flow a poem, such a poem that it would turn you green.

What I am going to make won't be a real, poetic, poet's poem for if the word 'war' were used in a real poem—then war, the real war that the real poet speaks about, war without mercy, war without truce would break out for good in our inmost hearts.

For in a real poem words bear their own facts.

(Daumal, 1954, all extracts from Dooling's translation reproduced at: <http://www.gurdjieff.org/daumal1.htm>.)

Here, the 'multitude of enemies he contains' refers to the subordination of all inner 'I's that the poet-priest, the über-poet, has accomplished 'for he contains them, and satisfies them when he wishes'. Such a poet, should he or she exist, fulfills the Gurdjieffian ideal of the totally free human being and quite distinct from the hypnotised and mechanical masses. Having negated any possible claim to being an über-poet, Daumal introduces the inner struggle as the privileging of truth over self-deception. If one accepts Gurdjieff's idea of the individual as legion, then the struggle of traditional mysticism to overthrow the ego suddenly becomes more difficult. Rather than a single 'I' to overcome one must wage war with potentially thousands of 'I's. These are the 'traitors to unmask':

to love the truth more than oneself, one must have died to self-deception, one must have killed the treacherous smugness of dream and cozy fantasy. And that is the aim and the end of the war; and the war has hardly begun, there are still traitors to unmask.

... One must have broken the deceiving mirrors, one must have slain with a pitiless look the insinuating phantoms. And that is the aim and the end of the war, and the war has hardly begun; there are still masks to tear off.

The theme of unmasking traitors is a recurrent theme in 'The Holy War'. Daumal goes on to speak about the difficulty of determining which inner entities are self-created 'I's and which are genuinely part of him—the observing 'true' I that Gurdjieffian philosophy seeks to strengthen and liberate. 'There are traitors in the house,' he writes, 'but they have the look of friends'. These traitors, the 'I's that believe themselves to be Daumal, are both the evidence of his enslavement and, at the same time, the jailers:

Myself, I only know how to say a very few words, and they are more like squeaks; while *they* even know how to write. There's always one of them in my mouth, lying in wait for my words when I want to say something. He listens and keeps everything for himself, and speaks in *my* place using my words but in his own filthy accent. And it's thanks to him if anyone pays attention to me or thinks I'm intelligent. (But the ones who know aren't fooled; if only I could listen to the ones who know!)

Against these illusions Daumal brings a simple war strategy—he turns on a lamp, he opens an eye:

Light be against you, phantoms! If I turn on the lamp, you stop talking. When I open an eye, you disappear—because you are carved out of the void, painted grimaces of emptiness. Against you, war to the finish—without pity, without tolerance. There is only one right: the right to *be* more.

The very essence of Gurdjieffian self-observation is contained in these passages. The attempt to build a place of stillness from which to observe the inner chaos, the rationale being that some things can only grow in the dark. Like shadows, one has only to switch on the light to make them vanish. 'You know by now,' writes Daumal, 'that I wish to speak of holy warfare'.

Returning to the ideal of a free human being, Daumal states rather simply that 'although his whole being is the field of the most violent battle, in his very innermost

depths there reigns a peace that is more active than any war' and '... alone, having overcome the illusion of not being alone, he is no longer the only one to be alone.' The free human being of Gurdjieffian conception is one who has contained the myriad of inner 'I's, who holds them, and in that immense inner struggle comes enormous peace. This idea is reminiscent of the Baghavad Gita—the warrior whose interior peace radiates outwardly, even as the holy war rages inside. Indeed, Daumal goes on to evoke Arjuna from that text, the soldier who takes part in battle without any thought of gain.

Daumal ends his epic prose poem by calling himself to arms: 'I shall speak to call myself to the holy war. I shall speak to denounce the traitors whom I nourished. I shall speak so that my words may shame my actions ...' and by negating the automatic tendency to speak from adages rather than real experience, 'and because I have used the word war, and because this word war is no longer, today, simply a sound that educated people make with their mouths, but now has become a serious word heavy with meaning, it will be seen that I am speaking seriously and that these are not empty sounds that I am making with my mouth.'

The extent of Gurdjieff's influence on the literary and artistic avant-garde is yet to be examined, but a number of art-world luminaries were drawn to his ideas—among them T.S. Eliot, Aldous Huxley, Gerald Heard, Katharine Mansfield, Ezra Pound, James Joyce, Denis Saurat, Frank Lloyd Wright, Hart Crane, Margaret Anderson and Pierre Schaeffer. Serious scholarship has not yet found a way to examine this question without confronting the fact that Gurdjieff's ideas were, at his own admission, largely stolen from other philosophies—chiefly near-Eastern doctrines such as Sufism and the Apostolic faiths. If one takes Aldous Huxley as an example, it would be difficult to mount an argument that mystical influences in his work come from Gurdjieffian thought rather than Vedanta. The case of Daumal, however, is somewhat more clear cut given his long association with Gurdjieffian circles and with the mystic himself, and his own written testimony in which he commits himself to experimentation with Gurdjieff's method. Perhaps it is time for a wider evaluation of Daumal's work, and particularly the two mature novels, in light of the Gurdjieffian influence.

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