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## **Ruedas metafísicas: 'Personality' and 'Essence' in Remedios Varo's Paintings**

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**Paper Title:**

*Ruedas metafísicas – ‘Personality’ and ‘Essence’ in Remedios Varo’s Paintings*

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*Remedios Varo, G.I. Gurdjieff, P.D. Ouspensky, El Cuarto Camino, El Yo, Esotericismo, Surrealismo*

**Abstract:**

While most critics have noted the profound affinity Remedios Varo felt with the ideas she encountered in the esoteric philosophy of G.I. Gurdjieff and his pupil P.D. Ouspensky, it is only in recent years that they have begun to uncover the extent to which this teaching informed the visual vocabulary of her richly symbolic work (Arcq 2008, Mirkin 2009). This article will show how Gurdjieff’s teachings on ‘personality’ and ‘essence’, as outlined in P.D. Ouspensky’s sanctioned exposition of his master’s ideas, *In Search of the Miraculous*, informed Varo’s depiction of a quest for spiritual equilibrium. In doing so, this article will bring to light the importance Varo placed in the development of a robust, spiritual Self.

Aunque la mayoría de los críticos han destacado la profunda afinidad que Remedios Varo sentía con las ideas de la filosofía esotérica de G.I. Gurdjieff y su discípulo P. D. Ouspensky, es solamente en los últimos años que éstos han comenzado a descubrir hasta qué punto esta enseñanza influyó el vocabulario visual de su obra (Arcq 2008, Mirkin 2009). El objetivo de este artículo es mostrar cómo las enseñanzas de Gurdjieff sobre "personalidad" y "esencia", tal y como las describe P.D. Ouspensky en su exposición autorizada, *En busca de lo Milagroso*, contribuyeron en la búsqueda de equilibrio espiritual representada en la obra de Varo. Así, este artículo demuestra la importancia que Varo atribuye al desarrollo de un Yo espiritual.

**Short Bio**

Dr Ricki O’Rawe completed his PhD in Hispanic Studies at Queen’s University Belfast in 2011 and has been a Lecturer in the Spanish Department at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth since September 2012. Ricki’s current research focuses on the spiritual interests of Modern Hispanic artists. It builds on this doctoral thesis (‘The Unorthodox Spiritualities of Jorge Luis Borges and Remedios Varo’), which he is currently adapting for publication. His research is informed by an abiding interest in the perceived spiritual crisis of Modernity, the concept of Self, and the work of vanguard artists in Spain, Argentina and Mexico in the 20th century.



In the catalogue raisonné of her work, Walter Gruen describes Remedios Varo (1908 – 1963) as ‘a spiritual pioneer’, resolutely searching for insight into the universe.<sup>i</sup> While recognising the diversity of her interests, he identifies the importance of Georges Ivanovich Gurdjieff’s (1866 - 1949) esoteric doctrine to her development in the 1940s. He concludes his biographical sketch by recounting how he questioned Varo whether these esoteric themes are found in any religion. Varo’s response is simple but poignant: ‘I imbibed Catholicism along with my mother’s milk. I should find answers by travelling down my own path, and by my own efforts.’<sup>ii</sup> Her desire to find her own way surfaces in the varied symbols in her paintings. However, Gruen’s question indicates that Varo may have found some of what she was looking for in the philosophy of Gurdjieff’s Fourth Way, also known as the Work. This teaching stressed the importance of an ‘inner journey’ in order to develop self-consciousness and fulfil one’s spiritual potential ‘that is, will, individuality, and objective knowledge’.<sup>iii</sup>

Lois Parkinson Zamora has warned critics not to ‘reduce the paintings to “illustrations” of esoteric ideas’, worried that such an approach neglects the multifarious significance of Varo’s work, yet most critics have noted Varo’s interest in the Fourth Way.<sup>iv</sup> Janet Kaplan and Beatriz Varo, to mention but two, have recognised the profound affinity she felt with the ideas of Gurdjieff and his most famous pupil, Peter Demianovich Ouspensky (1878 – 1947).<sup>v</sup> Tere Arcq, in a groundbreaking study, has outlined Varo’s contact with important proponents of the Work and her erudition in Fourth Way literature, establishing the influence of Fourth Way teachings on her paintings of the 1950s and early 1960s.<sup>vi</sup> Dina

Comisarenco Mirkin has also drawn from Fourth Way writings in her re-evaluation of the symbolic content of Varo's oeuvre, which has hitherto been limited by the biographical readings imposed on the art of women artists.<sup>vii</sup>

This article builds on Arcq's important work ascertaining the extent of Varo's investment in the study of the Fourth Way, by demonstrating the influence of Gurdjieff's teachings about 'personality' and 'essence' on her visual vocabulary. These concepts, as outlined by Ouspensky provide a tool for understanding a selection of Varo's lesser-known works from the 1940s, as well as her more famous paintings from the 1950s and 60s. In doing so, it brings to light the importance Varo placed on the development of a robust, spiritual Self.<sup>viii</sup>

Recent scholarship has elucidated the syncretic impulse that informed the inner journey of Varo, showing how her involvement with the Surrealists and her interests in psychology and mysticism informed her archetypal Jungian imagery.<sup>ix</sup> However, Varo also closely read other modern thinkers such as Aldous Huxley (1894 – 1963), Robert Graves (1895 – 1985), and Helena Blavatsky (1831 – 1891), who sought wisdom from psychology, art, philosophy and mysticism.<sup>x</sup> Whereas Carl Jung (1875 – 1961) recognised the enduring significance of religious sentiment, granting it importance within his psychological system, others devised explicitly spiritual programmes that couched esoteric philosophy in contemporary scientific theories. One of the most influential schools of thinking to emerge early in the twentieth century was Gurdjieff's Fourth Way, which responded to the same syncretic impulses as Theosophy.

Gurdjieff mostly transmitted his ideas orally to groups of followers, whom he instructed in a program of careful self-observation aimed at developing spiritual faculties that he believed were naturally inaccessible to humanity.<sup>xi</sup> Popular among artists and intellectuals in the grips of a spiritual crisis that had begun with the scientific advancements of the previous century, the Work involved learning to resist the forces in the world that prevent the Self from becoming a harmonious whole. As Alex Owen describes it, 'Gurdjieff taught a "*psychology of man's possible evolution*" which stressed the limitations of our mechanical everyday selves and the significance of the 'I' of complete realisation', the emphasis referring to Ouspensky's 1947 book *The Psychology of Man's Possible Evolution*.<sup>xii</sup> The Work sought to create 'the perfect I', which would operate on a higher level of consciousness that fully utilised one's potential, allowing access to the 'truth' of reality and an elusive stability that modernity had done much to destroy.

Living and working in Paris, Gurdjieff interacted with the intellectual and artistic elite, and his ideas generated great interest among the Parisian circles that Varo frequented between 1937 and 1940. In fact, Varo had personal contact with important followers of Gurdjieff in Paris and later in Mexico City.<sup>xiii</sup> In France, Varo moved within the same Surrealist circles as René Daumal, whose unfinished novel, *Mount Analogue: A Novel of Symbolically Authentic Non-Euclidean Adventures in Mountain Climbing*, eventually inspired the title of her painting of 1960, *Ascension of Mount Analogue*. According to Kaplan, Varo and Daumal very likely came into contact in Paris, if not Marseille, where they both fled in 1940 to escape the Nazi

occupation. Daumal was a student of Gurdjieff and Kaplan speculates that both he and Varo were 'deriving images for their work from this common source'.<sup>xiv</sup>

Fleeing Europe with the help of the Emergency Rescue Committee, Varo arrived in Mexico in December 1941, where she continued her interest in the Fourth Way. For example, she read the works of Gurdjieff and Ouspensky as well as their prominent followers, such as Maurice Nicoll. Moreover, she met Gurdjieffians such as Rodney Collin, who established a bookshop and publishing company, Ediciones Sol, aimed at distributing Spanish translations of his master Ouspensky.<sup>xv</sup> She also spent time with Christopher and Anne Fremantle, whom Gurdjieff's devoted disciple, Madame de Salzmán, had sent to lead the Fourth Way groups in Mexico.<sup>xvi</sup>

While critics have noted Varo's interest in the ideas of Gurdjieff, they have consistently played down any overt involvement of hers in this framework. Kaplan denies Varo's participation, while acknowledging the regular involvement of her close friend Eva Sulzer.<sup>xvii</sup> Gruen also denies that Varo belonged to a particular group, despite her role in introducing Sulzer to the Work.<sup>xviii</sup> The niece of the painter, Beatriz Varo, remembers her aunt's hesitancy to accept the limitations of organisations, but records her aunt's participation in a gathering linked to Gurdjieff: 'She got along well with the group of "addicts of the interaction of objects", as she called them in a letter, a group related to Gurdjieff. In reality, many of them were surrealists that had abandoned automatism for esotericism.'<sup>xix</sup>

More recently, Arcq has claimed that Varo, at the request of Christopher Fremantle, actually co-led the Gurdjieff group in Mexico City alongside Sulzer, who had felt unable to assume leadership duties on her own. Although Varo's name does

not appear in the group's minutes, Arcq suggests that the absence of Varo's initials in records of the meetings was due to her decision to sit at the back of the room in silence, speaking with Sulzer privately at the end of each session.<sup>xx</sup>

Although Arcq advances an intriguing possibility that contrasts significantly with the accounts of other observers, it is safe to say that Varo and her close friends immersed themselves in the Work in their reading, discussion, and even their artistic practice.

Despite uncertainty over her activities, Varo's erudition in the Fourth Way is indisputable. She collected and read key texts by Gurdjieff, Ouspensky, and some of their followers.<sup>xxi</sup> In Paris, her close friend Esteban Francés, with whom she had been romantically involved before fleeing Spain in 1937, spent time with Roberto Matta and Gordon Onslow Ford, discussing Ouspensky's *Tertium Organum* and its relevance to their art.<sup>xxii</sup> This book described the artist's ability to represent the fourth dimension, a 'true' reality that only the spiritually advanced can access.<sup>xxiii</sup> Ouspensky's text, very influential in Parisian artistic circles, was likely the means through which Varo encountered what became the main tenets of the Fourth Way.<sup>xxiv</sup> Her niece, Beatriz Varo, has attributed Varo's knowledge of the Fourth Way to her contact with his work: 'Later, in Mexico, Remedios joined a group that was following the teachings of Gurdjieff, who had died in 1949. Other surrealists, such as her friends Eva Sulzer and Leonora Carrington were also followers of his doctrine, as taught by his disciple, Ouspensky,<sup>xxv</sup>

Ouspensky advanced the popularity of the Fourth Way with the publication in 1949 of *In Search of the Miraculous*. Published simultaneously in French and



English, the book then became available in Spanish in 1950 through a publishing house set up in Mexico City in 1948 by his pupil, Rodney Collin. As the only sanctioned account of Gurdjieff's teachings, the book drew great interest and was very well received; even today, it is considered the most accurate and concise encapsulation of the Fourth Way.<sup>xxvi</sup> Gurdjieff's own book, *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*, appeared in English the following year and in French in 1956.

Although Varo may have encountered *Tertium Organum* in Paris, her library in Mexico contained a Spanish version alongside the Spanish translation of *In Search of the Miraculous*. She also kept a copy of the French edition of Gurdjieff's magnum opus, *Récits de Belzébuth à son petit-fils*, suggesting that it was Ouspensky's work that formed her understanding of the Fourth Way most clearly.<sup>xxvii</sup>

*In Search of the Miraculous* features 'G.', who teaches that a human being consists of different, naturally disharmonious 'centres'. This lack of harmony results from mechanical laws that permeate the universe and act on human beings, preventing each from uncovering one's true Self and achieving full potential. The Work focuses on creating the perfect 'I', which would enable an individual to escape this mechanical fate. The Fourth Way provided a way to recuperate a dwindling sense of self at a time of spiritual turmoil that was shot through with an overwhelming sense of fragmentation.

Developing faculties of "higher consciousness" was a key theme in Ouspensky's *Tertium Organum*. Later, with *In Search of the Miraculous*, he advanced Gurdjieff's teachings on the tensions between 'personality' and 'essence', making them central to the search for a balanced, self-actualised Self. For Ouspensky, a

balance between personality and essence was required to move beyond 'mechanisation'. While this strand of esoteric philosophy does not fully explain Varo's work, it provides a revealing lens through which to view her depictions of mysterious protagonists and their surroundings. I will analyse the extent to which Varo used this visual vocabulary in her depictions of self-exploration. Her work can be read as an allegorical depiction of a quest to develop inner cohesion, thereby allowing the essence to blossom and leading to a stable, spiritual Self.

### **The Influence of the Fourth Way of Varo's Visual Vocabulary**

The esoteric teachings of Ouspensky inform some of Varo's most common motifs from the 1940s, when she began studying Fourth Way texts, up to her death in 1963. During this period her paintings contain overt references to the Work and images that can be better understood using Fourth Way teachings on the harmony of a person's 'centres', the mechanisation of humanity, the concept of destiny and the possibility of attaining immortality.

#### **[FIGURE 1 HERE]**

Varo's clearest reference to these ideas surfaces in *Icon* of 1945.<sup>xxviii</sup> The cabinet, in the shape of an ogival arch, has two doors, each painted with an ornate tree charged with supernatural energy. These doors open to reveal on their inner sides Gurdjieff's initials—G.G.— in gold leaf (Fig. 1). According to Arcq, a pupil of Gurdjieff, Enrique Caraminola, commissioned this piece. In her analysis, she describes the tree, spiral and mountainous skyline of the cabinet's doors, connecting them to the hermetic principle 'as above, so below'.<sup>xxix</sup> She links this significance to the figure of the enneagram depicted on the central inner panel at the apex of the

arch. The enneagram, of singular importance to the Work, is a diagram believed to hold the key to all things. According to Gurdjieff, '*Everything* can be included and read in the enneagram': 'It is *perpetual motion* and it is also the *philosopher's stone* of the alchemists.'<sup>xxx</sup> For his part, Ouspensky affirmed that the enneagram encapsulates the link between the microcosm and the macrocosm, underlying the relation of the one to the other in spiritual evolution. Varo refers to this hermetic teaching in paintings such as *The Call* (1961) and *Useless Science or The Alchemist* (1958), among others.<sup>xxxii</sup>

In addition, the enneagram has ties to the trees depicted on the outer doors of *Icon*. They evoke the Tree of Life, representing 'creation, continuation, and fertility', and symbolise Enlightenment in Buddhism and the Christian belief in the endurance of the soul after the death of the body.<sup>xxxiii</sup> The connection becomes apparent in the spirals that run up each tree, from the golden roots to the flowers that sparkle with energy, thereby linking the microcosm with the macrocosm. Moreover, the trees, through their association with cycles of life, death, and rebirth, introduce the themes of change, unity, Self, and ultimately the *arbor philosophica*, which, according to the renowned scholar J.E. Cirlot, symbolises spiritual evolution.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

*Icon* also features imagery that would become emblematic of Varo's later, more famous work: symbols; a tower, a wheel, a staircase, a two-tone floor. The mystical symbolism of the exterior anticipates the esoteric content within. Under the enneagram are images similarly rich in meaning. For example, the glow of the sun rises from behind three hills, echoing the imminent enlightenment represented

by the rising tower. In the foreground, a road of white and black squares prefigures the tiles that appear in many of Varo's paintings from the 50s and 60s.<sup>xxxiv</sup> The interpenetration of opposites represents the dissolution of difference and the acquisition of harmony. In the context of the Fourth Way, the suppression of discord achieves the balance of a being's 'centres' and enables spiritual advancement. The two-tone pattern recurs within the winged tower flying alongside four little birds, sparkling dust, and stars.

Within the tower, a stairway spirals up to the turret, from which flows a warm golden light. Ouspensky uses *In Search of the Miraculous* to advance this metaphor of insight: 'between "life" and the "way" lies the "stairway". Only by passing along this 'stairway' can a man enter the 'way' [...] The way begins only where the *stairway* ends, that is, after the *last threshold* on the stairway, on a level much higher than the ordinary level of life'.<sup>xxxv</sup> As the goal of the Gurdjieffian quest, this ascendance marks the point at which a person's essence develops an unbreakable link with the celestial realm. The ring of earth around the tower's base indicates that a connection that endures despite its flight towards the heavens.

Another link between terrestrial and celestial realms emerges in the cogs and pulleys that connect the tower to the waxing and waning of the moon. In Gurdjieff's teachings, the moon acts as a 'huge electromagnet' drawing energy from Organic life on Earth in order to grow. In this relationship, its influence permeates everything that happens in a person's life.<sup>xxxvi</sup> The moon bears responsibility for the mechanical part of humanity; it is the fate of the mechanised to remain enslaved by cosmological laws, providing energy for the development of the moon.

Gurdjieff taught that human beings move through life as though sleepwalking, insisting that even those who believed themselves more wakeful than those around them are just as mechanical as the rest. The Gurdjieffian quest for self-actualisation begins with the battle to overcome mechanisation. In her paintings, Varo depicts characters subject to laws perpetuating the 'sleep' that mechanised humanity suffers. One such example is *The Call*, in which the incandescent protagonist, having become awakened, contrasts sharply with the rest of the population, who have remained asleep for so long that they have literally petrified.

Despite the linkage of the tower to the moon in *Icon*, Varo represents the possibility of liberation by means of a golden force emanating from the tower's turret towards the central moon. This moon, enclosed within three rings, represents the forces subjected to the will of the individual. Having been internalised they cannot, therefore, exert the same force on the tower. The three rings liken it to the image of both an electron and a ringed planet such as Saturn, reflecting the microcosm and the macrocosm, and suggesting the power of the enlightened individual to traverse both realms.

*Icon* consequently shows that someone who overcomes mechanisation can awaken to his or her true Self.<sup>xxxvii</sup> This optimism emerges in the contrast between the small wheel and the very large wings that elevate the tower towards the enneagram. Wheels appear throughout Varo's work to signify the mechanical disposition of the human automaton. Here Varo shows that this constitutes only a small part of the edifice, which has the potential to be replaced with the unity and permanence of the enneagram above.

## Personality and Essence

Ouspensky affirmed, along with Gurdjieff, that humanity mistakenly believes that each person is born with a permanent 'Self' that can master all parts of one's life. With *In Search of the Miraculous*, Ouspensky teaches that human beings possess no permanent I but rather many different I's that jockey for position, a different one taking control from one minute to the next, depending on influences external to them. He characterises these fragmented persons as machines, helplessly motored by a complex set of cosmological laws and therefore unable to do anything by choice. Subject to chance and accident, 'man-machine', as Gurdjieff calls him in Ouspensky's book, lives a life in which everything happens rather than being volitionally established.

To escape this unhappy situation, Ouspensky teaches that one may achieve self-awareness through the practice of self-remembering, wherein a person sees beyond the illusion of unity and learns to control the tensions between the plurality of I's within.<sup>xxxviii</sup> This process involves recognising the 'impressions' that a person receives constantly from the world. He labels this multiplicity of selves as 'personality':

It must be understood that man consists of two parts: *essence* and *personality*. Essence in man is what is *his own*. Personality in man is what is 'not his own.' 'Not his own' means what has come from outside, what he has learned, or reflects, all traces of exterior impressions left in the memory and in the sensations, all words and movements that have been learned, all feelings created by imitation—all this is 'not his own,' all this is personality.<sup>xxxix</sup>

Personality inhibits the growth of essence, often in early childhood, as a result of education and the pressures of social interaction and protocol. Spiritual evolution,

however, requires balance between personality and essence; in a state of imbalance, the essence can die, leaving only personality and the body. According to Gurdjieff, these people are ‘already dead’ and therefore cut off from any self-actualised future life.<sup>xl</sup> The Work aims to distinguish personality from essence in order to begin the process of developing individuality into a real I; according to Gurdjieff in Ouspensky’s text, ‘it can be said that a man’s individuality is his essence, grown up, mature’.<sup>xli</sup>

**[FIGURE 2 HERE]**

While Arcq identifies *Icon* as Varo’s first exploration of ‘man’s relationship with the cosmos’, a number of works from the previous year show that her investigations had already begun.<sup>xlii</sup> In the oneiric *Funambulists* of 1944 (Fig. 2), Varo depicts how mechanisation propels characters into plurality and a state of imbalance.<sup>xliii</sup> A stylised creature moves precariously along the branches of a forest, which form cogs and pulleys along a restricted loop of paths. The prism-like head of the creature consists of multiple faces: female, male, bird and fox. Just as with the light in a prism, every outside change will cause the face to shift. By illustrating the protagonist’s unstable Self and restricted progress, Varo illustrates how little control a person can exert over the multiple selves of personality. The title, *Funambulists*, alludes to the character’s precarious balance on the narrow branches and brings to mind the peril of the tightrope walker’s act. The painting represents an allegory of the difficult path awaiting the seeker of enlightenment.

**[FIGURE 3 HERE]**

In a 1944 drawing of the same name, Varo depicts a comparable humanoid creature (Fig. 3).<sup>xliv</sup> Cogs and pulleys here overlap the multiplicity of personalities. The first contraption surrounds the character's prismatic head, a second contains the heart, whereas the third pulley appears to have replaced the feet. A final device stretches out from the character's back, apparently driving the other three interconnected cogs. This study reinforces the Gurdjieffian imagery in the painting of the same name, by illustrating the 'centres' that Ouspensky ascribes to a human being:

The first, *the mind of the body*, which manifests itself in instincts and in the constant work of the body, the second, his *personality*, a complex and constantly changing 'I' which we know and in which we are conscious of ourselves; the third, the mind *of his whole life* - a greater and higher 'I'.<sup>xlv</sup>

Ouspensky teaches that these three minds know very little about one another and only come into contact 'under narcotics, in trance states, ecstatic states, in dreams, and in hypnotic and mediumistic states'.<sup>xlvi</sup> In order to develop, human beings must bring these components into balance.

#### [FIGURE 4 HERE]

The difficulty of balancing these centres appears anew in *Metaphysical Wheels* of 1944 (Fig. 4).<sup>xlvii</sup> Three mechanised women, using large wheels in place of legs, advance along lines that lead to a crystalline junction. Each being extends her arms as if to balance herself while travelling through the long room. The painting's title and the roots growing down from the ceiling suggest that this is an inner journey, something metaphysical and normally unseen. The architectural perspective, which implies movement away from the darkness at the back towards the glowing shape in the foreground, augurs a positive end to the journey. If the



women maintain their balance, they will come together in the crystal and free themselves from mechanisation, achieving the Enlightenment associated with the overcoming of multiple I's and the crystallisation of the Self. *Metaphysical Wheels* presents an optimistic view of the possibility of spiritual ascent.

**[FIGURE 5 HERE]**

Varo recognises, however, that inner change and freedom from mechanisation require a long and difficult journey. In *Crystalline Distortion* of 1949 (Fig. 5), a character inhabits a crystalline cocoon in a long, empty room.<sup>xlviii</sup> A bright light beyond the left edge of the composition casts a shadow of the protagonist on the wall. The shadow falls in the shape of a mechanical device, echoing a layer of the person that we cannot see.

Within Fourth Way philosophy, crystallisation describes the process of forming a permanent Self. It occurs when the seeker obtains a high level of inner cohesion.<sup>xlix</sup> One possibility, however, is to crystallise an imbalanced Self that inhibits further spiritual advancement. *Crystalline Distortion* presents a vision of the protagonist, wrongly crystallised. Despite some progress, symbolised by movement away from the darkness at the back of the room, she has not yet mended her inner disharmony. As the unusual shadow shows, she remains forever 'mechanised' within a crystal cocoon.

Varo characterizes another instance of incorrect development, this time as envisioned in one of her dreams. In *Plasticine*, she describes a scene in which the family of her ex-husband Gerardo Lizarraga, after undergoing a profound spiritual development, have gained the power to create highly nutritious foods out of

plasticine.<sup>1</sup> Upon realising that this magic is not 'objective' but rather 'a *personal* manifestation of terrestrial magic, without any true relation to the universe', Varo suddenly worries about them. Using Gurdjieffian language, Varo describes her preoccupation that they may have crystallised incorrectly: 'because of the apparent success of this spiritual conquest, they would be left unable to achieve true development'.<sup>li</sup>

The aforementioned examples attest to Varo's early knowledge of Fourth Way philosophy. It is clear from her involvement with the Fremantles and the books in her library that her interest extended throughout the 1950s and early 1960s when she was completing her most famous work. The paintings of this period display a movement away from the automatism of Surrealism, towards a carefully planned and meticulously executed practice that both Arcq and Kaplan have related to her interest in the Fourth Way.<sup>lii</sup>

*Encounter* of 1959 also represents the search for essence.<sup>liii</sup> A woman seated before a little box stares wistfully into space. The open box contains her face, which stares at her. The cloak that envelops the woman and her second face emphasises their connection. As Varo writes in a letter to her brother, 'this poor woman, on opening the little casket full of curiosity and hope, she finds only herself; in the background, on the shelves, there are more little caskets and who knows if when she opens them, she will find something new'.<sup>liv</sup>

The disappointment the protagonist feels is apparent in the sadness of her face. In this instance of self-reflection, the woman had hoped to glimpse something special but discovered only another representation of her surface personality. As

Varo observes, however, many other boxes await investigation and the process must continue until the subject finds her essence.

The optimism of Varo's commentary bears fruit in the 1962 painting *The Encounter*.<sup>lv</sup> This figure also wears a billowing blue robe, but this one emanates a translucent white that also seems to comprise the body within the garment. Here the protagonist has also discovered a representation of her own face but, unlike the woman in the earlier work, she appears to have gained control over this second manifestation of herself, silencing it as she arrives at her destination, deep within the forest. Suppressing personality, she opens the door to a building where an anthropomorphised owl awaits her, signalling the wisdom that she has achieved in her Work.

The contemporary *Breaking the Vicious Circle* (1962), is stylistically similar to *The Encounter* and therefore invites a comparison of symbolism.<sup>lvi</sup> Both are set in a forest, a place associated with cycles of life, death and re-birth. In the latter, the character meets an owl, symbolising both death and regeneration and indicating the achievement of wisdom.<sup>lvii</sup>

A little bird nestles in the character's cloak, reinforcing associations with transcendence. In *Breaking the Vicious Circle*, the character also incorporates the image of a bird in the translucent folds of their cloak. An image of the forest is also echoed, significantly, within the chest cavity of the character, emphasising a successful acquisition of the inner balance required in order to crystallise one's essence.<sup>lviii</sup> Gurdjieff insisted that human beings must break the vicious circle of false personality if they are to genuinely 'do' anything. Arcq has also treated this

theme: 'Remedios Varo depicts a man who is able to break the vicious circle he is trapped in through a study of himself. His clothing is torn, revealing a mysterious forest, a path towards light'.<sup>lix</sup>

**[FIGURE 6 HERE]**

In *Personage* (Fig. 6), the protagonist's outfit includes a cloak of the same colour of blue as the women's robes in the aforementioned paintings – once again inviting the viewer to draw a line of continuity.<sup>lx</sup> Like the garments in *Breaking the Vicious Circle* and *The Encounter*, his robes also emanate thin threads of translucent white, charged with energy. Within this character's midriff, the legs of a female character in a blue dress can be seen descending a stairway towards a chequered black and white floor. This insight into this character's inner being allows us to view the birth of his essence. Using familiar motifs, Varo shows his inner balance by presenting the coming together of his male and female parts within a space that unifies the opposites of black and white. Once again, the stairway depicts the coming together of the microcosm and the macrocosm, as his spiritual Self descends the steps to take up residence within his being.

Varo had depicted a successful overcoming of personality in *Rupture of 1955*.<sup>lxi</sup> A gender-ambiguous figure leaves a house from which s/he is watched by six faces that are identical to his/her own.<sup>lxii</sup> Arcq has suggested that these faces represent the false I's of personality, which the figure has successfully escaped by discovering his/her essence: 'The figure in the painting is seen descending a staircase wrapped in a cloak with his face illuminated, walking lightly and calmly, practically floating, as if he had just had a load taken off his shoulders'.<sup>lxiii</sup> Moreover,

Varo employs other mystical motifs to convey this spiritual achievement. The character's cloak is wrapped tightly around their body forming a mandorla, which in Eastern traditions represents the intersection of heaven and earth and the achievement of balance.<sup>lxiv</sup> Situating this act upon a stairway signifies a process of breaking through to a new spiritual reality.<sup>lxv</sup> For Ouspensky, this awakening would represent 'the beginning of a new growth of essence, the beginning of the formation of individuality, the beginning of the appearance of one indivisible I'.<sup>lxvi</sup> The character's shadow emphasises the personalities being abandoned as s/he moves towards Enlightenment.

The number of faces that look down from the house also bears meaning. The six faces represent the states of self that Gurdjieff referred to as 'man' numbers 1 to 6. This leaves the main protagonist as man number 7, who is described in Ouspensky's book as follows: 'Man number seven means a man who has reached the full development possible to man and who possesses everything a man can possess, that is, will, consciousness, permanent and unchangeable I, individuality, immortality, and many other properties which, in our blindness and ignorance, we ascribe to ourselves'.<sup>lxvii</sup> 'Man number seven' is a person who has developed a permanent and unchangeable 'I', one in whom the necessary harmony of centres has crystallised and one who can leave his or her trace in the world. The character walking towards the light, shaped like a mandorla, appears balanced and composed as s/he proceeds, secure of his/her essence and confident of his/her Enlightenment.

Varo's long interest in Gurdjieff/Ouspensky's Fourth Way philosophy had a noticeable impact on her depictions of this quest. The explorations that Varo enacts

on canvas are rich in symbolic meaning. As critics have noted, the symbols she employs are syncretistic and can sustain a diverse range of interpretations. However, as we have seen, by reading her works as symbolic explorations of the esoteric doctrine of the Fourth Way, which had captured the imagination of the group of artists and intellectuals within which she worked, one can isolate a fascinating and hitherto understudied strand of her visual vocabulary. By doing this, Gurdjieffian imagery can be employed retrospectively, to construct a narrative of spiritual search and Varo's paintings can be interpreted as depictions of both the difficulty and the necessity of achieving a permanent 'I' if the Self is to endure beyond the inevitable decomposition of the material body.

An understanding of the Fourth Way allows us to unpack some of the beliefs that nourished Varo's work. Whilst one can only speculate about whether or not Varo personally overcame the mechanisation and fragmentation of modern existence with the aid of this philosophy, her paintings present a pragmatic but optimistic view of the possibility of spiritual growth through a lifetime of exploration of one's inner world.

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<sup>i</sup> W. Gruen, 'Remedios Varo: A Biographical Sketch', in W. Gruen & R. Ovalle, *Remedios Varo: Catálogo razonado* (México D.F.: Ediciones Era, 2008 [1994]), pp. 101- 09 (p. 108).

<sup>ii</sup> Gruen, 'Remedios Varo: A Biographical Sketch', p. 109

<sup>iii</sup> M. De Salzmán, 'G. I. Gurdjieff', in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. by M. Eliade (New York; London: Macmillan; Collier Macmillan, 1987), VI, pp. 139-40 (p. 139).

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<sup>iv</sup> L. Parkinson Zamora, 'Misticismo mexicano y la obra mágica de Remedios Varo', *Foro Hispánico: El Laberinto De La Solidaridad*, 22 (2002), 57-87 (pp. 78-79). Unless otherwise stated, the translations of Spanish quotations are the author's own.

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<sup>v</sup> J. Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys: The Art and Life of Remedios Varo* (New York: Abbeville, 1998), pp. 171-172; B. Varo, *Remedios Varo: En el centro del microcosmos* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1990), pp. 58-59; 120-21.

<sup>vi</sup> T. Arcq, 'In Search of the Miraculous', in *Five Keys to the Secret World of Remedios Varo* (Mexico City: Artes De México, 2008), pp. 21-87.

<sup>vii</sup> D. Comisarenco Mirkin, 'Remedios Varo, The Artist of a Thousand Faces', *Aurora: The Journal of the History of Art*, 10 (2009), 77-114 (p. 78).

<sup>viii</sup> The term Self is used in the manner of Aldous Huxley. Within his philosophy, the Self is an inalienable core that is unique to the individual, yet is connected to something greater. It is what Christians call the Soul, and what Hindus call Atman; a spark of Divinity within, which is the base of all being. For Huxley, it is the ultimate task of every human being to seek this Self. A. Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy*, Perennial Classics, (New York: Harper Perennial, 2004 [1945]), pp. 1-2. Varo's library contains a 1949 Spanish edition of this book.

<sup>ix</sup> R. O'Rawe & R. Quance, 'Crossing the Threshold: Mysticism and Liminality in Remedios Varo', *Trellis Papers Series* (Madrid: Gateway Press, 2014).

<sup>x</sup> The breadth of Varo's readings was in evidence at a recent exhibition of her work entitled 'Remedios Varo: La dimensión del pensamiento' at the Museo de Arte Moderno in Mexico City. Some of the titles from her library were on display, including a 1960 edition of Gurdjieff's *Recontres avec des hommes remarquables*, Lama Yongden's 1954 book of Tibetan Buddhism, *la Puissance du néant*, Plon, a Spanish translation of Frank Sherwood Taylor's *Los alquimistas* (1957), and René Étiemble's 1958 biography of Confucius. There was also an important environmentalist text by Rachel Carson entitled *Printemps Silencieux*, published the year of Varo's death.

<sup>xi</sup> Gurdjieff did record his teachings as an allegorical tale, published shortly after his death as *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson: All and Everything*.

<sup>xii</sup> A. Owen, 'The "Religious Sense" in a Post-War Secular Age', *Past & Present*, 1 (2006), 159-77 (p. 167).

<sup>xiii</sup> Arcq, 'In Search of the Miraculous', p. 26; 35.

<sup>xiv</sup> Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys*, p. 171.

<sup>xv</sup> Ediciones Sol published translations of Ouspensky, Maurice Nicoll and other Fourth Way writings into Spanish. For a description of Robert Collin's trajectory through the Gurdjieff work with P.D. Ouspensky see J. Webb, *The Harmonious Circle: The Lives and Work of G.I. Gurdjieff, P.D. Ouspensky, and their Followers* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1980).

<sup>xvi</sup> Arcq, 'In Search of the Miraculous', pp. 35-37.

<sup>xvii</sup> Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys*, p. 171.

<sup>xviii</sup> Gruen, 'Remedios Varo: A Biographical Sketch', pp. 105-06. In an interview in 2001, Gruen furnished details: 'Eva (Sulzer) was experiencing emotional problems that provoked a very serious crisis. Remedios helped to guide her into an esoteric group that was studying the philosophy of the Russian mystic Gurdjieff. Eva flourished and became the leader of the group in Mexico.' Merry MacMasters, 'La despreocupación de Remedios Varo por el dinero duró hasta el día de su muerte',

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in *La Jornada* <<http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2001/05/24/03an1cul.html>> [accessed 3 June 2013]. According to Juliana González, 'Remedios did not belong to any specific esoteric "school" or "group", nor did she follow any "ortho-doxo".' J. González, 'Remedios Varo's World and Fantasy World', *Remedios Varo: Catálogo razonado*, pp. 89 - 99 (p. 91).

<sup>xix</sup> Varo, *Remedios Varo: En el centro del microcosmos*, p. 121.

<sup>xx</sup> Arcq, 'In Search of the Miraculous', pp. 47-48.

<sup>xxi</sup> Arcq, 'In Search of the Miraculous', p. 24.

<sup>xxii</sup> Arcq, 'In Search of the Miraculous', p. 30. In Mexico, Varo would also spend up to a month at a time at the home of Onslow Ford and his wife Jacqueline Johnson, sharing knowledge of mystical ideas, including those of Ouspensky and Gurdjieff.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Having drawn great attention for his 1912 book *Tertium Organum*, Ouspensky encountered Gurdjieff in 1915 and became his student for 10 years. He believed that Gurdjieff held the secret to the *miraculous* which he had spent years searching for in India, Ceylon and Egypt. Although his understanding was greatly advanced by his work with Gurdjieff, he broke with his master in 1924, continuing to develop his own system and encouraging his students to do the same. See Webb, *The Harmonious Circle*, p. 458, pp. 491- 93.

<sup>xxiv</sup> L. Dalrymple Henderson, 'Mysticism, Romanticism, and the Fourth Dimension', in *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*, ed. by M. Tuchman (New York: Abbeville Press, 1986), pp. 219-37 (p. 229). Ouspensky's *In Search of the Miraculous* records that Gurdjieff recognised the germ of his ideas in his student's work, the publication of which significantly pre-dates that his own. However, Gurdjieff claimed that he was not developed enough to understand what he had discovered - an observation with which Ouspensky concurs.

<sup>xxv</sup> Varo, *Remedios Varo: En el centro del microcosmos*, pp. 58-59.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Building upon ideas initially developed in *Tertium Organum*, *In Search of the Miraculous* charts Ouspensky's spiritual journey as Gurdjieff's pupil, whom he refers to only as 'G.', until their break in 1924. Constructed from notes that Ouspensky made whilst working with his master, the book acts as an account of his difficult quest towards an understanding of the 'miraculous', including stories of both the path's difficulties and his elation when he finally makes progress.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Zamora, 'Misticismo mexicano', p. 78. I owe thanks to Tara Plunkett, who verified the presence of the Ediciones Sol edition of Pedro Ouspensky, *En busca de lo milagroso: Fragmentos de una enseñanza desconocida* (México: Ediciones Sol, 1952) in Varo's personal library on a visit to Alexandra Gruen in Mexico City in July 2010.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Icon (1945), oil and inlaid mother-of-pearl/wood, 60 x 39 x 5, CAT 65. All catalogue numbers, designated with the abbreviation CAT, are taken from Gruen and Ovalle, *Remedios Varo: Catálogo razonado* (2008). **The entire catalogue can be viewed online at [www.remedios-varo.com](http://www.remedios-varo.com).**

<sup>xxix</sup> Arcq, 'In Search of the Miraculous', pp. 26-27.

<sup>xxx</sup> P. D. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977 [1949]), p. 294.

<sup>xxxi</sup> *The Call* (1961), oil/masonite, 98.5 x 68, CAT 329. *Useless Science* or *The Alchemist* (1955), oil/masonite, 105 x 53, CAT 122.



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xxxii P.R. Frese & SJM, 'Trees', in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, xv, p. 32; 28.

xxxiii J.E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols* (Mineola N.Y.: Dover Publications. Cirlot, 2002), pp. 349-50.

xxxiv In *To Be Reborn* (1960), oil/masonite, 81 x 47, CAT 289, this harmony is also echoed by the reflection of the moon in the chalice, symbolises the coming together of celestial and terrestrial realms. In the aforementioned *Useless Science* or *The Alchemist* (1955), the protagonist wears the floor of the workshop as a cloak, having achieved harmony with the surroundings. The black and white checkerboard floor is a common feature of Masonic lodges, where it represents the coming together of opposites and marks a site of initiation.

xxxv Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, p. 201. He also insists that a master is required to bring the initiate onto the first step. In Gurdjieff's teachings, a master is very important to a person's correct development (p. 222). Arcq also offers this interpretation. See Arcq, 'In Search of the Miraculous', p. 27.

xxxvi Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, p. 85.

xxxvii According to Ouspensky: 'If we develop in ourselves consciousness and will, and subject our mechanical life and all our manifestations to them, we shall escape the power of the moon.' Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, pp. 85–86.

xxxviii Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, p. 148.

xxxix Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, p. 161.

xl Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, p. 164.

xli Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, p. 163.

xlii Arcq, 'In Search of the Miraculous', p. 27.

xliii *Funambulists* (1944), tempera/masonite, 38 x 26.5, CAT 61.

xliiv *Funambulists* (1944), ink/paper, 28 x 22 (approx), CAT 62.

xliv P.D. Ouspensky, *Tertium Organum* (Charleston: Bibliobazaar, 2006 [1912]), p. 258.

xlvi Ouspensky, *Tertium Organum*, p. 258.

xlvii *Metaphysical Wheels* (1944), gouache/bristol board, 28.7 x 19.4, CAT 59.

xlviii *Crystalline Distortion* (1949), indian ink and pen/bristol board, 31.7 x 18, CAT 92.

xliv Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, pp. 32-33.

<sup>1</sup> The text appears in Isabel Castell's edition of Varo's writings under the title 'Sueño 7'. In her critical edition of the same, Edith Mendoza Bolio retitles the piece 'Plasticine'. No precise date is available for this text, but Mendoza Bolio claims that it was written, along with the other texts authored by Varo, in Mexico between 1941 and 1963. See R. Varo, *Cartas, sueños, y otros textos*, ed. by Isabel Castells (México D.F.: Ediciones Era, 1997), pp. 126-27; E. Mendoza Bolio, *'A veces escribo como si trazase un boceto': Los escritos de Remedios Varo* (Madrid: Iberoamericana; Frankfurt am Main: Vervuert, 2010), p. 69.

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<sup>li</sup> Varo, *Cartas, sueños, y otros textos*, p. 127. Within Gurdjieff's teaching the terms 'objective' and 'subjective' differ from traditional definitions in relation to art. In Ouspensky's text, 'G.' describes the awakened consciousness of the 'objective' artist, which he contrasts with the element of chance central to 'subjective' art. Within the Fourth Way, 'objective' knowledge is attained by observing things in an 'objective' state of consciousness, and is therefore only available to the spiritually developed. See Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, p. 296; 278.

<sup>lii</sup> Arcq, 'In Search of the Miraculous', p. 40. Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys*, p. 172.

<sup>liii</sup> *Encounter* (1959), oil/canvas, 40 x 30, CAT 253.

<sup>liv</sup> R. Varo, 'Comments by Remedios Varo on Some of her Paintings [Addressed to her Brother Dr. Rodrigo Varo]', *Remedios Varo: Catálogo razonado*, pp. 111 - 20 (p. 118).

<sup>lv</sup> *The Encounter* (1962), vinyl/Bristol board, 64 x 44, CAT 347.

<sup>lvi</sup> *Breaking the Vicious Circle* (1962), mixed media/cardboard, 65 x 35, CAT 346.

<sup>lvii</sup> In Goddess mythology, the Owl is a symbol of death but also of regeneration. The Bird Goddess in the form of an owl is the 'nocturnal aspect of the Life-giver', as Marija Gimbutas puts it, in recognition of the belief that 'out of every death new life grows. See M. Gimbutas, *The Language of the Goddess* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1989), p. 185.

<sup>lviii</sup> In her work, Varo presents the forest as a common place of spiritual investigation. For comparison, Ouspensky makes his own personal breakthrough within a forest; see *In Search of the Miraculous*, pp. 262-63. Moreover, Gurdjieff's followers were commonly known as the Forest Philosophers. See Arcq, 'In Search of the Miraculous', p. 56.

<sup>lix</sup> Arcq, 'In Search of the Miraculous', p. 56.

<sup>lx</sup> *Personage* (1961), oil/masonite, 58.5 x 39.5, CAT 323.

<sup>lxi</sup> *Rupture* (1955), oil/masonite, 95 x 60, CAT 132

<sup>lxii</sup> Arcq understand the figure to be a male, whilst Janet Kaplan understands it to be female. See Arcq, 'In Search of the Miraculous', pp. 55-56; Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys*, p. 24.

<sup>lxiii</sup> Arcq, 'In Search of the Miraculous', p. 56.

<sup>lxiv</sup> Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, p. 203.

<sup>lxv</sup> Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, p. 313.

<sup>lxvi</sup> Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, p. 218.

<sup>lxvii</sup> Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, p. 71. Despite the androcentric language, readers would have understood that he was also addressing himself to women.