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# The Re-Enchantment of Surrealism:

## Remedios Varo's Visionary Artists

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### Abstract

The visionary prowess of the artist was established, in both the visual and verbal arts, by the Symbolists in *fin de siècle* France. This article asserts a continuity between the avowed spiritual dimension of their work and the visionary power of surrealist art asserted—despite strong resistance from the centre—by a group of renegade surrealists in the 1920s and beyond. To do so, it explores the representations of artists that Spanish-born Mexican painter Remedios Varo (1908-1963) depicts in her work, demonstrating how they might be better understood when analysed in relation to Georges Ivanovich Gurdjieff's (1866?-1949) esoteric aesthetics. In doing so, it reveals a neglected, postsecular trajectory in the history of surrealism.

### Keywords

Remedios Varo; Surrealism; Mysticism; Le Grand Jeu; Gurdjieff; Ouspensky; Modernity; Western Esotericism

The artist's powers as a seer, as someone who could see or perceive beyond the ordinary was reinvigorated, in both the visual and verbal arts, by the Symbolists in *fin de siècle* France.<sup>1</sup> This article argues that there is a continuity between the avowed spiritual dimension of their work and the visionary power of surrealist art asserted—despite strong resistance from the centre—by a group of renegade

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Odilon Redon's 1879 lithograph, *Divine Omniscience*, in which the artist uncovers an aspect of reality normally left unseen.

surrealists in the 1920s and beyond.<sup>2</sup> In particular, it explores the teachings of Georges Ivanovich Gurdjieff (1866?-1949)—as recorded in Peter Demianovich Ouspensky's (1878-1947) official account *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (1949)—in order to shed new light on the diversification of surrealism in the 1940s and to offer a new understanding of how creative practice could be invested with spiritual significance.<sup>3</sup> The work of the Spanish-born Mexican painter Remedios Varo (1908 -1963) is an excellent example of how this phenomenon evolved as her paintings abound with characters who are artists: painters, musicians, dancers and weavers, all engaged in a creative process symbolically aligned with different mystical teachings and the hermetic tradition through the use of elements including alchemical colours, symbolic animals, and sacred geometries.<sup>4</sup> Even those not involved in an artistic activity *per se*—scientists, alchemists, explorers—are represented as having embarked on a process that symbolically implies spiritual reward or discovery. Each is a seer, to use Rimbaud's expression, uncovering some secret mechanism of the universe; for example, in *Creación de las aves* (1957), discussed below, disciplinary boundaries blur as the protagonist

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<sup>2</sup> Very few studies engage with this spiritual strand of surrealism. Celia Rabinovitch, in *Surrealism and the Sacred: Power, Eros, and the Occult in Modern Art* (Boulder, C.O: Westview Press, 2004), recognises the religious impulse in surrealism despite its secularity and presents it as a third way approach, between the sacred and the profane. A shorter volume, Nadia Choucha's *Surrealism and the Occult* (Oxford: Mandrake, 1991) places surrealism in the context of esoteric currents inherited from Romanticism. This is also the case with Patrick Lepetit's *The Esoteric Secrets of Surrealism Inner: Origins, Magic, and Secret Societies* (Vermont: Inner Traditions, 2014), which contains significantly more contextual information but is lacking in significant close analysis of surrealist works. More recently, Vivienne Brough-Evans, in her *Sacred Surrealism, Dissidence and International Avant-Garde Prose* (New York: Routledge, 2016), deals with the sacred as conceived by Bataille and the other renegade surrealists of the *Collège de Sociologie*. The most thorough study of the occultation of surrealism to date, is Tessel M Bauduin's *Surrealism and the Occult: Occultism and Western Esotericism in the Work and Movement of André Breton* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> P.D. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977 [1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1949]).

<sup>4</sup> For more examples of Varo's use of mystical symbolism, see Ricki O'Rawe & Roberta Ann Quance, 'Crossing the Threshold: Mysticism, Liminality, and Remedios Varo's *Bordando el manto terrestre* (1961-62)', *Modern Languages Open.*, (2016) DOI: <http://doi.org/10.3828/mlo.v0i0.138>

experiments with a Newtonian prism, alchemical vessels, a violin, and a palette of paints, and achieves magical results.<sup>5</sup>

The dominant critical narrative, established by Janet Kaplan and Whitney Chadwick, associates the development of Varo's individual aesthetic with her growing distance from the Surrealist group in the 1950s a period during which Varo's use of esoteric motifs increased.<sup>6</sup> As we shall see, whilst André Breton displayed an early interest in hermeticism, this was limited to its convergence with surrealist aims rather than its spirituality.<sup>7</sup> When viewed in relation to Breton, Varo's use of religious and occult imagery might be understood as purely metaphorical; a visual vocabulary re-appropriated in the pursuit of hidden aspects of human, rather than divine, experience.<sup>8</sup> This article will argue that analysis of Varo's paintings of artists brings to light a postsecular, re-enchanted form of surrealism, which existed on the fringes of Breton's group and foregrounded a spiritual, visionary practice based on a growing interest in western esotericism and the mystical schools of established

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<sup>5</sup> The conflation of the spiritual and the scientific was central to New Religious Movements in the twentieth century. For example, the motto for Aleister Crowley's journal *The Equinox*, set up to distribute the teachings of his new religion, Thelema, was 'The method of science – the aim of religion'. See Marco Pasi, *Aleister Crowley and the Temptation of Politics* (Durham: Acumen Publishing, 2013), 62. For more on the relationship between science and esotericism, see Jean-Pierre Laurant's *L'esotérisme* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1993).

<sup>6</sup> Janet Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys: The Art and Life of Remedios Varo* (New York: Abbeville, 1988), 129. Whitney Chadwick, *Women Artists of the Surrealist Movement* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1985), 194; 202; 219. Analysing work from this period, Deborah Haynes notes that 'Varo was unusual among the Surrealists for her explicit and persistent interest in religion'. Deborah Haynes, 'The Art of Remedios Varo: Issues of Gender Ambiguity and Religious Meaning', *Woman's Art Journal*, 16:1 (1995), 26-32 (p. 27). For further work sympathetic to the diversity of Varo's spiritual symbolism, see Rosa Ruis Gatell, 'Armonía y creación en el cosmos de Remedios Varo', in *Remedios Varo: Caminos Del Conocimiento, La Creación Y El Exilio*, ed. María José González Madrid and Rosa Rius Gatell (Madrid: Eutelequia, 2013), 77-99.

<sup>7</sup> Bauduin, *Surrealism and the Occult*, 27-8.

<sup>8</sup> According to Melanie Nicholson, the language of the sacred, the mystical, and the esoteric within surrealism, 'was conceptualized not in orthodox religious terms (most of the original surrealists were agnostics or atheists), but in terms of the *numinous*, a notion popularized by Rudolf Otto's seminal work *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational* (1917). Melanie Nicholson, *Surrealism in Latin American Literature: Searching for Breton's Ghost* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 19.

religions.<sup>9</sup> Her work draws attention to a strand of surrealism that complements later postsecular narratives, which ‘affirm the urgent need for a turn toward the religious even as they reject (in most instances) the familiar dream of full return to authoritative faith.’<sup>10</sup> In her engagement with G.I. Gurdjieff’s Fourth Way—a system she studied closely in Mexico in the 1940s—she exemplifies the desire of some surrealists to continue seeking spiritual outlets, even as they criticised the rites of existing religious institutions. Critics such as Kaplan and Tere Arcq have already uncovered the depth of engagement Varo had with Gurdjieff’s teachings.<sup>11</sup> In this article, I will demonstrate that these teachings helped her conceptualize the practice of art, recognising that this aspect of her approach reveals affinities with unorthodox surrealist groupings such as *Le Grand Jeu* and thus uncovers a neglected trajectory within the art history of modernity.<sup>12</sup> Ultimately, the space opened up by this study invites a reassessment of the assumption that modernist vanguard movements were concerned with predominantly secular values and modes of being.<sup>13</sup> In this

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<sup>9</sup> Scholars have addressed postsecularity with different emphases, but all assert the increasing, but shifting, visibility and importance of religion and spirituality (by which I mean non-doctrinal approaches to a deity) within modernity and postmodernity. Two important studies are Jürgen Habermas, ‘Secularism’s Crisis of Faith: Notes on Post-Secular Society’, *New Perspectives Quarterly*, 25 (2008), 17-29, and Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> John A. McClure, *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 6.

<sup>11</sup> Janet Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys*, 171-2; Tere Arcq, ‘In Search of the Miraculous’, in *Five Keys to the Secret World of Remedios Varo*, ed. by Tere Arcq (Mexico City: Artes De México, 2008), 21–87. Gurdjieff’s teachings were mostly transmitted orally to his followers, who gathered in groups to learn and practice his techniques. He did record his teachings in an allegorical tale, which was published shortly after his death. See G.I. Gurdjieff, *Beelzebub’s Tales to his Grandson: All and Everything*. (London: Arkana, 2000).

<sup>12</sup> The role of the occult in surrealism is contested. I do not mean to resolve it in this article, but to assert a surrealist prehistory that might elucidate Varo’s artistic journey. For a thorough and insightful discussion of the polemic, see the aforementioned Bauduin, *Surrealism and the Occult* and María José González Madrid, ‘Surrealismo y saberes mágicos en la obra de Remedios Varo’ (Phd thesis, Universitat de Barcelona, 2014).

<sup>13</sup> There are of course myriad other exceptions to this assumption, from modernists that maintained or re-developed religious belief—the most famous of which is perhaps T.S. Eliot—to those whose relationship with religion refused the order of existing monolithic structures but who remained haunted by the mysterious and the supernatural. See, for example, Robert Havard’s investigation of the persistent influence of religion on the Spanish surrealists Rafael Alberti, Federico García Lorca, Luis Buñuel, and Salvador Dalí. Robert Havard, *The Crucified Mind: Rafael Alberti and the Surrealist Ethos in Spain* (London: Tamesis, 2001).

regard, it participates in a contemporary re-casting of Modernism as an experiment in ‘the re-enchantment of the world, and reorientation of human history away from the abyss of materialism and nihilism’, within which art played a foundational role.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Disenchantment of Modern Art**

In his influential 1945 treatise on contemporary art, Wolfgang Paalen evokes Rimbaud as the prophet of the artistic paradigm of the modern, technological age: ‘it was Rimbaud who uttered the Open-sesame of modern expression, when he said that the artist must become a seer (“être voyant, se faire voyant”)’.<sup>15</sup> Paalen observed that artists were no longer required simply to show the world, but to see it anew, ‘to discover new universal horizons’.<sup>16</sup> He is responding to an aura of ‘disenchantment’, identified by Friedrich Schiller and systematised by Max Weber, which was thought to haunt modern, secular society.<sup>17</sup> The nineteenth century bequeathed the twentieth a complex socio-political, scientific, and philosophical legacy that shook the foundations of any worldview that assumed innate meaning, as the names of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, alongside those of Einstein and Schrödinger, became the cultural touchstones of a modern, secularising west. With God on the retreat, science, technology, and capitalism stepped into the breach to offer alternative conceptions of the self and the universe that reflected the uncertainty of the shifting cultural milieu. However, as Terry Eagleton has pointed out, ‘not believing in God is

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<sup>14</sup> Roger Griffin, ‘Series Editor’s Preface’ in John Bramble, *Modernism and the Occult* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), ix-xiv (p. xii). The relative absence of discussion about religion in modern art is beginning to be questioned by art historians. For an engaging reflection on this oversight, see the introduction to Charlene Spretnak, *The Spiritual Dynamic in Modern Art: Art History Reconsidered, 1800 to the Present* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 1-16.

<sup>15</sup> Wolfgang Paalen, ‘Surprise and Inspiration’, in *Form and Sense* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2013 [1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1945]), 55-68 (p. 55).

<sup>16</sup> Wolfgang Paalen, ‘Surprise and Inspiration’, 57.

<sup>17</sup> See Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2005 [1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1905]).

a far more arduous affair than is generally imagined' and the twentieth century saw a continued diversification of alternative means of 'providing surrogate forms of transcendence, plugging the gap where God had once been'.<sup>18</sup> Modernity, broadly conceived, sparked great creativity in response to such questioning and artistic movements as diverse as Symbolism, Futurism, and Expressionism forged new means of representing experience of the world in its newfound multiplicity. The artist emerged as a visionary responsible for representing the richness of life in four dimensions. As Eagleton notes:

Having done service for theology in its time, the aesthetic now makes a bid to supplant it. High modernism is numinous through and through, as the work of art provides one of the last outposts of enchantment in a spiritually degenerate world.<sup>19</sup>

Paalen knew the dangers of a modernist art, and science, which eschewed the subjective and extrapolated a worldview from a method.<sup>20</sup> After his experience of the Second World War, he was convinced that a poetic sensibility should be present in all inquiry in order to temper the potentially dangerous impersonality of a seemingly objective, positivist logic. Likewise, he recognised the power of creative insight to advance scientific discovery: 'The irrefutable evidence of anthropology and psychology is that art, science, and religion are inseparable in their origins, in their

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<sup>18</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Culture and the Death of God* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014), 119; vii-ix.

<sup>19</sup> Eagleton, *Culture and the Death of God*, 180-1.

<sup>20</sup> As Marshall Berman writes: 'to be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world—and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are'. Marshall Berman, *All that is Solid Melts into Air* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1988), 15.

original meanings as interpretations of the external world, as the beginnings of thought'.<sup>21</sup>

Paalen's ideas were central to a new generation of artists who experimented with abstraction as a form of self-expression, but also exemplified late surrealist attempts to assert the continued importance of art in a world capable of barbarism on the scale of the two World Wars.<sup>22</sup> Paalen settled in Mexico in 1939 after fleeing antebellum Europe. In Mexico D.F. he was active among a group of surrealists in exile dedicated to continuing the explorations of artistic methods begun in Europe. Their project was aimed at re-configuring the role of enchantment in modern life, but their quest for self-expression and fulfilment took on a renewed relevance to their sense of self, given their refugee status. The group included a range of practitioners and approaches, unified in their commitment to the visionary power of art. These seers used art to explore the dynamics of emerging political, social, and spiritual paradigms. Paalen, for example, undertook anthropological studies which resulted in writings on Totemism—published in Mexico in *Dyn*, a journal he established to host discussion of the evolution of surrealism—and a series of paintings, both of which sought to uncover a connection between the individual and primordial consciousness, 'a memory of the future'.<sup>23</sup> At the spiritual end of the spectrum, we find Remedios Varo.

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<sup>21</sup> Wolfgang Paalen, 'The New Image', in *Form and Sense*, 37-54 (p. 39). See also the essay 'Art and Science' in the same collection.

<sup>22</sup> In this regard he stands in contrast to Theodor Adorno, who claimed in 'Cultural Criticism and Society' that 'cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today'. Theodor W. Adorno, 'Cultural Criticism and Society', *Prisms* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1983), 17-34 (p. 34).

<sup>23</sup> Garza Usabiaga, 'Anthropology in the Journals *Dyn* and *El Hijo Pródigo*', in *Surrealism in Latin America: Vivísimo Muerto*, ed. Dawn Ades (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2012), 95-110 (p. 98). *Dyn* was run by Paalan in Mexico. Six issues were published between 1942 and 1945.



## The Re-Enchantment of Modern Art

Varo became aware of surrealism during her student years in Madrid where it was central to the artistic ferment of the *Residencia de Estudiantes*, but it was in Barcelona in 1935 that she began experimenting in earnest with its techniques, alongside friends and collaborators such as Esteban Francés, Óscar Domínguez and Marcel Jean. After moving to Paris in 1937 with her lover Benjamin Péret, she became part of the surrealist group but described herself as a dazzled fan, ‘con la boca abierta dentro de ese grupo de personas brillantes y dotadas’.<sup>24</sup> The works Varo made in this period conform to surrealist orthodoxy and it was not until the 1940s and 50s, in Mexico, that she would create work that is unmistakably her own, and which moved beyond the aegis of Bretonian surrealism. As we shall see, in this later period she presents the artist as a seeker of answers to perennial questions.

Although the artists she depicts evolve powers of cosmic proportion, she first learned about the visionary potential of art as she listened to the debates of the surrealist group in Paris. Surrealism restored the romantic role of the artist as a seer who might uncover the marvellous by undermining reason and subverting all aesthetic or moral concerns.<sup>25</sup> It thus recuperated a waning faith in the artist to give meaning to a world laden with chaotic symbols waiting to disclose their secrets. In his manifestoes, André Breton lists Symbolist poets, alchemists, and cabalists as surrealist precursors, proclaiming the artist as a visionary who plumbs the depths of the self in order to attain ‘the unknown’.<sup>26</sup> As he puts it in the second manifesto, of 1930:

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<sup>24</sup> Interview with Raquel Tibol in 1957, quoted in Janet A. Kaplan, ‘Remedios Varo y el Surrealismo: Una Nueva Mirada’, in *Remedios Varo: Caminos Del Conocimiento*, 15–36 (p. 17).

<sup>25</sup> André Breton, ‘Manifesto of Surrealism (1924)’, in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, tr. by Helen R. Lane and Richard Seaver (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1974), 3–47.

<sup>26</sup> André Breton, ‘Second Manifesto of Surrealism (1930)’, in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, 119–94 (p. 178).

Everything suggests the belief that there is a certain point of the mind where life and death, the real and the imaginary, the past and the future, the communicable and the incommunicable, the high and the low are no longer perceived as contractions. It would be vain to look for any motive in surrealist activity other than the hope of determining that point.<sup>27</sup>

Breton continues to conceptualise surrealist activity using hermetic language in his later manifestoes, such as 'On Surrealism in Its Living Works' (1952). There he describes surrealism as the sole 'thread that can put us back on the road of Gnosis as knowledge of a suprasensible Reality, "invisibly visible in an eternal mystery"'.<sup>28</sup> This is not to say that Breton advocated the neo-platonic mysticism of the western esoteric tradition, whereby the artist had access to a transcendent reality. Such religiosity was strictly forbidden:

Under the pretence of civilization and progress, we have managed to banish from the mind everything that may rightly or wrongly be termed superstition or fancy; forbidden is any kind of search for the truth which is not in conformance with accepted practices.<sup>29</sup>

Marcel Raymond believes that the surrealists' insistent materialism confused the existential role that Breton assigned to the artist by conflating it with the social obligations prescribed by Trotsky's materialist vision of art.<sup>30</sup> In doing so, according to Raymond, the surrealists failed to capitalise on the spiritual potential inherited from Romanticism, and nurtured by the Symbolists.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Breton, 'Second Manifesto of Surrealism (1930)', 123.

<sup>28</sup> André Breton, 'On Surrealism and its Living Works (1952)', in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, 295-394 (p. 304).

<sup>29</sup> Breton, 'Manifesto of Surrealism (1924)', 10.

<sup>30</sup> Marcel Raymond, *From Baudelaire to Surrealism* (S.I. Lockerbie: University Paperback, 1970), 272.

<sup>31</sup> Raymond, *From Baudelaire to Surrealism*, 313.

It was this spiritual thread, dropped by the surrealist group in Paris, that Varo and her closest friends—Leonora Carrington and Eva Sulzer—picked up in Mexico. Varo and Carrington, in particular, represent an approach that has generally been excluded from the discussion of modern art. As Charlene Spretnak has shown, art history has presented a narrowly formalist narrative of the development of vanguard art movements in the twentieth century, wherein the subject matter received little critical attention. According to Spretnak: ‘for more than 70 years [1900-1970s], then, the spiritual dynamic of modern art was all but invisible within the professional art world because it did not fit within the contours of the historicism of modern art’.<sup>32</sup> That is not to say that this ‘spiritual dynamic’ was invisible because it arose in isolated occurrences. In the case of Varo and her friends, a line can be drawn back to the symbolists creating an alternative trajectory in the history of surrealism. Not all surrealists had accepted the committed materialism of the Marxist turn led by Breton and by 1930 surrealism had traversed its fair share of internal disputes. Variations emerged that did not adhere strictly to the doctrine laid down by its founding fathers (at this stage, it was certainly a patriarchal family), and younger surrealists established magazines and groups to explore affinities tangential to Breton’s agenda.

One example was *Le Grand Jeu*, edited by René Daumal, Roger Gilbert-Lecomte, Roger Vailland and Joseph Sima. Fascinated by the mystical schools of world religions, in particular Hinduism and Buddhism, and disciples of Alfred Jarry and Rimbaud, this group also dedicated themselves to a study of the occult bibliography lauded by Breton in his 1930 manifesto, but without discarding entirely its spiritual content. Having been invited to join the surrealists in 1926, by 1929

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<sup>32</sup> Spretnak, *The Spiritual Dynamic in Modern Art*, 6.

their political commitment was under scrutiny and Daumal and his associates were disavowed as ‘god seekers’, with very few mainstream surrealists openly willing to participate in their projects.<sup>33</sup> The members of the *Le Grand Jeu* group were chastised for their reading habits (preferring ‘Landru to Sacco and Vanzetti’), for their allegiances (taking part in the Théâtre Alfred-Jarry), and for ‘having used the word ‘God’’.<sup>34</sup> According to Maurice Nadeau:

There was too much talk of “mysticism”; too much Plato-Hegel-Buddha-Christ-Balzac-Rimbaud. They were, in short, too close to literature (...) And if Breton returned, in the Second Manifesto, to occultism and the Initiates, it was a long way from his methods to those of these “God-Seekers”.<sup>35</sup>

Still committed to metaphysical questions, Dumal and his collaborators believed that art was capable of communicating answers that somehow exceeded the banal materiality of a work itself. For Raymond, contributors to this group were simply surrealists unwilling to forgo the life of the spirit, the modern corollary of which was mysticism. This is exemplified in the second issue of *Le Grand Jeu*, from which Raymond quotes the following passage:

By following a certain method called mystical a man can achieve the immediate perception of another world, incommensurable with his senses and irreducible to his intellect; knowledge of this world marks an intermediate stage between individual consciousness and the other consciousness. It is the common possession of all those who, some time in

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<sup>33</sup> Maurice Nadeau, *The History of Surrealism*, trans. from the French by Richard Howard with an intro. by Roger Shattuck (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1978), 157.

<sup>34</sup> Nadeau, *The History of Surrealism*, 172.

<sup>35</sup> Nadeau, *The History of Surrealism*, 157.

their lives, have wanted desperately to transcend the possibilities inherent in their species and have envisaged the mortal departure.<sup>36</sup>

This mystical method foreshadows the hermetic idiom that evolves in Varo's work in the 1940s. Another affinity is the important encounter between each artist and Gurdjieff's Fourth Way, a sacred teaching that offered its followers a practical program of careful self-observation aimed at developing spiritual faculties that it claims are naturally dormant in humanity and to resist the forces in the world that prevent the self from becoming a harmonious, permanent soul. After a chance meeting in 1931 with Gurdjieff's follower Alexandre de Salzmann, the 21-year-old Daumal dedicated himself to studying with this new master and often included reflections on aspects of the Fourth Way in his subsequent writings.<sup>37</sup> Like Varo, Daumal also found in Gurdjieff a focus on the spiritual purpose of art that appealed to his dedication to the visionary power of the artist.<sup>38</sup>

Despite the fact that—retrospectively—Varo's work appears to have more in common with the ethos of *Le Grand Jeu*, in the late 1930s in France she remained affiliated with the surrealist group alongside her partner Benjamin Péret.<sup>39</sup> Her work from this period is also more in keeping with a surrealist aesthetic that privileges the imagination as a tool for creating a new form of existence in the modern world, one which unsettles the primacy of the status quo by 'negating ready-

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<sup>36</sup> Raymond, *From Baudelaire to Surrealism*, 269.

<sup>37</sup> Kathleen Rosenblatt, *René Daumal: The Life and Work of a Mystic Guide* (New York: SUNY Press, 1999), 136. Daumal lived and worked with Madame de Salzmann, who took over control of Gurdjieff's teachings after his death, between 1933 and 1938. Gurdjieff himself often led the group in their studies (142).

<sup>38</sup> Rosenblatt, *René Daumal*, 137.

<sup>39</sup> There is no clear evidence that Varo and Daumal met, despite coinciding closely in interests, friends, and occasionally even geographically. It is clear that Varo revered Daumal's work, given her painting *Ascensión al monte análogo* (1960), named after Daumal's Gurdjieffian novel *Mount Analogue: A Novel of Symbolically Authentic Non-Euclidean Adventures in Mountain Climbing* (Woodstock: Tusk Ivories, 2004 [1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1952]).

made “orders,” denying the pertinence of codes (social, but also stylistic, linguistic, and even logical).<sup>40</sup> Exploring this praxis, Varo experimented with *collage* and collaborative *cadavre exquis*, literally deconstructing existing images to create new objects and generate new, meaningful juxtapositions. Furthermore, her paintings from the period— *Le désir* (1935, CAT 16), *Ojos sobre la mesa* (1936 CAT, 30), or *L’Agent Double* (1936, CAT 32)—contain tropes of sexual desire and frustration, of dreams and the unconscious, that were the stock and trade of surrealist art.<sup>41</sup>

However, once settled in Mexico in December 1941, Varo’s work began to change. Like Daumal, Varo subscribed to the central, emancipatory precepts of surrealism but would progress along a different path. Although natural allies at the outset, as orthodox surrealism gravitated towards dialectical materialism, Varo—like Daumal before her—was drawn instead to the Perennial philosophies popularised by Rudolf Otto, Aldous Huxley, and Carl Jung, and practiced in the teachings of Gurdjieff; spiritual systems increasingly incompatible with the surrealism of Breton.

In Mexico, Varo encountered an environment more welcoming to spirituality and thus sympathetic to a mystical conception of an artist’s visionary capacities. Alongside Péret, she was surrounded by a group of exiled surrealists which included Victor Brauner, Wolfgang Paalen, Eva Sulzer, and Leonora Carrington. The group continued the artistic experimentations they had begun in Paris, maintaining their belief in the visionary, reparative role of art in the modern world. Now out of earshot of the centralising voice of Breton, who held sway over a particular ideology, some members of the group—including Varo—began to nuance their adherence to

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<sup>40</sup> Jacqueline Chénieux-Gendron, *Surrealism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 5.

<sup>41</sup> All catalogue numbers, designated with the abbreviation CAT, are taken from Walter Gruen and Ricardo Ovalle, *Remedios Varo: Catálogo Razonado* (México D.F.: Ediciones Era, 1994). The entire catalogue can be viewed online at [www.remedios-varo.com](http://www.remedios-varo.com).

surrealist doctrine. Varo moved beyond Breton's insistence on a secular surrealism and began to study in earnest the esoteric philosophies which, according to Raymond, the surrealists had 'gradually deserted'.<sup>42</sup>

As already described, surrealism had long attracted—and sometimes then ejected—artists less inclined to restrict their interest in the occult to a search for poetic means. Luis Martín Lozano believes that, in France, Victor Brauner had already been very influential in supporting Varo's development of a metaphysical art dedicated to uncovering occult knowledge:

El sentido casi premonitorio que la pintura llegó a tener para Brauner significó para Remedios la posibilidad de comprobar que el arte no era un mero ejercicio intelectual, sino que estaba estrechamente atado a la formulación de un destino preestablecido, y al cual sólo el artista—como iniciado—podía acceder con ojo visionario.<sup>43</sup>

Varo met Brauner in June 1940, having fled Nazi occupied Paris with Oscar Domínguez. Domínguez had insisted Varo take his place in a car travelling south and she eventually arrived in Canet-Plage on the Mediterranean where she began an intimate relationship with Brauner.<sup>44</sup> The couple lived together for a number of months before joining a larger group of exiled artists in Marseille. Both fled to Mexico after having been joined by Péret, who had managed to buy freedom from a military prison in Rennes, where he had been interned for political activism.<sup>45</sup> In 1944, Brauner published an artistic statement for the New York based surrealist publication *VVV* that resonated uncannily with the work Varo would go on to make.

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<sup>42</sup> Raymond, *From Baudelaire to Surrealism*, 270. Orthodox surrealism may also have inherited a suspicion of the occult from Freud, who described it as a 'black mud tide'. C. G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, ed. by Aniela Jaffé (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 150.

<sup>43</sup> Luis Martín Lozano, 'Remedios Varo: Una reflexión sobre el trabajo y los días de una pintora', in *Remedios Varo: Catálogo Razonado*, 43–73 (p. 63).

<sup>44</sup> Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys*, 72.

<sup>45</sup> Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys*, 69; 74.

He lists reasons why viewers may like his painting, describing it as ‘nocturnal’, ‘symbolic’, ‘mythical’, ‘magic, hermetic, alchemical’, phantasmal, mysterious, disquieting’ and describing its protagonists as ‘sonambulists, incubi, succubi, lycanthropes, *éphialtes*, phantoms, spectres, sorcerers, seers, mediums’. In his list of reasons, he also allows glimpses of his philosophical approach, describing his work as ‘an adventure, a departure toward the unknown’, the very principle of becoming’, and ‘romantic, of a new and powerful romanticism which is to come and which will liberate man’. His final adjective is ‘surrealist’, which he qualifies as ‘physical, chemical, psychological, psychoanalytical’.<sup>46</sup> Up until this point, this description could be applied to Varo’s *oeuvre*, but an important omission would be spiritual. In the 1940s, Varo began to immerse herself in the hermetic, occult discourse Breton recommended as part of the surrealist project of personal mythmaking. However, as I have argued elsewhere, she embraced the new occult vocabulary in its full significance, employing it to depict a personal, spiritual journey of perennial importance.<sup>47</sup>

Far from home, she sought to establish new roots in a sense of being that transcended time and place. Dedicated to resisting imposed meaning and to the creation of new paradigms of knowledge, surrealism’s aesthetics were inimical to the recuperative artistic quest undertaken by Varo and her cohort of artistic seekers in Mexico, who were focused on uncovering primordial knowledge hidden from public view. According to Chénieux-Gendron:

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<sup>46</sup> Victor Brauner, ‘On the Fantastic in Painting, in Theatre’, in *Surrealists on Art*, ed. by Lucy R. Lippard (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1970), 67-69 (p. 67).

<sup>47</sup> Ricki O’Rawe, ‘Remedios Varo’s Feminine, Spiritual Quest’, in *Preservation, Radicalism, and the Avant-Garde Canon*, ed. by R. Ferreboeuf, F. Noble, and T. Plunkett (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 111–28.



The implicit philosophy of the French Surrealists, playing on the level of existence and not of essence, of beings and not of being, gives imagination a leading role: not to *recognise* something that had previously been veiled, but to give existence to its own unprecedented forms. The power of (poetic) imagination becomes, by definition, practical.<sup>48</sup>

The pre-eminence of multiplicity, the resistance to signification and the primacy of the new within surrealism contrasts with the poetics implied in the teachings of G.I. Gurdjieff, which was aimed at de-coding occult truth embedded in works created by esoteric initiates; at a recovery rather than a recreation of the sacred.

### **The Evolution of an Esoteric Art**

Suffering the dislocation of exile, an experience that for her entailed financial and emotional instability throughout the 40s, Varo began to study spiritual systems that might offer her life meaning and structure. One such system was the Fourth Way.<sup>49</sup> The Work, as this teaching was known, attracted people seeking an alternative to the religious institutions that had fallen out of favour with many moderns, the surrealists in particular. It offered a method for developing a permanent, elevated spiritual consciousness in tune with a higher level of reality—one usually inaccessible to passive, distracted human beings. This philosophy stressed the importance of an inner journey towards self-consciousness and aimed at fulfilling the spiritual potential of ‘real man’, ‘that is, will, individuality, and objective knowledge’.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Chénieux-Gendron, *Surrealism*, 4–5. Italics in the original.

<sup>49</sup> For a detailed overview of Varo’s contact with the Fourth Way and its influence on her work, see Arcq, ‘In Search of the Miraculous’, 21–87. For a detailed reading of how it informs the visual vocabulary of her artistic search for Self, see my ‘Ruedas metafísicas: “Personality” and “Essence” in Remedios Varo’s Paintings’, *Hispanic Research Journal*, 15:5 (2014), 445–62.

<sup>50</sup> Michel de Salzmán, ‘G. I. Gurdjieff’, *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, VI, 139–40 (p. 139). G.I. Gurdjieff was a spiritual teacher who was born Alexandropol (now Gyumri) in Armenia, then part of the Russian Empire. After travelling Asia and the Middle East for twenty years, he returned to Russia in 1912 with

Gurdjieff's system includes teachings on the role of artistic practice in the development of a harmonious self, the clearest exposition of which—*In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (1949)—was recorded by his most important pupil, Peter Demianovich Ouspensky.<sup>51</sup> Ouspensky's own work was already known to the surrealists. Roberto Matta and Gordon Onslow-Ford, with whom Varo would spend time in Mexico, dedicated the summer of 1938 in Brittany to reading Ouspensky's 1912 work *Tertium Organum*, among other texts.<sup>52</sup> Published before Ouspensky met Gurdjieff, this book explores the possibility of a four-dimensional perception that can overcome the Kantian prohibition on attaining direct access to the real world. It outlines the potential of art to allow access to hidden dimensions of reality:

Only that fine apparatus which is called the *soul of the artist* can understand and feel the reflection of the noumenon in the phenomenon. In art it is necessary to study 'occultism' - the hidden side of life. The artist must be a clairvoyant: he must see that which others do not see; he must be a magician, must possess the power to make others see what they do not themselves see, but which he does see. Art sees more and farther than we do [...] It sees vastly more than the most perfect apparatus can discover; and it senses the infinite invisible facets of that crystal, one of which we call man.<sup>53</sup>

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a spiritual system designed to aid an individual's search for an inalienable Self. He taught that to fulfil the spiritual potential of 'real man', one must work to develop inner harmony and self-consciousness. Aided by close followers, Gurdjieff's teachings spread throughout Europe and America—North and South—despite the outbreak of war.

<sup>51</sup> Ouspensky studied intensively with Gurdjieff between 1915 and 1918, but broke away from his formal teaching in 1924. He refrained from publishing his account of Gurdjieff's teachings until after his death.

<sup>52</sup> Linda Dalrymple Henderson, 'Mysticism, Romanticism, and the Fourth Dimension', in *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*, ed. by Maurice Tuchman et al (New York: Abbeville Press, 1986), 219–37 (p. 229).

<sup>53</sup> P. D Ouspensky, *Tertium Organum: The Third Canon of Thought*, trans. by Claude Bragdon (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1922), 161–62. Italics in original.

His appeal to the surrealists is clear: Ouspensky conceived of the artist as a visionary and art as a practice that ‘anticipates a psychic evolution and divines its future forms’.<sup>54</sup> Not only was art deemed an essential apparatus for uncovering the truth of reality, but it was also elevated to the status of religion in its sacred function. According to Ouspensky: ‘cosmic consciousness is also possible of attainment through the emotions attendant upon creation—in painters, musicians and poets. Art in its highest manifestations is a path to cosmic consciousness’.<sup>55</sup>

In subsequent years, Gurdjieff also emphasised the esoteric nature of an artist’s talents. According to his hermetic teachings, a human being that passively, mechanically goes about his or her life devolves spiritually. To avoid this, all action, including the creation of art, must be undertaken mindfully, awake to oneself and to the world. The Gurdjieffian artist must master their self in order to create deliberate, purposeful art and avoid mechanical mimesis. They must resist the ‘diseases’ which distract them from their purpose—‘pride, self-love, vanity’—by recognising that individual talent is subordinate to the communication of truth.<sup>56</sup> Only if artists are able to achieve this level of self-consciousness will they be able to create art that will aid in the self-development of others. And for Gurdjieff, art was only authentic if it played an active role in a human being’s spiritual evolution: ‘to aid us in our upward movement toward higher understanding and to help us struggle against the opposing forces of nature is the sacred purpose and obligation of art’.<sup>57</sup>

This aesthetics—used in the Kantian sense of ‘the capacity (receptivity) for receiving representations through the mode in which we are affected by objects’—

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<sup>54</sup> Ouspensky, *Tertium Organum*, 83.

<sup>55</sup> Ouspensky, *Tertium Organum*, 331.

<sup>56</sup> Anna T. Challenger, *Philosophy and Art in Gurdjieff’s Beelzebub: A Modern Sufi Odyssey* (Amsterdam; New York: Brill | Rodopi, 2002), 39.

<sup>57</sup> Challenger, *Philosophy and Art in Gurdjieff’s Beelzebub*, 36.

finds its clearest expression in *In Search of the Miraculous*, where the Gurdjieff's conception of 'objective' and 'subjective' art is outlined:

The difference between objective art and subjective art is that in 'objective' art the artist really does 'create,' that is, he makes what he intended, he puts into his work whatever ideas and feelings he wants to put into it. And the action of his work upon men is absolutely definite: they will, of course each according to his own level, receive the same ideas and the same feelings that the artist wanted to transmit to them. There can be nothing accidental either in the creation or in the impressions of objective art.<sup>58</sup>

It is apparent that Gurdjieff does not use the adjective 'subjective' by its common definition. 'Subjective' art for him is the result of passive, mechanical activity undertaken by an artist who is spiritually undeveloped. For Gurdjieff, 'most twentieth century art in its various forms, according to his standards, would fall into this category', and all mystery in art is due to the poor spiritual development of the artist, as well as their inability to access and communicate the truth of the universe.<sup>59</sup> As we see below, this is not the kind of artist Varo represents. While we do encounter characters hindered by their own mechanical nature, asleep to their true selves—to use some Gurdjieffian tropes—her artists are presented in landscapes adorned with symbols of their spiritual advancement. Their practice is objective: carefully constructed by an active, developed consciousness and capable of transmitting its message precisely to the intended audience. This assumes that the audience shares a similar level of spiritual evolution as the artist as, for Gurdjieff, objective knowledge—of the All, of the noumena—is attained by observing things in

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<sup>58</sup> Emmanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. by Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan, 1929), 19. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, 296.

<sup>59</sup> Challenger, *Philosophy and Art in Gurdjieff's Beelzebub*, 31.

an objective state of consciousness and is therefore only available to the spiritually developed.

Within the Fourth Way, the spiritually advanced artist has a privileged ability to understand and communicate the esoteric truth of the universe. Citing examples of objective art such as the Sphinx in Egypt, ‘as well as some historically known works of architecture, certain statues of gods, and many other things’, Gurdjieff claims that they ‘can be read like books, only not with the mind but with the emotions, provided [the viewer] is sufficiently developed’.<sup>60</sup> Ouspensky describes this effect by recounting one of Gurdjieff’s tales of his travels in Central Asia, where he encountered a strange sculpture of a local deity:

At first it produced upon us simply the impression of being a curiosity. But after a while we began to *feel* that this figure contained many things, a big, complete, and complex system of cosmology. And slowly, step by step, we began to decipher this system. It was in the body of the figure, in its legs, in its arms, in its head, in its eyes, in its ears; everywhere. In the whole statue there was nothing accidental, nothing without meaning.<sup>61</sup>

He goes on to describe how, through his understanding of the work, he began to feel the thoughts and feelings of its creators: ‘we grasped the meaning of what they wanted to convey to us across thousands of years, and not only the meaning, but all the feelings and the emotions connected with it as well. That indeed was art!’<sup>62</sup>

Within the fourth way, the artist’s challenge is twofold: to develop oneself and to communicate esoteric truth to other people. Yet, those capable of receiving the message of an enlightened art must also have awakened to their true selves. The

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<sup>60</sup> Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, 27.

<sup>61</sup> Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, 27.

<sup>62</sup> Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, 27.

negotiation of this relationship can be seen in the idiosyncrasies of Gurdjieff's own writings. J.G. Bennett believed that the wanton difficulty of Gurdjieff's style in his magnum opus *Beelzebub's Tales to his Grandson*, was part of an attempt to prevent passive consumption of the wisdom it contains. His motivation lay in a desire to subvert humanity's openness to suggestion, something that Gurdjieff believed was fundamental to our 'inner slavery'.<sup>63</sup> According to Bennett: 'when we have organised ideas put in front of us that our minds are able to accept, it is very hard to prevent this mind from being lazy. We say: "Now I understand" and we do not feel the need to do any work'.<sup>64</sup>

The purpose of Gurdjieff's terse prose was not to alienate those unable to ascertain the esoteric content of a work of art, but rather to encourage their conscious engagement with the material. For this reason, art for Gurdjieff must be multivalent, as it will be approached by a diversity of people, with different levels of understanding. Part of this balance requires appealing to the different coordinating centres he believed to be present in a human being. An over-emphasis of style, innovation, or originality is but a distraction – it is 'subjective' and thus unhelpful to the seeker. Katherine Mansfield sums this up beautifully, while resident at Gurdjieff's short lived Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man at the Prieuré des Basses Loges, Fontainebleau-Avon:

Suppose that I succeed in writing as well as Shakespeare. It would be lovely, but what then? There is something wanting in literary art even at its highest... The greatest literature is still only mere literature if it has not a purpose commensurate with its art. Presence or absence of purpose distinguishes literature from mere literature, and the elevation of the

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<sup>63</sup> Challenger, *Philosophy and Art in Gurdjieff's Beelzebub*, 73.

<sup>64</sup> J.G. Bennett, quoted in Challenger, *Philosophy and Art in Gurdjieff's Beelzebub*, 73–4.

purpose distinguishes literature within literature. That is merely literary that has no other object than to please. Minor literature has a didactic object. But the greatest literature of all—the literature that scarcely exists—has not merely an aesthetic object, nor merely a didactic object, but, in addition, a *creative* object: that of subjecting its readers to a real and at the same time illuminating experience. Major literature, in short, is an initiation into truth.<sup>65</sup>

It becomes clear that there is an important difference here with the surrealist conception of the artist. For Breton, the surrealist artist was a conduit, a medium that might communicate a message, but one that could not be held responsible for its content.<sup>66</sup> For Gurdjieff, this is the definition of a ‘subjective’ artist, who acts with indefinite purpose and is not in control of the result. As Gurdjieff states: ‘you say an artist creates. I say this only in connection with objective art. In relation to subjective art I say that with him “it is created.” You do not differentiate between these, but this is where the whole difference lies’.<sup>67</sup>

As we shall see, during the 1940s Varo moves closer to Gurdjieff’s conception of the artist than to Breton’s. By the 1950s—the decade in which her best known work was created—her practice as an artist involved the precise construction of carefully planned paintings replete with symbolism. It also involved work on her sense of self, which is manifest in her visual interrogations of the power and praxis of art. For Varo, the artist becomes someone who can offer ‘an initiation into truth’.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> A. R. Orage, ‘Talks with Katherine Mansfield’, *The Century Magazine* (New York, November 1924). Quoted in Challenger, *Philosophy and Art in Gurdjieff’s Beelzebub*, 43.

<sup>66</sup> J. H. Matthews, *The Surrealist Mind* (London: Susquehanna University Press, 1991), 72.

<sup>67</sup> Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, 296.

<sup>68</sup> Orage, ‘Talks with Katherine Mansfield’, quoted in Challenger, *Philosophy and Art in Gurdjieff’s Beelzebub*, 43.

Varo was aware of her divergence from the Parisian surrealist group. In a letter to Walter Gruen written from Paris in 1958, she writes: ‘veo que definitivamente he dejado de pertenecer a estas gentes [the surrealists] y a estas cosas’.<sup>69</sup> It is noteworthy that Varo specifies her disconnection with ‘estas gentes’, rather than with surrealism as a method. In a rare, undated interview re-printed by Castells, Varo offers a further clue to her relationship with surrealism, when she describes it as a disposition—‘un sentimiento inherente al hombre’—and thus impervious to decline.<sup>70</sup> It may, therefore, be more fruitful to speak of her divergence from the surrealist group rather than surrealist practice. Varo exemplifies, in this regard, a multiform surrealism that developed as practitioners spread throughout the world pre- and post- World War II.<sup>71</sup> In fact, Anna Balakian has questioned whether Breton should remain the paragon of surrealism in the post-war period, given the diversity of practices happening under its auspices at that time.<sup>72</sup> To his credit, this appears to have been recognised by Breton himself, who—in an interview in 1946—references Varo and other female artists as evidence of the continued relevance of post-war surrealism.<sup>73</sup> Such acknowledgement is made by Breton despite a divergence in approaches to selfhood, which has been identified by Tara Plunkett.<sup>74</sup> Where Breton emphasized the romantic, Varo—whose work does not preclude romantic encounters—grounds the search in a sacred idiom. More generally, post-war surrealism had turned toward myth, in particular in work of the female

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<sup>69</sup> Gruen and Ovalle, *Remedios Varo: Catálogo Razonado*, 47.

<sup>70</sup> Isabel Castells, ‘Remedios Varo, entre España, París y México’, in *Cartas, sueños y otros textos* (México D.F.: Ediciones Era, 1997), 67.

<sup>71</sup> In the introduction to Michael Richardson and Krzysztof Fijalkowski, *Surrealism Against The Current: Tracts and Declarations* (University of Michigan: Pluto Press, 2001), 1-18, Michael Richardson sketches the evolution of surrealism, indicating the range of approaches designated by the term.

<sup>72</sup> Anna Balakian, *Andre Breton, Magus of Surrealism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 211.

<sup>73</sup> André Breton, *Entretiens (1913-1952)* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), 243.

<sup>74</sup> Tara Emma Plunkett, ‘Self and Desire: Surrealism in the Images and Texts of Federico García Lorca, Rafael Alberti, Remedios Varo and Leonora Carrington’ (PhD thesis, Queen’s University Belfast, 2013).



surrealists, who had previously been somewhat sidelined.<sup>75</sup> In this renewed focus on myth, Varo found common cause between her readings of Gurdjieff and Ouspensky and the artistic approach she had adopted. Increasingly, surrealists had turned to mythologies of the occult and esoteric practices for inspiration. As mentioned previously, this was especially the case among those who gathered in Varo and Péret's flat on Calle Gabino Barreda in Mexico City:

According to Gerzso, part of the conversations and activities at the house on Gabino Barreda Street revolved around books about magic and occultism that arrived in Mexico through the auspices of the bookstore called the Librería Británica, which Carrington, among others, had helped to establish. [...] During the war years in Mexico, Péret, Varo and Carrington began an exploration of the arcane, which would become the new theme of the Surrealist Bretonians after the war—the vindication of mythology, magic, and natural laws, connected to the postulation of the ‘feminine principle’ diametrically opposed to the masculine psychology that had provoked the war. This leaning toward the arcane stimulated renewed exploration of non-Western traditions among the Surrealists, with their progressive loss of a political presence.<sup>76</sup>

Yet, it is important to reassert Varo's commitment to the sacred power of art, which aligned her more closely with heretical surrealists such as *Le Gran Jeu*. Her paintings from the 1940s that might be described as more narrative also set her

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<sup>75</sup> See Lourdes Andrade, ‘De amores y desamores: Relaciones de México con el surrealismo’ in *El Surrealismo entre Viejo y Nuevo Mundo* (Las Palmas: Cabildo Insular de Gran Canaria, Centro Atlántico de Arte Moderno, 1989), 101-109 (p. 102).

<sup>76</sup> Cuauhtémoc Medina, ‘Gerzso and the Indo-American Gothic: From Eccentric Surrealism to Parallel Modernism’ in *Risking the Abstract: Mexican Modernism and the Art of Gunther Gerzso* (Santa Barbara: Santa Barbara Museum of Modern Art, 2003), 195–213, (p. 201).

apart from a zeitgeist that was increasingly conceptual and abstract. Commenting on this period of her work, Arcq notes a movement towards drawing, which she interprets as an attempt to practice a more objective art—planned meticulously and executed in accordance with particular goals.<sup>77</sup> Similarly, Kaplan believes that, for Varo, ‘the very act of painting could be seen as such a spiritual endeavour’.<sup>78</sup> According to Kaplan:

As a process of transformation, of making physical the energy of the spirit, Varo’s slow and deliberate technique served to foster just such self-awareness. And by setting revelations of the marvellous in the context of daily activity, Varo can be seen as visualizing a conception central to the Gurdjieffian approach to spirituality.<sup>79</sup>

Varo’s interest in a Gurdjieffian conception of the artist also suggests that her work may hold a key to the mysterious vision of hidden realities that she was uncovering on her own journey. In Mexico City in the 1940s, she participated in workshops run by Christopher Fremantle aimed at developing practical knowledge of the links between the artist and spirituality.<sup>80</sup> Both Varo and Carrington participated in these workshops, where they would study form and colour in an attempt to develop a more objective art. According to Arcq: ‘the study focused on observation: they would observe an object for a lengthy period, and then capture the impressions that the object in question had caused in them’.<sup>81</sup> Lillian Firestone, when interviewed about her memories of these workshops, described the work they developed in these

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<sup>77</sup> Arcq, ‘In Search of the Miraculous’, 33.

<sup>78</sup> Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys*, 172.

<sup>79</sup> Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys*, 172.

<sup>80</sup> Arcq, ‘In Search of the Miraculous’, 37. Other than her contact with Rodney Collin (reported by Arcq), much of Varo’s artistic development of Gurdjieff’s ideas was led by her contact with the British painter Christopher Fremantle who had studied directly with Gurdjieff and had been instructed by Madame de Salzmann to lead the group in Mexico. See Arcq, ‘In Search of the Miraculous’, 35-36.

<sup>81</sup> Arcq, ‘In Search of the Miraculous’, 37.

sessions: 'No inanimate object was seen to be completely devoid of movement. [...] We saw the 'livingness' even in rocks. [...] Even a perfectly round orange was revealed as a complex kingdom of curves and whorl'.<sup>82</sup> Firestone describes this 'form and colour' study in the introduction to a collection of Fremantle's writings and letters, *On Attention*, describing the Zen activities that Fremantle led them in over the many years that he visited Mexico to continue his teachings based on Gurdjieff's works.<sup>83</sup> He encouraged the artists he taught to feel the life in all objects and they came to 'distinguish between the uniqueness of each object and the stereotypical appearance the mind ascribed to it'.<sup>84</sup> In another exercise, Fremantle would restrict their work to the gradients of a single colour so they would come to understand its power. This practice brings to mind the paintings *Mujer sedente* (1950, CAT 95) and *Valle de la luna* (1950, CAT 98), which are composed of different shades of a very limited palette. As Firestone writes: 'after a year, he allowed a second color to be used. By then, we understood something of what a color contained'.<sup>85</sup> This practice of ritualistic study and close attention must have enlivened the ideas that Varo encountered in her readings of Ouspensky and Gurdjieff, encouraging her predilection for depicting artists as powerful beings in the act of creation. Fremantle's interest in Zen Buddhism may also have informed the sense of interconnection and unity that Varo's representations of visionary artists discover on their journey.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Arcq, 'In Search of the Miraculous', 37. Quotation drawn from a personal interview carried out by Arcq.

<sup>83</sup> Christopher Fremantle, *On Attention: Talks, Essays and Letters Based on the Ideas of G.I. Gurdjieff* (Denville: Indications, 1993).

<sup>84</sup> Liliana Firestone in Fremantle, *On Attention*, iv.

<sup>85</sup> Firestone in Fremantle, *On Attention*, iv.

<sup>86</sup> Varo was independently interested in Buddhism and her library contained a copy of writings by the Zen Buddhist teacher D.T. Suzuki. See Haynes, 'The Art of Remedios Varo', 28.

As we have seen, in Mexico, Varo's artistic connections widened beyond the surrealist milieu to include a group of dedicated students of esoteric teachings, in particular Gurdjieff's Fourth Way. These teachings provided a schema for understanding the artist as an empowered individual whose creative practice contributed to uncovering secrets about the self and the universe. In the remaining section of this article, I will show how an understanding of these teachings opens up new, important avenues of analysis for Varo's representation of artistic practice in her paintings.

### **An Initiation into Truth**

In Varo's paintings one encounters artists capable of bringing about spiritual transformation. Understood in the idiom of the Fourth Way, paintings such as *El flautista* (1955), *Armonía* (1956), and *Creación de las aves* (1957), are found to depict protagonists capable of uncovering and communicating what Gurdjieff called objective knowledge.

In *Creación de las aves* (1957) Varo depicts a visionary endowed with extraordinary power. An anthropomorphised owl-woman-artist sits at a desk painting small birds in the three primary colours which, when combined with the rays of starlight she filters through a Newtonian prism, fly from the page into the room. The spiritual significance of the scene is symbolised by the octagonal table, which represents the coming together of the circle and the square and the meeting of celestial and terrestrial planes.<sup>87</sup> The primary colours, which appear to have been extracted from an egg-shaped alchemical vessel, represent a new pure substance that has been developed from the basic matter of the atmosphere that is drawn in

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<sup>87</sup> Juan Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols* (Mineola N.Y.: Dover Publications, 2002), 242.

from outside the building. The process of refining this material in the alchemical vessel has garnered the powerful 'noble Tincture' sought by the alchemists, a substance which in its esoteric interpretation would facilitate the perfection of a soul in balance with the universe.<sup>88</sup> By combining this substance with celestial light refracted by a Newtonian prism, the protagonist draws out its hidden complexity, engendering new life in the form of a bird.

Both the artist and her work act as symbols of a process of rebirth. In Goddess mythology, the Owl is a symbol of death and regeneration and 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'.<sup>89</sup> The egg-shaped alchemical stove from which the artist draws the magical ink further reinforces this idea. Interpreted in this way, the painting is seen to signify the cycles of life and death, in which all things change, die and are reborn, which is particularly pertinent, given that the mythical founder of alchemy was Maria Prophetissa, a female painter credited with inventing the alchemical apparatus known as a *kerotakis*, a Greek word also associated with the artist's palette.<sup>90</sup> Along these lines, Elizabeth Sánchez has described the painting as a depiction of 'both the collaborative nature of the creative act and the artist's central role in bringing her own creations to life'.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness*, 12th ed. (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1999), 142.

<sup>89</sup> Marija Gimbutas, *The Language of the Goddess* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1989), 185.

<sup>90</sup> Peter Marshall, *The Philosopher's Stone: A Quest for the Secrets of Alchemy* (London: Macmillan, 2001), 202.

<sup>91</sup> *Creación de las aves* has commonly been recognised for its depiction of a feminine creative power. See Whitney Chadwick, 'Cycles of Narrative Fantasy', in *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement*, ed. by Whitney Chadwick (London: Thames and Hudson, 2002), 219–37 (p. 202); Estella Lauter, *Women as Mythmakers: Poetry and Visual Art by Twentieth-Century Women* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 84–85; Alejandra María Zanetta, *La Otra Cara de La Vanguardia: Estudio Comparativo de La Obra Artística de Maruja Mallo, Ángeles Santos Y Remedios Varo* (Lewiston N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 2006), 201.

An important ingredient in the mysterious alchemy of the protagonist's generative art appears to emanate from the sound hole of a little violin that hangs over the owl figure's heart, before being transmitted to the canvas by the artist's paintbrush. Gurdjieff taught a *Theory of Octaves*, which posited that the universe was made up of vibrations and that certain types of art could interact with these vibrations in very powerful ways.<sup>92</sup> In this regard, he believed music to be particularly powerful, highlighting the biblical tale of the destruction of the walls of Jericho as a legend of objective music.<sup>93</sup> Thought of in this way, the third factor in the owl protagonist's art, the vibrations passing from the heart-violin to the canvas, becomes the truly important element in this mysterious conjunction. If the esoteric knowledge required to create is dependent on the level of spiritual development of the artist, then this painting appears to depict an artist who has achieved a high level of consciousness, one capable of creating works of objective art with the engagement of the 'inner octave'.<sup>94</sup> In Varo's painting, the protagonist is portrayed as being so successful at communicating exactly what she intended that the work flies off the page, literally granted life by the work of the artist.

Gurdjieff considered music in particular to be an effective tool for uncovering esoteric truth about the universe and oneself.<sup>95</sup> At his nightly meetings in Paris in his flat on the rue de Colonel Renard he would always perform music, playing 'the most moving and unearthly music' on 'one of those little hand organs so popular in

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<sup>92</sup> Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, 122-23. The Law of Octaves, which she will have encountered in Ouspensky and Gurdjieff, expands the periodicity of eights found in the musical scale and the periodic table into a Ray of Creation, which Ouspensky believed to be an ancient knowledge that explained all the mechanisms of the universe, manifest and hidden. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, 81-82.

<sup>93</sup> Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, 297.

<sup>94</sup> Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, 297.

<sup>95</sup> Louis Pauwels, *Gurdjieff* (New York: S. Weiser, 1972), 101.

the Near East'.<sup>96</sup> Gurdjieff also composed scores alongside Tomas De Hartmann, with whom he lived between 1917 and 1929 and who was later charged with composing music for the Gurdjieff movements.

In his teachings, music is claimed to facilitate the synchronicity between one's inner being and the universe. A connection which, to use a now common metaphor, a human being should seek to harmonise. If able to develop and control a harmonised 'inner octave', a person can gain great power – the power both to destroy and to create. According to Pauwels: 'plain music, no matter of what kind, will not destroy walls, but objective music indeed can do so. And not only can it destroy but it can also build up'.<sup>97</sup> In Varo's 1955 painting *El flautista* (CAT 127), we encounter a musician engaged in just such a work of objective art.

Varo depicts a mysterious musician constructing a tower from rocks marked by the symbols of epochs past by playing the flute. Bright wispy lines emanate from the flute, forming the schematic outline of the tower's blueprint, whilst also carrying forward the rocks necessary for its construction. Leaning on a mossy rock formation that acts as a primitive and unrefined shadow of the octagonal tower being created, the flautist is absorbed in this special act of creation. The power of his objective art is emphasised by the inlaid mother of pearl used to represent the figure's face, making it strikingly bright in comparison with the murky surroundings. Its intensity is also stressed by the superhuman stillness of the character, who has seemingly been deep in concentration for some time, allowing the organic matter that grows on the rock to spread to his face and clothing.

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<sup>96</sup> John G. Bennett and Elizabeth Bennett, *Idiots in Paris: Diaries of J.G. Bennett and Elizabeth Bennett, 1949* (York Beach, Me: S. Weiser, 1991), 9.

<sup>97</sup> Pauwels, *Gurdjieff*, 101.

Such harmony is echoed in the octagonal structure of the tower which, as already noted, is a symbol of perfection and harmony.<sup>98</sup> However, Arcq has linked this painting to the Law of Octaves, noting that Eva Sulzer purchased the painting in acknowledgement of its connection to Gurdjieff's teachings.<sup>99</sup> This connection had already been made by Varo in her commentary, where she emphasises the importance of the theory in certain esoteric doctrines:

el flautista construye esta torre octagonal levantando las piedras con el poder e impulso del sonido de su flauta, las piedras son fósiles. La torre es octagonal para simbolizar (algo vagamente, debo decir) la teoría de las octavas. (Teoría muy importante en ciertas enseñanzas esotéricas.) La mitad de la torre es como transparente y solo dibujada porque está imaginada por el que la van construyendo.<sup>100</sup>

Varo emphasises the esoteric resonances of the painting, but also draws attention to the artist's precise vision of the work that is being constructed. The viewer can see that in the painting the flautist is successfully creating exactly the tower that he has imagined. Each block is being placed precisely, in accordance with the schematics that signify his vision for the finished edifice. The flautist is an objective artist *par excellence* and Varo makes manifest the conception, creation and completion of his act of objective art.

Varo also draws attention to the fact that the flautist builds the tower from rocks marked with engraved fish, leaves, dragonflies, snails and beetles. The inclusion of this detail highlights the importance of symbols from ancient times,

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<sup>98</sup> According to Beatriz Varo: 'la idea primordial del cuadro *El flautista* es la de la fuerza del sonido; según la tradición hindú, al sonido de la flauta de Krishna nace el mundo'. Beatriz Varo, *Remedios Varo: en el centro del microcosmos* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1990), 108-9.

<sup>99</sup> Arcq, 'In Search of the Miraculous', 66.

<sup>100</sup> Gruen and Ovalle, *Remedios Varo: Catálogo Razonado*, 52.



which this artist of higher consciousness is able to interpret and use in his creative act. The flautist's work brings these symbols together as if recreating an ancient codex. The blending of past and present, along with the deliberately limited palette of greens and yellows, creates a feeling of interconnection. This harmony is continued in the figure of the flautist, who has been incorporated into the colour and texture of his surroundings, perhaps having discovered 'el hilo invisible que une todas las cosas', which Varo describes as the goal of the artists depicted in *Armonía*, from 1956.<sup>101</sup>

Varo uses explicitly Gurdjieffian language in her commentary on *Armonía*, which shows another musician/scientist who is searching for harmony among a number of unusually juxtaposed objects by manipulating them on a stave. The protagonist's connection to a spiritual reality is demonstrated by the aid received from the ethereal female figures who emerge from the wall to help arrange disparate objects (a leaf, a prism, a radish, a flower, and a number of pieces of paper containing mathematical formulae) on a mysterious musical device. Despite the protagonist's calm expression, the space feels full of movement: plants, flowers and translucent shapes break through the floor tiles, birds fly freely within the room and various objects and implements tumble from drawers and trunks. There is a sense of dynamism and process in each part of the painting and every nook and cranny is teeming with life. The play on the painted birds coming to life, perhaps an allusion to Pygmalion, emphasises the connection between the harmony that the protagonist searches for, and the emergence of life, and it brings to mind the work of the artist represented in *Creación de las aves*. Even the building itself is endowed with individuality, as the unusually placed bed appears to form the lips for a face that is

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<sup>101</sup> Gruen and Ovalle, *Remedios Varo: Catálogo Razonado*, 54.

made up of the windows and wall of the room – not unlike Dalí’s Mae West ‘portrait’ rooms. As Kaplan has noted, the work is reminiscent of the Pythagorean search for harmony in the universe, yet the musical metaphor also resonates with Gurdjieff’s teachings.<sup>102</sup> Challenger writes of the profound influence the Mevlevi order of Sufis had on Gurdjieff’s developing system during his travels between 1887 and 1911, a time about which very little is known other than what he recorded in *Meetings with Remarkable Men*; a book that formed part of Varo’s collection.<sup>103</sup> Music is central to the Mevlevi order’s spiritual practice, providing a tangible, shared experience of being moved by something one cannot understand. Its founder, Jelaluddin Rumi, conceived of music as a means of recollecting divine origins:

Human beings are nothing more nor less than lutes, Rumi poeticised in a musical metaphor. When we are empty—devoid of manifestations of egoism—we sound forth beautiful music; when full, we produce no music, but rather disharmony and discord.<sup>104</sup>

The experience of music, when conceptualised in this way, also provides a lexicon of terms within which Gurdjieff—along with Rumi and Pythagoras before him—found a rich source of metaphors for spiritual experience. The language of octaves, melodies, and resonances speaks to the hermetic universe conceived in terms of correspondences between different realms of sacred manifestation. The relevance to Varo’s *Armonía* is obvious in the imagery and title of the painting, but she further emphasises the musical metaphor using specifically Gurdjieffian language in her commentary on the piece:<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys*, 178.

<sup>103</sup> G.I. Gurdjieff, *Meetings with Remarkable Men* (London: Pan Books, 1978). FIRST EDITION?Varo owned a French translation by Jeanne Salzmann and Henri Tracol, *Rencontre avec des Hommes Remarquables*, published in 1960.

<sup>104</sup> Challenger, *Philosophy and Art in Gurdjieff’s Beelzebub*, 13.

<sup>105</sup> Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys*, 178.

El personaje está tratando de encontrar el hilo invisible que une todas las cosas, por eso, en un pentagrama de hilos de metal, ensarta toda clase de objetos, desde el más simple hasta un papelito conteniendo una fórmula matemática que es ya en sí un cúmulo de cosas; cuando consigue colocar en *su sitio* los diversos objetos, soplando por la clave que sostiene el pentagrama, debe salir una música no solo armoniosa sino también *objetiva*, es decir capaz de mover las cosas a su alrededor si así se desea usarla, la figura que se desprende de la pared y colabora con él, representa el azar (que tantas veces interviene en todos los descubrimientos), pero el azar *objetivo*. Cuando uso la palabra *objetivo* entiendo por ello que es algo fuera de nuestro mundo, o mejor dicho, más allá de él, y que se encuentra conectado con el mundo de las *causas* y no de los fenómenos que es el nuestro.<sup>106</sup>

In this commentary, Varo explains that the character is searching for the secret unity of all things by attempting to produce objective music. She also identifies her ghostly collaborators as ‘el azar’. Gurdjieff taught that only the spiritually advanced could identify the role of fate and chance in their lives, and therefore, only an evolved consciousness has the ability to choose whether to embrace or resist it. In her commentary, Varo suggests that this figure is of a higher level of consciousness by emphasising the collaboration between chance and the protagonist performing the experiment. At this advanced level, the character is capable of combining these objects to create an objective art that is, according to Varo, ‘conectado con el mundo de las *causas*’, which is extremely powerful, and of which she has careful control.<sup>107</sup>

The protagonists in *Armonía*, *Creación de las aves*, and *El flautista* are either searching for the supernatural or have developed a supernatural power by

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<sup>106</sup> Gruen and Ovalle, *Remedios Varo: Catálogo Razonado*, 54.

<sup>107</sup> Gruen and Ovalle, *Remedios Varo: Catálogo Razonado*, 54.

combining symbols and objects in a novel, yet expert way. In *Creación de las aves*, the protagonist distils primary colours, the basic constituents of all colour, from the atmosphere, and combines them with such skill that the birds he/she paints are granted life. And as we have just seen, in *Armonía* the artist/scientist combines ancient knowledge in the form of Pythagorean mathematics with the fruits of the earth and mysterious crystal prisms in a search for esoteric knowledge of reality.

Gloria Durán recognises a Jungian influence in Varo's search for meaning amongst primordial symbols. She reminds the reader of Jung's hypothesis that 'wisdom is a return to these symbols', whilst claiming that 'consciously or unconsciously, Varo's work incorporates the symbols that Jung has identified with the search for self or wholeness'.<sup>108</sup> The same logic can be extended to Varo's use of motifs relating to the Fourth Way. Gurdjieff believed that myth and symbol were important vehicles for conveying objective truth from generation to generation and in *In Search of the Miraculous*, Ouspensky describes symbol and myth as being central to humanity's ability to learn about itself and its relationship to the universe.<sup>109</sup> Ouspensky discusses the necessity of paying close attention to myth as a repository of esoteric knowledge, whilst also acknowledging a widespread misunderstanding of its importance. Myth is required, he says, because of the difficulty encountered when attempting to express objective truths in ordinary language:

Realizing the imperfection and weakness of ordinary language the people who have possessed objective knowledge have tried to express the idea of unity in 'myths' and 'symbols,' and in particular 'verbal formulas' which, having been

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<sup>108</sup> Gloria Durán, 'The Antipodes of Surrealism: Salvador Dalí and Remedios Varo', *Symposium*, 42:4 (1989), 297–311 (p. 305).

<sup>109</sup> Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, 279–80.

transmitted without alteration, have carried on the idea from one school to another, often from one epoch to another.<sup>110</sup>

Gurdjieff taught that the artist, having acquired the requisite level of consciousness, had the ability to both perceive the knowledge contained in symbols and mythology, and the potential to communicate its esoteric content in the objective works of art that they created. Within this system, it is implicit that myths—and some works of art—contain a message reserved for future initiates, and are designed, in Gurdjieff's words, 'to transmit to him ideas inaccessible to the intellect and to transmit them in such forms as would exclude the possibility of false interpretations'.<sup>111</sup>

The practice of artistic forms also played an important functional role in the daily spiritual practice of Gurdjieff's teachings. Much like the painstaking creation of sand mandalas by Tibetan Buddhist monks, Gurdjieff encouraged the engagement of the body and mind in meditative activities such as dance and weaving. Alongside music, he placed great importance on the practice of a series of movements, which often became the principal activity at meetings of Fourth Way groups. Here too Gurdjieff was influenced by the Mevlevi order of Sufis, also known as the Whirling Dervishes, who believed that dance is one of the 'many roads that lead to God'.<sup>112</sup>

In the Institute at Fontainebleau, Gurdjieff taught sacred dances based on dervish exercises and conceived in relation to the enneagram, a shape of singular importance to the Work.<sup>113</sup> The movements formed a new ritual aimed at the 'harmonious development of man' and were practiced for 5 or 6 hours, contributing to the reputation the work acquired as physically gruelling. Arcq claims that Varo

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<sup>110</sup> Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, 279.

<sup>111</sup> Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, 279.

<sup>112</sup> Challenger, *Philosophy and Art in Gurdjieff's Beelzebub*, 13.

<sup>113</sup> Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, 294.

would have encountered these movements in the aforementioned study group led by Christopher Fremantle and it is plausible that such activity served as the inspiration for her 1959 painting *Ritos extraños* (1959, CAT 257).<sup>114</sup>

The painting shows a passageway partially shrouded with a green curtain. In the foreground is an antechamber, empty apart from a corner unit that contains two mirrors, a number of hat pegs and an umbrella stand. Light falls onto the scene emphasising the shadowy corners and mystery of the eponymous rites taking place in the room beyond. A man can be seen, seemingly dancing, through a gap of the curtain. Otherwise, the far room appears empty and leads onto a series of other dark rooms, echoing the labyrinthine corridors of the soul within the protagonists of *Ermitaño* (1955, CAT 124) or *Les Feuilles Mortes* (1956, CAT 156).

The occultation of the mysterious dance taking place behind the curtain emphasises the esoteric nature of the rite. That it might be focused on self-development is suggested by the contrast with the objects in the foreground, which are used to adorn the body superficially (the hat and umbrella) or observe one's exterior (the mirror). The implication is that one's superficial personality is discarded before undergoing the ritual dances beyond the veil. This is also suggested by the multiple faces that fall in the fabric of the curtain. The imagery of moving beyond multiple personalities towards something more essential resonates with Gurdjieff's focus on the development of an essential Self and once again echoes similar imagery elsewhere in Varo's work, most notably in *Ruptura* (1955, CAT 132).

Although the movement of the dancer is only implied, the placement of his arms and legs, and his upturned palm and gaze, are reminiscent of sacred shapes

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<sup>114</sup> Arcq, 'In Search of the Miraculous', 36.

central to the Gurdjieff movements.<sup>115</sup> This can be deduced more clearly in the two preparatory sketches which are included in the *catálogo razonado*, the second of which renders the details of the curtain and the room more clearly.<sup>116</sup> In the sketch there is movement in the blind, which blows vigorously outwards towards the reader, emphasising a contrast with the sedentary space in the antechamber, whose stillness is underscored with the inclusion of cobwebs and cracks in the mirror. The difference in the vitality of the two spaces suggests a rite of great power and dynamism is taking place beyond the curtain. That this ritual might have spiritual significance is an interpretation corroborated by the alternative title *Cortina o Visión*, included with the first preparatory sketch. The suggestion that a vision might occur behind the curtain underscores the spiritual focus of the dance. The shape maintained by the arms of the dancer in *Ritos extraños (Dibujo Previo I)* also strengthens the association with the Gurdjieff movements as the awkward geometry of the shape created suggests significance rather than leisurely abandon. Once again, the mysterious scene glimpsed in Varo's painting yields meaning when approached through the lens of the Fourth Way.

## Conclusion

As a close reader of Breton, Gurdjieff, and Ouspensky, it is unsurprising that Varo placed such importance upon the role and power of the artist. Whether it is an owl-woman capable of engendering new life by painting, musicians in tune with the unifying harmony of the universe, or dancers using sacred movements to balance their spiritual being, the artists Varo depicts are best understood as seers,

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<sup>115</sup> An impressive demonstration of these movements can be found in Peter Brook's 1978 film adaptation of Gurdjieff's *Meetings with Remarkable Men*.

<sup>116</sup> *Ritos extraños [Dibujo Previo I]* (1959, CAT 255); *Ritos extraños [Dibujo Previo II]* (1959, CAT 256).

collaborating with the universe in order to uncover occult, objective knowledge. Extrapolating this insight to the artist herself, a new understanding emerges of the change in Varo's aesthetic while in Mexico and new explanations of her mysterious paintings arise. It becomes clear that Varo's movement away from the automatism of her work in the 1930s, towards the meticulously planned and executed paintings of the 1950s, runs in parallel to her growing engagement with the Fourth Way.<sup>117</sup>

Exploring Varo's paintings in full recognition of this spiritual aesthetic provides a twofold contribution to the history of modern art. Firstly, it becomes clear that there were precursors to this approach on the peripheries of surrealism in 1920s Paris who were equally committed to using art to uncover esoteric knowledge of the universe. After the Second World War, Varo emerges as a prism, through which this alternative, postsecular strand of modern art might be studied, one honest about the continued importance of spiritual quest. Secondly, when Varo's paintings are read alongside Gurdjieff's teachings, a commitment to the visionary capacity of the artist emerges that connects to the poetic project of French *fin de siècle* Modernists, whose religiosity was not straightforwardly overturned by the following generation of avant-garde artists, but rather continued—in adapted form—by groups of renegade surrealists that themselves became an inspiration to the artists of the 1960s, who embraced New Age and alternative spiritualities with reinvigorated fervour.

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<sup>117</sup> Arcq, 'In Search of the Miraculous', 33; Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys*, 172.