Gurdjieff and the Angry Young Men: Stuart Holroyd, Colin Wilson, and Waking Up in 1950s Britain

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Abstract

In 1950s Britain the writers Stuart Holroyd (1933-2025) and Colin Wilson (1931-2013) were part of a group of working-class and lower-middle class novelists and playwrights who were known as the 'angry young men'. Wilson and Holroyd, friends over three decades, shared an interest in literature, esotericism and altered states of consciousness, sexual flourishing, the paranormal, and spirituality more broadly. Both explored the teachings of Armenian-Greek spiritual teacher G. I. Gurdjieff (1877-1949), who featured in Wilson's epoch-making book, *The Outsider* (1956) and Holroyd's unpublished play, *The Prophet* (1959). This article draws connections between: Wilson's and Holroyd's textual and theoretical engagement with the Fourth Way; Fourth Way groups and teachers in Britain with which they interacted, chiefly John Godolphin Bennett (1897-1974) and his pupils; and the rise of anti-establishment literature and culture in the UK in the 1950s and 1960s. The value of Holroyd's *The Prophet*, and Holroyd's literary reputation, are asserted to be greater than is usually acknowledged.

Keywords: G. I. Gurdjieff, Fourth Way, Colin Wilson, Stuart Holroyd, angry young men, literature

Introduction

The 1950s in the United Kingdom was a time of great change which was nevertheless often perceived as stasis and the persistence of older, class-bound and institution-dominated social forms. In the 1950s and the 1960s working class youth – primarily musicians, artists, writers, actors, and models – were a progressive force in British culture and fearlessly drove groundbreaking cultural change.[1] The 1960s are better-known, and the world-beating cult of the Beatles and the Rolling Stones is undeniable, while working-class stars like Cilla Black and Sandie Shaw never conquered the world stage, but had a significant impact in Britain.[2] As in the United States, the 1950s acted as an incubator for the radical shifts of the 1960s. Cultural forces included musician Lonnie Donegan, film studios including Ealing, Elstree, and Hammer – and their stars, like Christopher Lee, Alec Guinness, John Mills and Sylvia Syms – and the writers called the 'angry young men'.[3] This group – which was not homogeneous, and was to some degree artificial in that many of them were not acquainted and they had no agreed-upon

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[1] Christopher Booker, *The Neophiliacs: The Revolution in English Life in the Fifties and Sixties* (New York: Random House, 1993 [1969]).

[2] Arthur Marwick, *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy, and the United States, c. 1958-c. 1974* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[3] Hermann Peschmann, 'The Nonconformists: Angry Young Men, "Lucky Jims," and "Outsiders,"' *English: Journal of the English Association*, vol. 13, no. 73 (1961), pp. 12-16.

manifesto – included the novelists Kingsley Amis, Alan Sillitoe, John Wain and John Braine, the playwright, John Osborne, and the film director Lindsay Anderson.

These men, with Holroyd, Wilson and their novelist friend Bill Hopkins, were mostly from working-class backgrounds in regional England (usually the northern midlands and the north) and were born in the 1920s-1930s. The themes in their works were class, masculinity, and relations between the sexes; they championed freedom and escape from the dreary, convention-bound, religious, and dutiful lives of their parents' generation.[4] Women were generally represented as being less free, less authentic, even less human, than men. The one exception was the extraordinary play by Shelagh Delaney, *A Taste of Honey* (1958): this story of the sexual lives of Helen and her teenage daughter Jo, both entangled in single motherhood, and the men in their lives, Helen's young boyfriend Peter, Jo's Black lover Jimmie, and gay Geof who helps the women raise Jo's baby after Jimmie goes to sea, radiated strength and optimism.[5] Delaney was nineteen when *A Taste of Honey* premiered and became a hit; she asserted the reality and authenticity of working-class women's lives and the courage and resilience they demonstrated in the face of destructive relationships with troubled, uncertain men.[6] She stated: "no one in my play despairs … like the majority of people they take in their stride whatever happens to them and remain cheerful."[7]

John Osborne's play, *Look Back in Anger* (1956) is the flagship angry young man text. It is the story of working-class Jimmy Porter, who despite his university education has elected to earn a living running a sweet stall, and his upper-middle-class wife Alison. They live in the midlands and are seemingly unhappily married.[8] Jimmy has sex with Alison's actress friend Helena after her father Colonel Redfern takes Alison to her parental home, partly because Helena is worried about the potential violence in the marriage, given Alison's pregnancy.[9] In Act Three Alison is reconciled with Jimmy after an interval of several months, during which she has miscarried, and Helena has been living with Jimmy. *Look Back in Anger* was received rapturously. The distinguished theatre critic Kenneth Tynan pronounced:

> *Look Back in Anger* presents post-war youth as it really is, with special emphasis on the non-U intelligentsia who live in bed-sitters and divide the Sunday papers into two groups, 'posh' and 'wet'. To have done this at all would be a signal achievement; to have done it in a first play is a minor miracle. All the qualities are there, qualities one had despaired of ever seeing on the stage - the drift towards anarchy, the instinctive leftishness, the automatic rejection of 'official' attitudes, the surrealist sense of humour

[4] Susan Brook, 'Engendering Masculinity: The Angry Young Man, Class and Masculinity', in *Posting the Male: Masculinities in Post-war and Contemporary British Literature*, eds Daniel Lea and Berthold Schoene (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2003), pp. 19-34.
[5] Jack Windle, 'Angry Young Men at the Kitchen Sink', *Key Words: A Journal of Cultural Materialism*, no. 18 (2020), pp. 81-84.
[6] Selina Todd, *Tastes of Honey: The Making of Shelagh Delaney and a Cultural Revolution* (London: Vintage, 2019).
[7] Windle, 'Angry Young Men at the Kitchen Sink', p. 84.
[8] P. Yvard, 'Literature and Society in the Fifties in Great Britain', *Journal of European Studies*, vol. 3 (1973), p. 41.
[9] Michael A. Peters, 'Anger and Political Culture: A Time for Outrage!', *Policy Futures in Education*, vol. 10, no. 5 (2012), p. 566.

> … the casual promiscuity, the sense of lacking a crusade worth fighting for and, underlying all these, the determination that no one who does shall go unmourned.[10]

The qualities that characterised Osborne's play – a defiantly working-class perspective, the focus on tensions between university education and street smarts, the hostility in marriage and between men and women in general, and the absolute necessity of personal freedom (especially for men) – are seen in celebrated novels of the era like Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* (1954), John Braine's *Room at the Top* (1957), and Alan Sillitoe's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1958).

Another important theme in British literature in the 1950s was the spiritual quest; this was broadly understood to take place outside the established Church of England, and to include mystical paths and personal spiritual orientations.[11] Both Colin Wilson and Stuart Holroyd were spiritual seekers, disaffected from mainstream Christianity, and open to esotericism and unconventional paths, which they both explicitly linked to literary practice and artistic vocations.[12] For this reason, commentators have drawn connections between the angry young men and the American Beat writers, while acknowledging that Buddhism and poetry were much more prominent among the latter.[13] Wilson's second book, *Religion and the Rebel* (1957) and Holroyd's literary debut, *Emergence from Chaos* (1957) were variously received: Wilson was excoriated for seemingly having resiled from the defiant existentialism of his debut *The Outsider* (1956); while Holroyd was praised for his treatment of what he called "the religious attitude" which signals higher consciousness and is a precondition for freedom and change.[14] Wilson's *The Outsider* had a poor reception with critics, in part because of Wilson's youth and lack of a university education.[15] Nevertheless, the book became a bestseller and a cultural milestone, with an impact similar to Osborne in the theatre (suffused, as it was, by existentialist philosophy, sexual liberation, and leftist politics), and the figure of the 'Outsider' was attractive to many. One of the 'Outsiders' he included was Gurdjieff. This article traces the influence of one spiritual/ esoteric teaching, G. I. Gurdjieff's the Work or the Fourth Way, on Holroyd and Wilson in the 1950s and beyond.

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[10] Kenneth Tynan, 'The Voice of the Young', *The Guardian*, 13 May (1956). At: https://www.theguardian.com/books/1956/may/13/stage.

[11] Callum Brown, *Religion and Society in Twentieth-Century Britain* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014 [2006]), pp. 177-223.

[12] This is most clearly exemplified in Stuart Holroyd, *Emergence from Chaos* (New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1972 [1957]) which was often read in tandem with Colin Wilson, *Religion and the Rebel* (London: Gollancz, 1957). See the joint review by Charles J. Rolo, 'Reader's Choice', *The Atlantic*, December (1957). At: https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1957/12/readers-choice/641245/.

[13] Derek Stanford, 'Beatniks and Angry Young Men', *Meanjin*, vol. XVII (1958), pp. 413-419.

[14] Nona Balakian, 'The Flight from Innocence: England's Newest Literary Generation', *Books Abroad*, vol. 33, no. 3 (1959), pp. 263-264.

[15] Nathan A. Scott Jr reviewed *The Outsider* negatively: "it must be said that Mr Wilson's book is a very untidy and often a very dull book. It is really the diary of a young man's intellectual life, and, since the young man in question is a self-educated proletarian who has not enjoyed the proving disciplines of a university training, perhaps we ought not to be surprised that his first major publication is little more than a scrapbook into which he has thrown quotations from his reading that are interlarded with commentaries sometimes remarkably perspicacious and sometimes either ludicrously ignorant or incredibly naïve," Nathan A. Scott Jr, 'Review: *The Outsider*', *The Christian Scholar*, vol. 40, no. 2 (1957), p. 136.

G. I. Gurdjieff and the Work/ Fourth Way in 1950s England

George Ivanovich Gurdjieff (1877-1949), a Greek-Armenian mystic and esoteric teacher who came to prominence in Russia from 1912 and, with his pupils, fled during the Revolution in 1917, finally settling in France where Gurdjieff founded the Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man at the Prieuré des Basses Loges, in Fontainebleau-Avon, 70 kilometres south of Paris.[16] A detailed discussion of Gurdjieff's teaching is unnecessary for this article: in the milieu in which Holroyd and Wilson operated, core ideas that were reasonably widely understood included humanity's mechanical nature; the need to cultivate self-observation; Gurdjieff's personal charisma; the need to unify the three centres (moving, intellectual, and emotional); the lack of a 'real I' and the multitude of divisions within the person; problems of identification; the distinction between essence and personality; and the possibility of attaining higher states, the highest of which was objective consciousness.[17] Despite the fact that Gurdjieff had died comparatively recently in 1949 and his pupil Pyotr Demianovich Ouspensky (1878-1947) two years earlier, Wilson notes in *The Outsider* that many sources for the Fourth Way were readily available. The clearest and most unambiguous of these was Kenneth Walker's *Venture With Ideas* (1951).[18]

Further, London was an especially fertile location for learning about Gurdjieff's ideas and encountering a myriad Gurdjieff groups in 1951, the year Wilson first read Ouspensky's *In Search of the Miraculous*. Ouspensky, who had separated from Gurdjieff in 1924 after nine years of close contact, arrived in England in 1921 and taught in London for more than two decades. From 1928, he and Madame Ouspensky (Sophie Grigorievna Volochine) began weekend work retreats, first at Gadsden, a Victorian house on ten acres near Hayes, Kent and later at Lyne Place, a Queen Anne mansion on a hundred acres at Virginia Water, Surrey which they purchased in 1935.[19] The Ouspenskys moved to America during the War and replicated "their English set-up at Franklin Farms, Mendham, the former residence of the Governor of New Jersey."[20] Ouspensky's pupil Francis C. Roles (1901-1982) registered the Study Society in 1951, which is based at Ouspensky's former residence Colet House, Barons Court, London. He met Leon MacLaren (1910-1994) in 1953. MacLaren first encountered Ouspensky's ideas in theatre maven Peter Goffin's *The Realm of Art* (1946), and then brought Fourth Way ideas into the curriculum of the School of Economic Science (formerly the Henry George School of Economics), which he founded in London in 1937.[21] Roles and MacLaren discovered Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in 1959, and in 1961 the SES and the Study Society established a

[16] Carole M. Cusack, 'Intentional Communities in the Gurdjieff Teaching', *International Journal for the Study of New Religions*, vol. 6, no. 2 (2015), pp. 165-168.
[17] Colin Wilson, *The Outsider* (New York: Diversion Books, 2014 [1956]).
[18] He lists P. D. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (San Diego, New York, and London: Harcourt 2001 [1949]); G. I. Gurdjieff, *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson* (New York: Penguin Arkana 1999 [1950]); and Kenneth Walker, *Venture With Ideas* (London: Neville Spearman, 1973 [1951]).
[19] Andrew Rawlinson, *The Book of Enlightened Masters: Western Teachers in Eastern Traditions* (Chicago and La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1997), p. 295.
[20] Chris Coates, 'How Many Arks Does It Take?', in *Spiritual and Visionary Communities: Out to Save the World*, ed. Timothy Miller (Farnham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013), p. 179.
[21] Johanna J. M. Petsche, 'Gurdjieffian Overtones in Leon MacLaren's School of Economic Science', *International Journal for the Study of New Religions*, vol. 6, no. 2 (2015), pp. 197-219.

School of Meditation in Holland Park. Later, MacLaren and Roles became followers of Sri Shantananda Saraswati, the Shankaracharya of the Jyotir Math Atharva Veda monastery in northern India, and Advaita Vedanta gradually became more important to the SES in particular, eventually displacing Gurdjieff and the Fourth Way.[22]

Additionally, Gurdjieff sent his American pupil Jane Heap (1887-1964) to teach in London in 1935. Heap, a literary, sexual and cultural titan, and her lover Margaret Anderson (1886-1973) ran a trailblazing modernist monthly magazine, the *Little Review*, for fifteen years. In March 1918, the *Little Review* began a twenty-three month serialization of James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1920), the first appearance of this remarkable novel, which garnered Anderson and Heap great praise but also created legal problems.[23] In 1924 they travelled to Paris to meet Gurdjieff, having become aware of his teachings through Alfred Richard Orage (1873-1934), himself the editor of a famed British literary journal, *The New Age*, from 1907-1922. Heap was a celebrated communicator of Work ideas, though she never published her materials, and she was another powerful node in the network of Fourth Way teachers in London that were (to some extent) available to Holroyd, Wilson and their friends.[24]

The final teacher in this group is John Godolphin Bennett (1897-1974), who broke with Jeanne de Salzmann (1889-1990) Gurdjieff's nominated successor and the Gurdjieff Foundation, the network of teaching institutes she established, in 1953. Bennett met Gurdjieff in Constantinople in 1920, spent time at the Prieuré in 1923, and was for years a pupil of the Ouspenskys. He reunited with Gurdjieff in 1948, shortly before his death. Bennett, a lifelong seeker, is one of the Work's great experimenters and most original teachers. In 1957 he discovered the Indonesian spiritual movement Subud, founded by Muhammad Subuh Sumohadiwidjojo (Pak Subuh), and broke with Subud in 1962 after his 1961 conversion to Catholicism. Bennett's teaching property at Coombe Springs flourished from 1946 to 1966, when he transferred ownership to the *soi-disant* Sufi teacher Idries Shah, who sold it to property developers, destroying–among other things–the structure Bennett created for the performance of Movements, the Djameechoonatra.[25] Undeterred, Bennett inaugurated the International Academy for Continuous Education, at Sherborne House in the village of Sherborne in Gloucestershire, in 1971. In the year of his death, 1974, Bennett bought Claymont Court, West Virginia, which is the centre of the Bennett Fourth Way legacy to the present day.[26] Wilson interacted with Bennett and Bennett's student, and notable Work teacher in his own right, Anthony Blake (b. 1939) met Wilson, Holroyd, and Hopkins, providing confirmation of the fertility of the London environs of the 1950s for seeding Gurdjieff's ideas into mainstream literary and cultural circles.[27]

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[22] Petsche, 'Gurdjieffian Overtones in Leon MacLaren's School of Economic Science', pp. 203-204.
[23] Holly A. Baggett, *Making No Compromise: Margaret Anderson, Jane Heap, and the Little Review* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2023), Chapter 5, 'Pound, Yeats, Eliot, and Joyce'.
[24] Carole M. Cusack, 'Pupil Memoirs as Hagiography in the Gurdjieff Work', *Postscripts: The Journal of Sacred Texts, Cultural Histories, and Contemporary Contexts*, vol. 12, no. 2 (2021), pp. 229-230.
[25] Michael Pittman, *Classical Spirituality in Contemporary America: The Confluence and Contribution of G. I. Gurdjieff and Sufism* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2012), p. 107.
[26] Cusack, 'Intentional Communities in the Gurdjieff Teaching', pp. 170-171. See also Joseph Azize, *John G. Bennett: Witness to Death and Resurrection* (Rhinebeck, NY: Red Elixir, 2024), which is an insightful, in-depth spiritual biography of Bennett that articulates the originality and power of his take on Gurdjieff's teachings.
[27] Anthony Blake, 'The Fourth Way: A Hazardous Path (Part 2)', *Literature & Aesthetics*, vol. 28, vol. 1 (2018), p. 111.

Stuart Holroyd: Biographical and Thematic Sketch

Stuart Holroyd was born in Bradford in 1933, and his family moved to Blackpool in 1939 due to anxieties about wartime safety. He was a scholarship student at the Arnold School, and at the age of eighteen began working at Blackpool Repertory Theatre. He moved to London in 1952, where he was part of a group "of fellow poetry-lovers who met on Sunday evenings in a Westminster pub."[28] In 1954 Holroyd married Anne Freeman. He and Anne first met Colin Wilson at a party for members of a group called the Bridge, which Holroyd belonged to. Wilson thought Anne "a pretty girl" and observed that Bill Hopkins "engaged in earnest conversation with Holroyd."[29] Wilson's friendship eventually led to Holroyd ending his participation in the Bridge, an anarchist organization led by a Hungarian immigrant to Britain, Alfred Reynolds, as his views moved away from Reynolds' quietist perspective.[30]

Holroyd and Anne struggled financially, but Wilson at that time was camping on Hampstead Heath, effectively homeless. He and Holroyd encouraged each other, but their friendship was complicated and involved elements of rivalry.[31] Holroyd began writing *Emergence from Chaos* in 1955 before Wilson conceived of *The Outsider*, but Wilson wrote more rapidly and published before his friend.[32] After *Emergence from Chaos* (1957) was published Holroyd and Wilson appeared together at a few events, and that year he and his wife Anne separated. Holroyd wrote the first draft of the play which was to become *The Tenth Chance* – based on the diaries of Petter Moen (1901-1944), a member of the Norwegian resistance – during a three-month stay in Munich. This play was given one performance at the Royal Court Theatre on 9 March 1958.[33]

Holroyd was at this point twenty-four years old, the author of a successful book, and with a play that he hoped would be successful. Yet, Kenneth Tynan – whose favour was key to establishing John Osborne as the voice of a generation two years earlier - was critical of *The Tenth Chance*, and a minor *fracas* accompanied its debut. Henry Adler explains:

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[28] Antoni Diller, 'Stuart Holroyd: Years of Anger and Beyond', *Colin Wilson Studies*, no. 18 (2012), p. 5. Antoni Diller was kind enough to introduce me to Holroyd after I read this remarkable article and contacted Diller via email in June 2018. Holroyd wrote to me and was delightful. I acquired scans of both *The Tenth Chance* and *The Prophet*. I shared these texts with Anthony Blake, as Holroyd thought he recalled meeting Blake in London in 1959, and with a few other colleagues who work on Gurdjieff. Later, Holroyd sent me a third play, *Blossom Brothers and Smelswete,* and gave me permission to publish his plays.

[29] Colin Wilson, 'A Memoir of the 'Fifties', in *Colin Wilson. The Bicameral Critic: Selected Shorter Writings*, ed. Howard Dosser (Salem, NH: Salem House, 1985), p. 264.

[30] Interestingly, Wilson also gives an account of his knowledge of the founder of the Bridge, whom he calls 'George.' George and he discuss Gurdjieff; George read Gurdjieff's *Beelzebub's Tales* (1950) and concluded he was a fake. When Wilson proposed reading Kenneth Walker to get the Work principles clear, George rejected reading 'interpreters' and preferred the 'fountainhead'. It does not seem likely that George discussed Gurdjieff with Bridge members, so presumably Holroyd's interest was ignited by meeting Wilson. See Wilson, 'A Memoir of the 'Fifties', pp. 259-260. Later, Holroyd drafted an autobiographical novel, *Evil Be My Good* (1960), about twenty-one year old Francis Hudson from Yorkshire, whose time in London is "dominated by his membership of the Link Group, an organisation run by the middle-ages, Hungarian-Jewish intellectual George Lucas who espouses a gentle, liberal philosophical anarchism," Diller, 'Stuart Holroyd: Years of Anger and Beyond', p. 22.

[31] In his later years Wilson wrote nostalgically and warmly of his friendships with Holroyd and Hopkins. See Colin Wilson, *The Angry Years: The Rise and Fall of the Angry Young Men* (London: Robson Books, 2007).

[32] Diller, 'Stuart Holroyd: Years of Anger and Beyond', pp. 8-9.

[33] Diller, 'Stuart Holroyd: Years of Anger and Beyond', pp. 11-12.

> *The Tenth Chance*, an immature play by a young writer named Stuart Holroyd, was tried out at the Royal Court for a single Sunday night performance. The play dealt with the reactions to persecution in a totalitarian state of three imprisoned men: a rationalist, a religious mystic, and a moronic tough. It shows the tough, lacking in mental resources, breaking first, and the mystic, buoyed up by faith in some extra-personal force, outlasting the rationalist who relies unsuccessfully on his vulnerable brain. What Holroyd was getting at was similar to Shaw's aim in *Saint Joan* and other plays. But the performance of Holroyd's play embodying these familiar principles was assailed by shouts of protest from Christopher Logue, a Brechtianesque poet, who was apparently outraged by this aspersion on the staying power of Socialist rationalists and by Mrs Kenneth Tynan who, although an *afficianada* of bullfighting, declared herself repelled by the play's 'sadism' (the application of ketchup to simulate blood in the style made familiar by such plays as *Oedipus Rex* and *King Lear*).[34]

Diller notes that while Holroyd was distressed by Tynan's hostile review of *The Tenth Chance* and disappointed that George Devine declined to put on a season of it at the Royal Court, his life was busy and productive: he completed a first draft of *Flight and Pursuit* (1959) in September 1958; and began a passionate affair with a beautiful actress, Joan, with whom he later had a son. Later scholars of the theatre have also drawn attention to the volatility of the critics in the late 1950s, and their, often public, disagreements. Philip Roberts noted that popular interest "did not prevent riots at the Sunday Night of Stuart Holroyd's *The Tenth Chance* on 9 March, or … divergent opinions about Doris Lessing's *Each in His Own Wilderness*: 'an excellent play' (Harewood); 'a beastly play' (Poke)."[35]

In early 1959 Holroyd began a new play, which was initially to be called A *Time for Assassins*, but later was re-titled *The Prophet* (1959). This returns this article to the topic of Gurdjieff and Holroyd's personal acquaintance with Fourth Way publications and Work members, about which less is known than of Wilson's engagement, for example. His interest in worldviews and revolutionary politics makes it likely that Gurdjieff would be an attractive figure, and Wilson's immersion in the Fourth Way cannot be doubted. In *Emergence from Chaos*, which was written at the height of his friendship with Wilson, Holroyd expressed a position that is compatible with Gurdjieff:

> Religion is not so much man's attempt to know God as his attempt to know himself. The saint's asceticism and the mystic's ecstasy carry each deeper into himself, to the ultimate till centre where man and God are co-existent. All great religious men are profound psychologists, for they are familiar with the inner life and have explored in

[34] Henry Adler, 'To Hell with Society', *The Tulane Drama Review*, vol. 4, no. 4 (1960), p. 53.

[35] Philip Roberts, *The Royal Court Theatre and the Modern Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 64. The mention of Doris Lessing (1919-2013) is interesting. To date I have presented the 'angry' literary era as almost entirely male (with Shelagh Delaney the sole exception). Doris Less later became one of the most distinguished and successful female novelists of the twentieth century and the 2007 recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature. Lessing was older than Wilson and Holroyd, but was deeply involved in Marxist politics, had an unconventional romantic and sexual life, and pursued a spiritual quest that intersected with the developing Gurdjieff groups in England, being a student of Idries Shah (1924-1996). Her plays are regarded as less important than her novels, but there are links between the two dramas and later fiction. See Molly Hite, '(En)gendering Metafiction: Doris Lessing's Rehearsals for *The Golden Notebook*', *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 34, no. 3 (1988), pp. 481-500.

> themselves all its ways and byways. They know that being religious is not a matter of subscribing to a number of beliefs and accepting a code of conduct, but consists rather in a man maintaining his inner life at its highest pitch of intensity while all the irrelevancies of the world external to him conspire to slacken its tension. Essentially religion is an entirely personal and subjective matter, but in his quest for self knowledge man has tended to project outside of himself the inner processes of his unconscious mind in order to comprehend them more fully. Thus he has created art and the religious dogma. Certain works of art, and dogmas like that of original sin, afford us a deeper understanding of our own unconscious minds than we could ever arrive at by purely discursive means of thought. The question of the truth of a religion or of its dogmas does not arise, for religion is not justified by its truth but by its efficacy. A religion is anything that a man can live by, and in being lived it finds its truth, which, because it is existential, is irrefutable.[36]

The stories of Gurdjieff in Paris during World War II were known to Holroyd from Kenneth Walker's *Venture With Ideas* (1951), and the wartime setting was familiar from *The Tenth Chance*. Walker explained the eating and drinking rituals that Ouspensky's pupils had to familiarize themselves with when they went to Paris in 1948 to meet Gurdjieff, the source of the teaching. His description of Gurdjieff's apartment at 6 Rue des Colonels Renard, and the patterns of life there, including music, readings from *Beelzebub's Tales*, the furnishings and art, lavish and spicy foods, carpets and exotic objects, is vivid and compelling.[37]

Moreover, Diller reveals that Holroyd had met Walker, and Walker had shared further anecdotes of Gurdjieff's exploits during the war, including his practice of holding "meetings for German officers and members of the Resistance on alternate nights. The Germans brought more food than they could consume and this was then used to feed the Resistance members."[38] This is all translated into Holroyd's *The Prophet*, which transforms Gurdjieff into 'Gurdensky' and shifts the location to an imaginary eastern European city, Minz, in the midst of a revolution.[39]

The Prophet is a play in three acts. Act One opens in a flat with five students Luc, Peter, Anton, Abram and Eva. Anton and Luc leave to fight for the revolution, disillusioned with Gurdensky. Eva is the favoured pupil, and the only one whose loyalty to Gurdensky is absolute. In Scene Three Jaroslav Cotyn, a revolutionary, brings an American journalist named Frank Solomon to meet Gurdensky. Luc and Anton return. Cotyn asks for asylum; the enemy troops arrive in Scene Four and Gurdensky sends the men up into the roof-space. Gurdensky and Eva chant and light incense. Peter and Abram help to put off the officer, Captain Scriassev (who turns out to be a follower of Gurdensky's through a friend, Sigrid Svetlos), and his men. In Act Two, Scene Three Gurdensky and his pupils discuss the arrests of many revolutionary leaders and combatants. In Scene Four Scriassev sends a man with food and other provisions for Gurdensky. Later Scriassev and three men eat with Gurdensky, who turns the tables and holds them at gunpoint, seemingly joining the revolution.

[36] Holroyd, *Emergence from Chaos*, p. 16.
[37] Walker, *Venture With ideas*, *passim*.
[38] Diller, 'Stuart Holroyd: Years of Anger and Beyond', p. 15.
[39] Stuart Holroyd, *The Prophet* (1959). Author's typescript.

In Act Three, Scriassev, who has been shot in the leg, holds Gurdensky and Luc at gunpoint; Cotyn announces over the radio that the revolution has succeeded. Scriassev shoots Luc, and Eva disarms him. Cotyn and Anton come to help Gurdensky, and then the officers ask for his protection. Gurdensky argues with Cotyn and leaves without his pupils. The journalist Frank Solomon arrives to tell Cotyn that he was a betrayer but has been won over by Cotyn. Cotyn, shaken by Gurdensky, seems to lose faith in the revolutionary cause and leaves, and Anton shoots after him. The play ends with the audience not knowing if Cotyn is dead.[40] Holroyd recollected that writing the play was enjoyable, but his assessment of its value was influenced by the fact that the Royal Court declined to produce it:

> They were weeks of productive work. I enjoyed writing the play, which I had now given the working title of *The Prophet*, and exploiting the comedic and dramatic potentials of the subject of Gurdjieff in war-time Paris while engaging with such questions as whether the essential change was political or spiritual. The play was conceived and written in the manner of the literary Shavian theatre, which at the time was being superseded by social realist, expressionist and absurdist drama, but I was blissfully unaware at the time that I was laboring in an exhausted mineshaft.[41]

Holroyd's personal knowledge of Walker suggests that he and Wilson may have deliberately sought out Gurdjieff's pupils in England. For example, Anthony Blake, Bennett's pupil, recalls Wilson at Coombe Springs heckling him from the back of the room while Blake was giving a lecture.[42] Blake is an important source for these years, as he met Holroyd and Hopkins in 1960, stayed overnight at Holroyd's flat in London, and had a full day of conversation with them and Holroyd's girlfriend. Both Holroyd's plays were discussed, and Blake was especially intrigued by the Gurdensky play – which he could not have seen, as it was never staged – and he used it (the idea of it, his imagining of it) as a launchpad for certain of his drama workshops at Coombe Springs.[43]

After the disappointment of *The Prophet* failing to reach theatrical production, or even play reading and rehearsal stage, Holroyd entered a new stage of life. He married his second wife Sue Rowland in 1961, in 1962 he set up a language school, and by 1963 he and Sue had three children, twin daughters and a son (and Sue had a son from her previous marriage).[44] Holroyd saw Wilson and Hopkins occasionally. Wilson published *The Occult* (1971), which contained references to: Ouspensky's reincarnation novel *The Strange Life of Ivan Osokin* (1915); Gurdjieff's biography, and his known interactions with Aleister Crowley (1875-1947); Bennett's links with Subud; and the relationship of the Fourth Way with other occult and

[40] Stuart Holroyd, '*The Prophet'*, *Literature & Aesthetics*, vol. 35, no. 2 (2025), pp. 139-189.
[41] Stuart Holroyd, *His Dear Time's Waste: A 1950s Literary and Love-Life Memoir*, second edition (London: Obscuriosity Press, 2014), pp. 243-244.
[42] Anthony Blake, personal communication, 2019.
[43] Blake, 'The Fourth Way: A Hazardous Path Part 2', p. 111, fn 36. Blake is mistaken here; the play in question is *The Prophet* (1959). See: "John Allen's group operated under the name of *Theater of All Possibilities* and experimented with three-brained acting and cosmic themes. My own work centred on the process of acting and, incidentally, drew for its main exercise on Stuart Holroyd's play *The Tenth Chance* (1958), concerning a guru called Gurdensky in an occupied city, based on stories of Gurdjieff he learned from Kenneth Walker."
[44] Diller, 'Stuart Holroyd: Years of Anger and Beyond', pp. 23-24.

psychological strands in the twentieth century. Wilson provocatively claimed that "Gurdjieff is undoubtedly the greatest 'magician' dealt with in this book" and he continued:

> [Gurdjieff] had learned to push his senses to new limits through various disciplines and studies. As a consequence, he had gained certain occult powers. Whether these powers were of any importance is another matter. Probably he did not think so himself. He differed from all the other magicians we have considered in one obvious respect. He was free from the usual magician's destiny of sudden rise and slow downfall. Compared to him, Paracelsus, Agrippa, Dee, Crowley, Madame Blavatsky, seem to be talented eccentrics, lacking in self-discipline and the sense of self-preservation.[45]

Wilson was not a member of a Work group, and his ideas have in the main been despised by Gurdjieff's official pupils. Yet Gurdjieff continued to be a touchstone for Wilson, and *G. I. Gurdjieff: The War on Sleep* (1980) reveals a deep engagement with Fourth Way ideas. By this time a greater range of publications were available to Wilson, and his bibliography demonstrates familiarity with all new material, both Gurdjieff's own writing and books by pupils such as Bennett and more minor figures like Anna Butkovsky-Hewitt.[46]

Holroyd shared Wilson's interest in the occult and the paranormal, and the fringes of human knowledge. In 1974, at Wilson's suggestion, he attended a conference at Brunel University on alternative medicine, and this started his next phase of literary production, focused on paranormal phenomena, UFOs and aliens, and altered states of consciousness. These publications included *Magic, Words, and Numbers* (1976), *PSI and the Consciousness Explosion* (1977), *Prelude to the Landing on Planet Earth* (1977), *Mysteries of the Inner Self* (1978), *Alien Intelligence* (1979), and *Briefing for the Landing on Planet Earth* (1979).[47] He published many more books on alternative topics from the 1970s to the 1990s, which must be acknowledged as two decades of exemplary productivity on his part. In the early 1980s Holroyd and Sue divorced, and he had more than forty years with his partner Gyll, an artist whom he met in 1979 and got together with in 1981. They developed their common life, travelled together and retired to France.[48] In 2019 he was awarded a pension by the Royal Literary Fund in recognition of his contribution to British literary culture.[49]

Conclusion

This article has examined the intersections of: Colin Wilson's and Stuart Holroyd's textual and

[45] Colin Wilson, *The Occult: A History* (New York: Random House, 1971), p. 464. A later book, Colin Wilson, *The Devil's Party: A History of Charlatan Messiahs* (London: Virgin Publishing, 2000), covers similar territory. In *The Occult* Wilson speculated on why Gurdjieff required followers; in Chapter 8 of this book, "Strange Powers," he examines Rudolf Steiner, Krishnamurti, and Brother Twelve (Edward Arthur Wilson) and their interactions with followers. See Wilson, *The Devil's Party*, pp. 163-187.

[46] Colin Wilson, *G. I. Gudrjieff: The War Against Sleep* (London: Aeon Books Ltd, 2005 [1980]). Curiously, Wilson was sceptical that Gurdjieff was eighty-three when he died. Rather, he argued for a birth date in the 1870s, either 1873 or 1877, which is confirmed by Michael Benham's article in this special issue. See Michael Benham, 'In Which Year was G. I. Gurdjieff Born?', *Literature & Aesthetics*, vol. 35, no. 2 (2025), pp. 1-12.

[47] See Diller, 'Stuart Holroyd: Years of Anger and Beyond', pp. 53-56 for a list of Holroyd's publications.

[48] Diller, 'Stuart Holroyd: Years of Anger and Beyond', pp. 43-49.

[49] I provided a letter of recommendation to the Royal Literary Fund on Holroyd's behalf on 8 February 2019.

theoretical engagement with Gurdjieff's Fourth Way; the Fourth Way/ Work groups and teachers in Britain with whom they may possibly have interacted, and those they are known to have had ties to, chiefly Kenneth Walker and J. G. Bennett (1897-1974) and his pupils; and the rise of anti-establishment literature and culture in the United Kingdom in the 1950s and 1960s.[50] Wilson is a well-known literary and cultural figure, and in addition to his status as an *enfant terrible*, a limited number of critics have championed re-habilitating Wilson's literary criticism.[51] Holroyd–a playwright, poet, novelist, memoirist, literary critic, and writer on esoteric topics–is a candidate for revisionism, as it is time for his written legacy to be reassessed and his reputation to be better-known. In addition to the works discussed in this article he has authored three significant autobiographical works: *Flight and Pursuit* (1959), which concerns the search for spiritual values; *Contraries: A Personal Progression* (1975), a memoir of the 'angry' years which discussed his relationships with Wilson and Hopkins; and finally *His Dear Time's Waste* (2014), an expanded memoir.[52] The friendship between Holroyd and Wilson embraced the definitive cultural trends of the 1950s: the angry young men, with their championing of regionalism, working-class culture and sexual liberation;[53] the pursuit of alternative spiritual paths, which here is focused on Gurdjieff and the Fourth Way, but involved a range of possibilities; and perhaps most inspirationally, the conviction that pursuing life as an artist, a mystic – to use Wilson's term, an outsider – was not only possible but desirable and achievable.

[50] Morton Kroll, 'The Politics of Britain's Angry Young Men', *Social Science*, vol. 36, no. 3 (1961), pp. 157-166.
[51] Dosser (ed.), *Colin Wilson. The Bicameral Critic: Selected Shorter Writings* (Salem, NH: Salem House, 1985)
[52] See Stuart Holroyd, *Flight and Pursuit: A Venture into Autobiography* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1959); and Stuart Holroyd, *Contraries A Personal Progression* (London: The Bodley Head, 1975).
[53] Leslie Paul, 'The Angry Young Men Revisited', *The Kenyon Review*, vol. 27, no. 2 (1965), pp. 344-352.