

THE SCIENCE OF IDIOTISM

Recollections of No. 6, Rue des Colonels Renard, 1948-1949

For many years Mr. Gurdjieff used in his teaching a symbolical representation of human destiny by what he called the Science of Idiotism. He often said that this comes from a very ancient tradition, four thousand five hundred years old; that it was known in Babylon and afterwards preserved in Central Asia. He himself came across it in a brotherhood – having their central monastery, I gathered, in the Pamirs – where he spent some time. This Brotherhood used the symbolism of the Idiots for expressing and preserving important knowledge about Man and his Destiny. This was handed down from generation to generation by initiates, and is now one of the principal secrets of this Brotherhood.

Mr. Gurdjieff himself decided to use it in a different way – that is for teaching of uninitiated people. He did so because he saw in it a special power, which did not exist in the other ways of expressing the secrets of the inner life of Man. He once or twice said in my hearing – and no doubt at other times also – that those who knew this secret had been angry with him because they thought that it should have been preserved for its original purpose. Nevertheless he had continued because it was necessary to him for the fulfillment of his task. He even -- without saying so explicitly -- conveyed the impression that in some way he had had to pay for this action of his – that he had lost something precious by it – and that he had only done it for the good of the people whom he had to prepare. I cannot say whether he intended this account of the origin of the Science of Idiotism to be taken seriously or not. All I know is that I learnt almost more from his expositions based upon it than from any other aspect of his teaching.

The Science of Idiotism is inseparable from the notion of a sacred or sacramental meal. Mr. Gurdjieff would never speak of it except at table. Once someone going out of the room asked him some questions about it and he had turned on them, chiding for speaking of it away from the table. On another occasion it happened that a newcomer showed knowledge of the Idiots and said that I had told him beforehand. Mr. Gurdjieff scolded me for this and said that I spoiled everything by speaking – people had to learn about the Idiots at the table and understand each for himself. They must never be told in advance.

He always emphasized the sacred character of meals taken together and the role of each person in such meals. The Director or ‘Chamodar’ was the ruler of the feast. It was a great responsibility – so great that even Christ had fulfilled it towards his disciples. He was continuing this tradition – not as it had been wrongly understood by the Church – but as it was in its original significance. The sharing of food and drink is inseparable from the idea of a sacred meal. The ritual character of the meals at Mr. Gurdjieff’s table derived in part from the sharing of food, in part from the definite roles assigned to the participants, but most of all from the toasts. This is why the Science of Idiotism cannot be understood apart from the meals, nor the meals apart from the Science of Idiotism.

The rule at Mr. Gurdjieff’s meals was that each newcomer was a visitor – an ‘esteemed guest’ – who took no part in the ceremony of the Idiots. He should only listen and take

note of the different idiots. “Then if – accidentellement – he should come a second time, he must choose what idiot he is. He tells the Director. Or better, he writes it on his visiting card and gives it to the Director. Everyone who has such a visiting card showing that he is initiated into the Science of Idiotism will be received everywhere. There are monasteries in Central Asia where he will be received at once with such a visiting card.”

The ritual of the Science of Idiotism was simple. As soon as the meal begins, the Director proposes the toast ‘To the health of all Ordinary Idiots.’ If anyone is present who has chosen or been designated as Ordinary Idiot (it is usually a child) the Director adds “And to your health also, So-and-So.

A few minutes later the toast of 'All Super Idiots' is proposed, and so on through the list. Mr. Gurdjieff may allow the toasts to pass without comment or he may use one of them as a text for some explanation. Sometimes he explains to a newcomer the whole Science of Idiotism in somewhat the following terms:

"There are twenty-one Idiots. Everyone is an Idiot. The first is Ordinary Idiot and the twenty-first is the Unique Idiot – that is, Our God." He explained in this way and I noticed he invariably said 'our' God, never 'God', never 'Our Endlessness' which he always used in speaking of the Creator. I had the impression that in speaking of the Twenty First Idiot he had in mind a particular Manifestation of Divinity – in some sense the Divine Person.

He never, in my hearing, spoke at all clearly about who were and were not Idiots. In one sense, all individualized essences are Idiots, including very High Sacred Individuals. In another sense Idiots are contrasted with Wise Men and Intelligent. Only Idiots are to be toasted with alcohol and only alcohol is appropriate for toasting Idiots. Wise Men are to be toasted in pure water, Intelligent in water with something added. Even wine is not strong enough for the toast of the Idiots – once I saw him forbid someone drinking wine only from participating in the toasts. Certainly, he disapproved their being drunk in water, though he did not always stop people who did so for reasons of health.

It seemed to me – but here I can rely only upon the impression he gave rather than any specific explanation – that the Idiot is someone who strives towards something – he is the Being in process of Becoming. That is why those who are stationary, such as 'Wise Men', are not able to be Idiots.

The actual series of Idiots was as follows:

1. Ordinary Idiot.
2. Super Idiot.
3. Arch Idiot.
4. Hopeless Idiot.
5. Compassionate Idiot.
6. Squirming Idiot.
7. Square Idiot.
8. Round Idiot.
9. Zigzag Idiot.
10. Enlightened Idiot.
11. Doubting Idiot.
12. Swaggering Idiot.
13. Remorseful Idiot.
14. Born Idiot.
15. Patented Idiot.
16. Idiot of Stinking Heredity
17. -

I do not write down the description of the seventeenth Idiot, because I never heard it myself. So far as I know, it has not been toasted except at a meal at which only seven or eight men and Lisa Tracol were present, just before he left for America in December 1948.

The next three Idiots, eighteen, nineteen and twenty, occupy a special place. He always and frequently referred to himself as Number eighteen. Of nineteen and twenty, he said that these were

Sacred Individuals, who perform functions in relation to the whole Megalocosmos.

The special force of the Science of Idiotism as a method of instruction lies to a great extent in the ordering of the Series. Looking at the first ten – those most commonly toasted – there seems to be an ascending order from Ordinary to Enlightened. The next seven move in a direction which does not seem to be upward or downward, but rather of greater helplessness and dependence on influences out of their control. I doubt whether anyone studying the descriptions only would discover for himself the inner significance of the series. This lies in the fact that there are two directions of movement – ‘upwards’ towards number twenty one and ‘downwards’ towards Ordinary Idiot. Since the ultimate aim and purpose of the existence of every being must be to approach as closely as lies within his power the Source of Everything that exists, one would naturally expect that to ‘mount’ the scale is better than to ‘descend’.

The point is that to mount with encumbrances must sooner or later result in failure to move further. By the time a certain degree is reached the encumbrances can no longer be shed, and they become an insurmountable obstacle. The more so since these very encumbrances are not felt in the process of mounting. The objectively real encumbrances are not felt to be such until they are discovered from their results.

This then is the meaning of Ascent and Descent of the Scale of Idiotism. Wherever one finds oneself, one must first ‘descend consciously’ to the Ordinary Idiot, that is the Idiot with no distinguishing features, no personality, no special powers or properties. Mr. Gurdjieff’s understanding of the Ordinary Idiot could not be better exemplified than when he said that all very young children are Ordinary Idiots. Obviously the Gospel saying “Except ye become as little children, ye shall in no wise enter the Kingdom of Heaven” leaps into one’s mind.

Again and again Mr. Gurdjieff has impressed on us that no further progress is possible. He said, ‘Necessary consciencely descend jusqu’a ordinaire – then after only consciencely monter’. This is closely connected with his insistence on the necessity for ‘realizing one’s own nothingness’ before we can hope to move towards anything real.

About ascending, he said that this is automatic for everyone who works. Every two or three years he goes up one stage – Square becomes Round, Round Zigzig and so on. This ‘automatic’ ascent is the result of life experience, of increasing knowledge. It does not come without effort and sincere striving, but it lacks something essential, it is the way of knowledge and not being.

The way of knowledge leads only to the stage of the Enlightened Idiot. Of this Mr. Gurdjieff spoke sometimes in scorn but more often in deep compassion. “I pity Enlightened Idiot. More unhappy person not exist.” The Enlightened Idiot has struggled and climbed and finally reached the stage when he knows everything. He knows exactly what he must do – but he cannot do it. It may not even be his own fault. It may be some defect in his heredity. “Grandfather or grandmother. Perhaps his grandmother was a prostitute. He can do nothing about it. She is already dead. No one can help him. Not even God can help him.” The terrible situation of the Enlightened Idiot disturbed many people profoundly, and Mr. Gurdjieff was frequently asked whether there was really no possible way out. Sometimes he replied that if such an Idiot came to him and could pay enough, he could perhaps help him. But then he would have to descend all the way back to Ordinary Idiot and start afresh. This was very difficult; he would have to give up all that he had gained from so much labour. But if he had the courage to do so, he would be able to ascend consciously from Ordinary Idiot, and this time he could pass through Enlightened Idiot and reach Number Seventeen.

The Ordinary Idiot is thus the starting point for the growth of understanding, which alone has power to overcome the obstacles of the way up without sooner or later coming to a standstill. Once I asked him, half in jest, what Idiot was Nassr

Nassreddin Mullah. He replied that of course he was Ordinary Idiot. So simplicity, common sense and above all the absence of self-deception are the marks of the Ordinary Idiot. I think he is the

'obyvatel' of Fragments. But most of all, he is the child like whom each of us must become before we can hope to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

The Super Idiot is seldom particularized. For a short time Mr. Gurdjieff instructed the Director to add the explanation, 'That is to say all Ordinary Idiots who are not tail of donkey.' From this it would appear that the Super Idiot has 'something'. If he has still to descend to Ordinary Idiot, this 'something' is an encumbrance, a relic of his self-importance, from which he must divest himself. If he is already moving upward on the right hand side of the scale, the 'something' is a certain real value which he has acquired in his external world. He is still far short of objective inner attainments. Let it be clear that this interpretation of the Super Idiot is my own personal understanding which hangs by the slender thread of hints given by Mr. Gurdjieff on the few occasions he spoke of the second Idiot.

The Arch Idiot had a somewhat more definite role. Mr. Gurdjieff often designated as Arch Idiots people who occupied positions of importance in the realization of his immediate

plans, but had not a corresponding inner understanding. When I was in New York in January, 1949, I was transferred to the status of Arch Idiot because I was (at that time) designated as 'Director for England' I felt at the time that Mr. Gurdjieff was mocking me. When he returned to Europe and I began to work with him more seriously, I was soon returned to the Idiot I had first chosen.

The only 'detail' for Arch Idiot I ever heard was a personal joke with Peggy Flinch, whose father was a bishop. (Mr. Gurdjieff always insisted that he was an Archbishop). Anyhow, when Peggy was present the Director was instructed to add to the toast of Arch Idiot the phrase 'And to the health of all high-class Clergy'. It is possible to detect in all this an underlying motif; namely, to depict the situation of the man who relies upon external things and has not understood that no outward possessions or powers can affect one's own inner nothingness. On the other hand an Arch Idiot on the upward path has certain real powers which engender the respect of his fellows.

It was usual for the toasts of the first three Idiots to be passed over quickly. The fourth toast was very often the great climacteric of the meal. The whole atmosphere changed, and a sense of the immediate significance of our life united us all. The Hopeless Idiot was invariably drunk with a detailed explanation which Mr. Gurdjieff told us was taken from the Esoteric Group. He said that in the Esoteric Group all toasts were drunk with very full details which sometimes required half an hour to expound. These details concerned the seven aspects of each Idiot. To the Exoteric Group only two aspects were divulged.

The details of the Hopeless Idiot were changed somewhat during the time that I went to meals at Number 6, but the final form was fixed for many months before Mr. Gurdjieff died. It ran: "To the health of all Hopeless Idiots, subjectively and objectively. That is to say, to the health of all Hopeless Idiots who are candidates for perishing like dogs." From the end of 1948 and to an increasing extent in the last months of his life he introduced an 'addition' which was not spoken by the Director but by someone else in the room. Latterly it was invariably Elizabeth Mayall. This Addition was an explanation of the detail of the toast. "By the way, it is necessary to add that only those can die honourably who have worked on themselves. In life those who do not work on themselves will inevitably, early-lately, perish like dirty dogs."

Mr. Gurdjieff often took this toast as the starting point for a talk about aim. "Everyone must have an aim. If you have not an aim you are not a man. This is a very simple aim – not to perish like a dog. Everyone can have this aim. It is not a big aim. It is a small aim. But if you achieve this aim – to die honourably – then you can perhaps set yourself a bigger aim." The inescapable force of this presentation was immeasurably enhanced by the deep seriousness with which he spoke. To hear it reiterated day after day was to have something driven into the depths of one's consciousness. One dare not shirk this issue: "Unless you work you will inevitably perish".

Mr. Gurdjieff's way of turning suddenly from the serious to the light hearted was often exemplified in his dismissal of the toast. Once a postman came to the flat as the toast was being called, to deliver

a registered letter from America. As usual he was called in to have

a drink. When he heard the toast he said, "C'est bien vrai – qui ne travaille pas, tot ou tard, il crevera comme un chien." Mr. Gurdjieff was so delighted that the man was sent away loaded with presents.

The fifth toast is the Compassionate Idiot, with the detail "To the health

of all Compassionate Idiots, sympathetic and antipathic". Latterly he added the third category "And so-so-so". For a short time we had the further detail, "That is to say to the health of all Compassionate Idiots who have true pity and to the health of all those who only swagger and wish to be seen". To illustrate this Mr. Gurdjieff told the story of the man lying starving by the road side. The true Compassionate Idiot will give his last crust to help him. But the Antipathic Idiot will look round to see if someone is watching him. "Perhaps fiancée or fiancée's father is watching from the window. Then he will give his last crust. If no one is watching he will quickly go away. Perhaps even kick him. I hate such Idiots."

I think that the contrast between the Hopeless and the Compassionate Idiot is very significant. The latter sees outside himself, either in a good or a bad way. The former is concerned only with himself. Though 'subjectively' hopeless he will nevertheless resolve to struggle without expecting a result. The 'objectively' Hopeless Idiot does not even suspect that anything is wrong and therefore no question of struggle arises for him. He perishes like a dog, because he is content to live like a dog. In both cases the drama is enacted within the psyche of the Hopeless Idiot himself. The Compassionate Idiot has an external situation. He sees himself in relation to others who need help. If he does not deceive himself he realizes that he cannot help others unless he himself has 'being'. He sees that he has not being and when this fact penetrates deeply into his experience he 'consciously descends' to the state of Hopeless Idiot. If he has already descended to Ordinary Idiot and is working on himself up the scale of understanding, he struggles with the impossible task of 'consciously ascending' to the stage of 'Squirming Idiot'. There are three different possibilities for the Compassionate Idiot. This gives some idea of the extraordinary wealth of meaning which is hidden in the Science of Idiotism.

The Squirming Idiot toast is not usually detailed in respect of the positive and negative aspects. But Mr. Gurdjieff gave two kinds of explanation which indicates the difference. He spoke of the Squirming Idiot (in French, 'Idiot Recalcitrant') who will not admit that he is an idiot. He is convinced that he can 'do'. "Such an Idiot comes to me and asks for my help. I prove to him that he is idiot. He says, 'Yes, I am idiot'. Then he goes out and begins to think, 'But why am I idiot? Did I not buy this something for a hundred francs and sell it for two hundred? I am not idiot – Mr. Gurdjieff is idiot'. Then he comes back to me to explain what he is not idiot. I hit him in the jaw and break two teeth. Then he recognizes that he is idiot. But when he goes away again he changes".

The other aspect of the Squirming Idiot is described by another comparison. "He is like fish out of water. Fish knows what he cannot live without water. He has only a little time to get back into the water. But he has no legs. If I pick him up to put him back in water, he squirms and falls out of my hand so I cannot help him".

In both cases the Squirming Idiot is difficult to help. The conflict is now both in the inner and the outer world. The Squirming Idiot cannot find peace in either. He has not faith nor is he hopeless. He is not compassionate for he is too much occupied with his inner world. And yet he struggles. He is not satisfied. Even when he refuses to believe that he is an idiot, he does not trust his own judgment, but goes back to convince his teacher. His positive merit is that he struggles and out of this struggle something will result.

The toast of the Squirming Idiot was always coupled with the detail, 'And

to the health of all hysterical women'. At this point Gurdjieff would often say that all women are hysterical. Never in all his eighty years had he met a woman who was not hysterical. His use of the

word 'hysterical' had a special significance. It implied, I think, lack of judgment and a tendency to extremes. I do not remember any explanation of the coupling of this particular toast with hysterical women, but it seems to me that it is connected with the saying of Beelzebub that women can never have an independent judgment.

The seventh toast was always given in this form: "We come now to the series of Geometric Idiots. First, to the health of all Square Idiots". The Square Idiot is he who is 'sometimes not idiot'. He is 'candidate for Round'. The Round Idiot is always Idiot, but the square sometimes has a moment of sanity. Mr. Gurdjieff always used to accompany this explanation with a gesture of tracing a circle and a square in the air with his finger. At the corners of the square there is a change of direction, so the square symbolizes an idiot who has something in him that is different from the rest.

Very little was said in my hearing about the different kinds of Square Idiot, but I believe that Mr. Gurdjieff once gave the explanation that the Square Idiot may be real or imaginary. I have the impression that the Square Idiot is 'practical'. He may apply his 'practicalness' to activities which are in themselves imaginary, and if he believes that they have objective value, he himself loses touch with reality. On the other hand, the Square Idiot who has understanding can, within his own limitations, do work for an objective purpose. The Science of Idiotism has one more dimensions that any ordinary classification of human types and the stages of inner growth, for it takes separately into account the three factors of knowledge, being and understanding. He only touched the fringes of it in our meals at No. 6. For example, there was the question of automatic passage. Mr. Gurdjieff for some reason most often referred to this in commenting on the Square Idiot – "Candidate for Round". He used to say that every three years one passed one stage. Once he spoke of a woman who had not seen him for twelve years: she had been Hopeless Idiot and he told her that now she was Round. I think that he intended to convey the special danger that exists for the man who has some external manifestations on which he can rely. If he forgets that these are as mechanical as his accidental manifestations, he will lose discrimination and all his manifestations will acquire the character of 'Round Idiocy'.

The Round Idiot is one of the two or three who are mentioned in 'Beelzebub'. In its primitive sense, Round Idiot means completely devoid of discrimination. He takes everything the wrong way in terms of his own subjectivity. Sometimes, Mr. Gurdjieff spoke of the Round Idiot as being in a peculiarly difficult situation; there is no point at which he can escape. He will end by being hysterical, that is Zig-zag Idiot. But in the

meantime he is irresponsible. So he is always very lucky: whatever he does no one can blame him. He can say, 'What do you expect? I am Round Idiot'.

Once Mr. Gurdjieff spoke of the Round Idiot more seriously. He said that he must struggle very hard and very continuously; "but he can do this because he is Round Idiot! If he sees his Idiocy he will struggle day and night to be free".

In general cases, I heard that Mr. Gurdjieff made people transfer from Round Idiot directly to Hopeless Idiot. This was when they had made some long and persistent effort – particularly against their own judgment, that is on faith.

But by far the most frequent explanation given by Mr. Gurdjieff was the gesture of tracing a circle with his finger. 'He always Idiot. Day, night, sleep, wake, in eglise, in water closet, always Idiot. Idiot all sides'. Clearly this can be taken in more ways than one. The Round Idiot who is unaware of his idiocy is a real danger to himself and everyone near him. But if he is conscious of his idiocy and does not forget it, then he has a reminding factor which will make him work in a way that the other Idiots cannot do. He sees nothing in himself but idiocy and therefore can have no other aim except to change himself and become free.

The last of the Geometric Idiots is Zig-zag. The toast was given in more and more detail – 'taken from the Esoteric Group' – as time went on. It finally settled in the form: 'To the health of all Zig-zag Idiots, that is to say, to the health of all those who have five Fridays in the week. And to the

health of all hysterical people, and to the health of all three sexes’.

Mr. Gurdjieff gave many explanations of all these details. Sometimes he would interrupt the Director, who was coupling with the toast the name of one or more people present, to say: "No, this toast is to all hysterical people. Everyone is hysteric, so this toast is for everyone – there is no need to give names”.

About ‘five Fridays in the week’, there were many attempts to persuade him to explain what this meant. Once he said explicitly that there was no special significance in the ‘Friday’. It might be any day of the week. What was important about the Zig-zag Idiot was that he had no stability. From one side he was very strong;’ from another very weak. He would make great efforts to begin to really move (?) and then he would go right back. To illustrate this, Mr. Gurdjieff made a gesture with his finger, stretching it as far as he could to the right and then back halfway and then a succession of smaller zig-zags.

The Zig-Zag Idiot has broken out of the charmed circle in which the Round Idiot is confined, but he has no inner stability of his own. So he is hysterical. And everyone who begins to work on himself has something of this property. He does not go in a definite direction because his understanding does not correspond to his efforts.

The connection between the Zig-zag Idiot and the Three Sexes came later (at any rate in my experience) than the other details. He used it frequently as a text to speak about the third sex and its uselessness for the work. In a sense therefore the Zig-zag Idiot represents

an end point. He has become a dilettante unable to stick to anything, and finally loses the inner impulse to work. But he may also be a man or woman in the true sense, and as such his efforts will be real and effective. Mr. Gurdjieff drew the picture of the Zig-zag Idiot as one who works with almost frantic energy. “I admire such idiot. He make many mistakes, but he never stop – day, night he struggle”. This is the Zig-zag Idiot who has understood his position. He has a certain affinity with the Squirming Idiot, and indeed once or twice Mr. Gurdjieff gave the explanation usually reserved for the Squirming Idiot in the Zig-zag toast.

I think that it may be possible to take the Idiots in groups of three. The first of each triad represents the inner aspect, the second the outward manifestation and the third the outcome of their conflict. This would mean that there is a certain analogy between Idiots occupying the same place in each group of three. Thus Arch Idiot, Squirming Idiot, Zig-zag and Swaggering Idiot would represent different stages in the realization of a certain aspect of human experience.

The fourth series of three begins with the Enlightened Idiot. He is the end point of the way of knowledge beyond which it is impossible to pass without being. It is certain that Mr. Gurdjieff conceived more than one way – perhaps seven – of ascending the scale of Idiotism. One is simply imaginary. The Idiot does not change in any real sense, but he progressively grows more and more sure that he is advancing. Such an Idiot can reach, in his imagination, any stage. Most probably he will become Swaggering Idiot, convinced that he has something which makes him as different from all other men.

There is no objective significance in the changing manifestations of such a person. He does not really work on himself and is, in the full sense, a candidate for perishing like a dog.

The way of knowledge is quite different from this. He who follows this way really struggles. He overcomes great difficulties in order to acquire not more information but real knowledge. This work changes him, and he climbs up the scale of Idiotism until he becomes Enlightened. Then he knows everything that it is possible for him to know. He knows what he must do in order to reach real freedom. But he cannot do it. He struggles desperately, but finds that it is quite impossible for him to do what is necessary. Mr. Gurdjieff very often gave explanations of the situation of the Enlightened Idiot. “Perhaps it is not his fault. It is the fault of his heredity. His grandfather or grandmother. Perhaps his grandmother was a prostitute. He can do nothing about it. She already

dead. No one can do anything for him. I pity such Idiot more than any.”

Such explanations naturally aroused feelings of wonder and dismay. Though reminiscent of ‘the sins of the fathers shall be visited upon the children until the third and fourth generation of them that hate me’, they seemed utterly at variance with the infinite mercy and compassion of the Creator. They brought home to us the terrible situation of the man who relies on knowledge rather than on being. Often Mr. Gurdjieff was asked

(ends here)

(from handwritten notes)

1. Ordinary Idiot

Good to be ordinary

2. Super Idiots arch

thinks he knows everything high society

3. Arch Idiot

4. Geometric

Round Idiots all time

5. Square Idiot along in lines (??)

keeps hitting corners

6. Zigzag somebody has 5 Fridays in week

7. Compassionate Idiot

antipathic - kick a dog when no one is looking ----- if someone is watching

sympathic – sympathy for every --- even cold sausages (?)

8. Squirring Idiot fish out of water

9. Hopeless Idiot

subjective objective

nothingness kundabuffer

10. Doubting Idiot

11. Enlightened Idiot

12. Third Sex and all Hysterical Women

present company excluded