

The Man in Question

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A distinct cameo and confirmation that
“the Gurdjieffian enigma is here to stay”

George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff was born to poor Greco-Armenian parents in Alexandropol, near the Russo-Turkish frontier, in 1866, and died in Neuilly, Paris, on October 29, 1949. What happened in between makes a curious and bravura story. Despite hectic episodes of fame and notoriety, Gurdjieff had seemed posthumously destined for historical oblivion. In characteristic fashion, he defied conventional expectations and history now confirms that the Gurdjieff enigma is here to stay.

If Peter Brook’s 1979 film, *Meetings with Remarkable Men* (freely adapted from Gurdjieff’s autobiography), clouds his early years, they were misty anyway. We do know that Gurdjieff was precociously seized by an imperious existential question: an “irrepressible striving” to fathom the meaning of life. “What selected the boy”, muses Brook, “out of all his contemporaries and set him off in this direction?” Something strong enough to impel him through two decades of strenuous pilgrimage in a quest for the traditional knowledge of the monasteries and holy men of Asia. Reputedly, he visited Tabriz, Turkestan, Orenburg, Sverdlovsk, Siberia, Bokhara, Merv, Kafiristan and the Taklamakan desert: “In one place symbol, in another technique and in another dance.” Three times he survived bullet wounds, one evidently sustained near a Red Hat Buddhist monastery in Ladakh.

Gurdjieff’s purported travels are not corroborated by the journals of contemporary explorers (Sven Hedin, Sir Aurel Stein, Albert von Le Coq, Paul Pelliot and Count Kozui Otani), though one hypothesizes for this is that Gurdjieff was a Tzarist agent adroit in disguise and good at covering his tracks. By and large, historians are baffled as to his actual movements between 1887 and 1912, though, intriguingly, when he finally turned up in St Petersburg, his first known English-speaking pupil was Paul Dukes, later knighted for services to British Intelligence.

Gurdjieff’s long search for illumination in Asia proved fruitful. He surfaced in Metropolitan Russia with “The Work” – an integrated system of ideas and

techniques for conscious evolution which incorporated cosmology, a phenomenology of consciousness and a typology of human characteristics. His early pupils numbered Piotr Ouspensky, mystic, mathematician and author of the unexpectedly influential *Tertium Organum*; Thomas de Hartmann, whose ballet *The Pink Flower* had been premiered before the Tsar (with Nijinsky and Pavlova in the cast); and, later, Alexandre Salzmann, an associate of Rilke and Kandinsky.

Gurdjieff's hopes of establishing his envisaged institute for the Harmonious Development of Man in Russia were dashed by the First World War, the Revolution and the ensuing Civil War. He extracted his nucleus of pupils, crossing Red and White lines five times; and, having walked them out over the northern Caucasus range, successively relocated in Tbilisi, Constantinople and Berlin. In July 1922, though officially stateless, Gurdjieff secured a Nansen passport and settled permanently in France. Generously aided by Mary Lilian, Viscountess Rothermere, he soon acquired his famous seat, the Prieuré des Basses Loges at Fontainebleau-Avon, where he finally set up his Institute in order to propagate his teaching and test his ideas. Professor Henry Leroy Finch, conveys their quasi-religious character:

The Gurdjieff teaching returns us to the Divine Individual, antedating the Christian tradition, but in a direct line backwards from it. And to self-knowledge, understood more "objectively" than by the Greeks; to the awakening of consciousness, a Buddhist task; and to the decoding of everyday life to reveal its "other" meanings . . .

Gurdjieff's reputation was first fanned, and then compromised, by his encounter with the critically ill Katherine Mansfield, who gained access to the Institute through A. R. Orage, Editor of the *New Age*. From the first, she liked Gurdjieff - "He looks exactly like a desert chief. I kept thinking of Doughty's Arabia." The Prieuré, she wrote, was full of life and humour and ease, and the people agreeably strange and quick and not ashamed to be themselves. But when she died on January 9, 1923, Gurdjieff was stigmatised as "the man who killed Katherine Mansfield". Wyndham Lewis deprecated the "Levantine psychic shark"; D. H. Lawrence said the Institute was a "rotten, false, self-conscious place of people playing a sickly stunt"; even Freud *ipsissimus* mocked Gurdjieff's conversions from the psychoanalytic camp: "You see what happens to Jung's disciples." There were some endorsements: Ezra Pound flippantly commended Gurdjieff's soup. - very tasty and "bright yellow . . . Pier della Francesca in tone". Diaghilev proposed to "borrow" Gurdjieff's Sacred Dances as a novelty item in his Ballets Russes season. And in the spring of 1924, when Gurdjieff took these unique ensemble dances to America, he attracted new disciples: the novelist Jean Toomer, avatar of an Afro-American literary renaissance; Georgette Leblanc, a former consort of Maeterlinck; and Margaret Anderson and Jane Heap, who had serialised *Ulysses* in their journal, *The Little Review*.

Back in France, however, Gurdjieff was gravely injured in a car crash. He closed his Institute, put off his disciples, fought for recovery, and at the age of fifty-eight, began his 1,238 page *magnum opus*, *Beelzebub's Tales to his Grandson* a mythopoeic critique of human life and the phenomenon of consciousness. Gurdjieff chose to write in the hubbub of the Café de la Paix, where he could conveniently observe the “four sources of action existing under the names ‘mother-in-law’, ‘digestion’, ‘John Thomas’ and ‘cash’ ”. Gurdjieff’s *alter ego* and wisdom-figure, Grandfather Beelzebub, is a fallen angel sorrowing over humanity’s predicament.

In 1949, dressed in stripped pyjamas and Astrakhan hat, Gurdjieff came out of his apartment at 6 Rue des Colonels Rénard for the last time, sitting upright in his stretcher and waving “Au revoir, tout le monde!” Frank Lloyd Wright, who was, at the time, accepting a medal at Cooper Union, broke off to announce: “The greatest man in the world has just died. His name was Gurdjieff.”

Gurdjieff trod the Gobi Desert and Coney Island, crossed the path of a Turkestan tiger, made a pilgrimage to Mecca and played Carnegie Hall. Yet, according to his closest pupils, the essential Gurdjieff – the “Teacher of Dancing”, the author of *Beelzebub* – was a sobering incarnation of being and a catalyst to self-initiation. History will rigorously test their claims, as Gurdjieff’s influence spills over into the twenty-first century.

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