

Beelzebub's Tales To His Grandson

Commentary by Terry Winter Owens and Suzanne D. Smith

“Despite all the inherent difficulties which Gurdjieff has implanted in the book—complexities in writing and in concepts, the rewards are there also. But in keeping with Gurdjieff's philosophy, the rewards are commensurate with the reader's struggle to find them.”

This book is without doubt one of the most extraordinary books ever published. Its title is no exaggeration, for the book not only touches on all and every conceivable subject, but it also is all and everything—that is, a collection of science fiction tales, an allegory, a satire, a philosophical treatise, a sociological essay, an introduction to psychology, a cryptogram and, for those who follow Gurdjieff's teachings, a bible. It is a highly unusual mixture of entertainment and esoteracism, humour and seriousness, obscurity and clarity.

GEORGE IVANOVITCH GURDJIEFF ranks among the most controversial men of the 20th century, and he may well be one of the most important. He was born in 1877 of Greek ancestry in Russian Armenia and died in Paris in 1949. As a young man he devoted his energies to searching for the fundamental truths of life. He travelled extensively throughout the East, sometimes gaining entrance to esoteric schools that few, if any, Westerners had ever been admitted to. He became convinced that there was a way for man to become much more than what he is. He then set about putting what he had learned into a form that would be understandable and meaningful to the Western world. He developed a method whereby a man could evolve through his own efforts. The basis of the method seems simple enough—to observe oneself objectively, impartially and at each moment. But the execution of it is extremely difficult, which led to it being called "the Work." Through efforts "to work on oneself" and increase one's self-awareness or consciousness, Gurdjieff maintains that a man can develop new faculties which, because they are based on objectivity and impartiality, enable man to function harmoniously. Gurdjieff believes, unlike many religious philosophers, that

man has to develop a soul—he is not born with it—and these new faculties contribute to the development of the soul. He presented his ideas in three forms—lectures and writing, music, and sacred dances and movements to correspond to the three main areas of man—his intellect, his emotions, and his physical body. What was possibly most important and unique about Gurdjieff was that he was a living example of what his method could produce. Even people who didn't like him had to admit that here was a man in control of himself, a man who operated from the inside out rather than being in the power of external influences like most men.

It is fortunate that he put his ideas in writing, because throughout history we can see what has happened when wise men have entrusted the dissemination of their teachings solely to their disciples. Distortions, disagreements and even reversals are inevitably the final result. This is not to say that many of the books written about the ideas and method of Gurdjieff are not quite good. Ouspensky's *In Search of the Miraculous*, Kenneth Walker's *A Study of Gurdjieff's Teachings*, and C. Daly King's *The States of Human Consciousness* are excellent introductions to Gurdjieff and his ideas. But these are secondhand and consequently not as complete or as accurate as something coming directly from Gurdjieff himself.

Because the book is so unique, the reading of it does present certain challenges. Gurdjieff suggests that *All and Everything* be read three times, and not until the third reading should the reader try to fathom the gist of it. However, this does not mean that a tremendous amount cannot be gleaned from the first reading. A good guide to understanding the book is the section "From the Author" at the very end. Here Gurdjieff steps out of his role as storyteller and talks to the reader directly.

Another guide is to keep in mind Gurdjieff's purpose in writing *All and Everything*, which he states in no uncertain terms: to destroy mercilessly all man's beliefs and views about everything existing in the world. To reinforce this aim, Gurdjieff selects a most diabolical name for his hero—the name of the devil himself—Beelzebub. However, *All and Everything* is not like so many philosophy books that brilliantly show man what a farce he is and then leave it at that. Its exposé of man is not an end in itself, but rather a beginning. Gurdjieff sets out to destroy only in order to create. He believes that before man can proceed to uncover and develop his hidden possibilities, he must first question the condition in which he is, must feel dissatisfaction, must have an inkling that there is more to life than what the senses perceive.

Two other important points to keep in mind are the sub-title, "An Objectively Impartial Criticism of Man," which implies this is no ordinary criticism, and Gurdjieff's statement that the book is written "according to entirely new principles of logical reasoning." It is impossible to explore here all the ramifications of these two points, but they mean that Gurdjieff does not propose palliative measures of reform nor does he present his arguments in a traditional way. He makes it clear that mankind cannot be "worked on" from the outside; that is, things like war or disease cannot be eliminated even through the best forms of legislation or science or artistic endeavours. The only possible solution is that enough men embark on a road leading to higher states of consciousness.

Probably the biggest challenge in reading the book lies in its richness of content. What is said can be taken on so many different levels, and it is often hard to know how to go about deciphering it. In general, it could be said that Gurdjieff is working on the hypothesis "as above, so below." Thus, when he talks about the universe and the sun and the moon, he is also talking about man and what he is composed of.

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Since Gurdjieff has chosen to present his ideas in part in the form of allegory, one can read those parts of this book simply as fascinating science-fiction. The story opens aboard the space ship Karnak. Beelzebub is travelling to a conference where his sage advice is needed on matters of cosmic significance. He is accompanied by his grandson, Hassein, and his old and faithful servant Ahoon. As they travel, Beelzebub regales Hassein with tales about the Earth, about events in the universe, and about cosmological and psychological law. Beelzebub tells Hassein how he happened to become interested in the planet Earth. During his youth, he intervened in affairs that were of no concern to him and as punishment was banished to Mars, in a "remote corner of the Universe" (our solar system). There he builds a telescope in order to study the goings-on on Earth and to observe the strange customs of its inhabitants. He finds man's inclination to "destroy the existence of others" particularly strange and repugnant. The significance of Mars is perhaps in its distance—that is, one cannot become as easily prejudiced if one has perspective.

Beelzebub then relates an engrossing story about the early life of Earth, which is filled with psychological implications. Due to cosmological disturbances, two fragments broke off from the Earth early in its creation—one was the moon, the other what

Gurdjieff calls Anulios which Earthmen do not know exists. In order to maintain the balance of the universe, it was necessary to ensure that these two satellites remain orbiting around the Earth, and Earthmen were required to give off a certain substance that would facilitate that end. Fearing that if the Earthmen found out what their function was, they might find no reason for continuing to live, the higher powers implanted an organ in them called Kundabuffer which prevented them from perceiving their true condition. Later the organ was removed, but unfortunately its consequences remained and they remain to this day. The Kundabuffer was only intended to prevent man from seeing reality, but it also caused the additional qualities of self-love, vanity, swagger, pride, etc. These qualities are psychological and emotional props which put a cloud over the true nature of man. Hence, man needs a vantage point beyond the cloud, as if from Mars, to see this real nature and to discover there the purpose of his life. Gurdjieff presents this purpose not only as an aim, but as a duty—a duty quite separate from the usual ethical and moral obligations.

Beelzebub also tells of his personal visits to Earth where he learns more about the nature of man after gaining preliminary knowledge through his telescope. These trips may be construed as a more advanced step in the method of working on oneself—perhaps implying that once having acquired the ability to see oneself objectively as if from the outside, one can then make closer observations and still retain one's state of impartiality. These descents to Earth are narrated to his grandson for educational purposes, but they are always entertaining stories. In all, Beelzebub makes six trips to Earth, each possibly representing a specific portion of the body or psyche deserving study.

Beelzebub is not alone in his quest after development, and he tells his grandson of other people—some extra-terrestrials, some Earthmen and some of divine origin—also in pursuit of objective truth. The first of them is Gornahoor Harharkh, whom we first meet in the chapter "The Arch-preposterous." He is an "essence-friend" of Beelzebub's living on Saturn. His prime interest is in electricity called Okidanokh which participates in the formation of all new arisings. Gornahoor Harharkh invents a machine which demonstrates and makes available for his use the properties of Okidanokh. The purpose of his experiments is to develop his Reason—an attribute which, according to Gurdjieff, man does not have by nature but must acquire through effort. The machine is described in great detail, and the experiment might correspond to an exercise or practice connected with "the Work."

Perhaps the most outstanding character in the book (outside of Beelzebub) is Ashiata Shiemash. We learn about him in a series of four chapters which are some of

the most emotionally stimulating in the book. Ashiata Shiemash was sent to Earth as a messenger from above, a messiah figure of enormous nobility and beauty. His writings are unusually moving and have a scriptural tone and quality. An example are his three verses on what he calls the sacred being-impulses of Faith, Love and Hope:

Faith of consciousness is freedom

Faith of feeling is weakness

Faith of body is stupidity.

Love of consciousness evokes the same in response

Love of feeling evokes the opposite

Love of body depends only on type and polarity.

Hope of consciousness is strength

Hope of feeling is slavery

Hope of body is disease.

Ashiata Shiemash establishes the Being-Obligolnian Strivings, five rules of objective morality which lead to genuine conscience. These five rules are:

- to have everything satisfying and really necessary for one's body,
- to have a constant and unflagging instinctive need for self-perfection in the sense of being,
- the conscious striving to know ever more and more concerning the laws of World-creation and World-maintenance,
- to strive from the beginning of one's existence to pay for one's arising and individuality as quickly as possible, in order afterwards to be free to lighten as much as possible the Sorrow of our Common Father,
- the striving always to assist the most rapid perfecting of other beings, both those similar to oneself and those of other forms, up to the degree of self-individuality.

Gurdjieff points out that one of the psychological traits of contemporary man which impedes the formation of a conscience is the "disease of tomorrow"—i.e., putting off until later or tomorrow what should be done now.

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Woven into Beelzebub's stories, are pieces of information that seem quite straightforward. For instance, Beelzebub explains to his grandson that man is composed

of three brains or centres. They are the instinctive or moving centre, the emotional or feeling centre, and the intellectual or thinking centre. Perhaps Beelzebub and his party can be seen as a demonstration of the three centres functioning together as a unit, each having a definite role to fulfil. Beelzebub himself would correspond to the thinking centre. He has all the information, is the maker of plans and decisions, and is the leader of the group. Ahoon, the servant, represents the physical centre. He is described as faithful. He is always there, ready to serve and does not intrude with his own personal desires—perhaps a more ideal condition for the body to be in than is generally the case with man. Hassein represents the emotional centre. He is young, not fully developed, is in the process of being educated, has willingness and eagerness to grow up, and is often intensely moved by what Beelzebub tells him. In this analogy it can be seen how Gurdjieff's method, which has been called the Fourth Way, differs from the three ways of the monk, the yogi and the fakir. They each try to develop primarily through the means of one centre: the fakir through chastisement of the body, the yogi through mental discipline, and the monk through prayer and belief, which are chiefly emotional. For Gurdjieff's work, all three centres must be utilised so that man can develop harmoniously, not lopsidedly.

The knowledge of this concept of three centres is prerequisite to Gurdjieff's treatment of the Law of Three. It is quite an unusual concept and rarely, if ever, appears in contemporary scientific knowledge. Yet Gurdjieff maintains that it is the underlying principle in all phenomena and also plays a very significant role in man's possible development. The Law of Three states that there are three rather than two forces always in operation. We generally, of course, know of only positive and negative. To this, Gurdjieff adds the neutralising force.

Beelzebub tells how each of man's three centres can play a part in his development through the use of consciously ingested and digested substances. Unfortunately, man in his present condition does not take in these substances and therefore does not fulfil his potentialities. The chapter "Hypnotism" goes into it, telling what these substances are, how they are to be ingested and digested, and what the results of this can be.

Towards the end of the book, in the chapter "Form and Sequence," Gurdjieff draws a distinction between knowing and understanding. Understanding can only result through the conscious verification of knowledge. So, although the book presents knowledge, and perhaps knowledge of a very high order, it is not in itself useful unless one puts it to the test—digests it and converts it into understanding.

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Interspersed with his stories, Beelzebub discusses various theoretical and philosophical subjects. At one point in their travels through space, Beelzebub's party learns of the impending appearance of a comet which could, if they cross its path, poison the ship's passengers. Beelzebub decides that the Karnak should wait in outer space until the comet has gone by. He makes use of this time to explain to Hassein the dynamics of space ships, much as the contemporary father explains the workings of an automobile to his young son, and also in keeping with the best tradition in science-fiction. But here, in allegory perhaps, are principles dealing with the methodology of "work on oneself." Included in his explanations is the idea of perpetual motion which Beelzebub puts forth in such a plausible way that one is hard put to find any theoretical flaw in it. Perhaps there are indications here of what kind of fuel could be used to keep oneself in perpetual effort to develop.

Another exciting principle which Gurdjieff brings forth is the Law of Seven, to which he devotes a whole chapter. If one can in any way sum up the intricate logic of this law, it is that all events proceed in seven steps or "deflections," each step having specific attributes and properties which determine the progress of every activity. Gurdjieff links this law and its progressions rather intimately with the stages of a man's development.

The Law of Seven has at least several illustrations in contemporary knowledge—obviously in the music octave, but more profoundly in the periodic table of elements in chemistry. When the elements are lined up in tabular form, each series headed by an inert element, it can be seen that certain of their characteristics repeat in patterns of seven. It is interesting to note here that the electrons of inert elements have closed orbits; they cannot combine with the other elements of this world easily. Thus, we see that Gurdjieff's theories are not solely a product of his rich imagination, and it is fascinating to see how he finds psychological applications in them.

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In many ways, Gurdjieff seems to be trying to discourage people from reading All and everything. In the introduction, which he calls "Arousing of Thought," not only thought, but many feelings are aroused—some unpleasant ones toward Gurdjieff himself. Gurdjieff helps to invoke these by such statements as, "cheerful and swaggering candidate for a buyer of my writing...before embarking in the reading...reflect seriously and then undertake it...you might lose your...appetite for you favourite dish

and for your...neighbour, the brunette." Apparently Gurdjieff does this to keep the reader from being lulled or feeling complacent. He wants to agitate and unsettle us—shake us loose from our ordinary way of thinking and of receiving new impressions.

One of the aspects of the book that is quite decidedly "arousing" is the very manner in which it is presented. Sometimes there is digression upon digression, so that Gurdjieff appears rambling and disconnected. But actually each seeming digression adds a new dimension to that which is being discussed. Another problem is that people are so used to what Gurdjieff calls "bon ton literary language"—exciting images and lulling reveries requiring little effort on the reader's part. Gurdjieff writes quite otherwise on purpose; he constructs sentences which are, at times, outlandishly long and complex—sometimes a quarter of a page in length.

Gurdjieff seems hell bent on disturbing our equilibrium, for there is hardly a "quiet" moment in the book that is not disturbed by one of Gurdjieff's classic "Otherwise." This, as he explains in the introduction, is based on an injunction from his grandmother which states, "In life never do as others do...Either do nothing—just go to school—or do something nobody else does."

It is sometimes hard to determine when Gurdjieff is being humorous and when serious. He will often discuss a most weighty problem in a tone which is light, sometimes facetious, often with tongue-in-cheek. A prime example of this is his discussion of our responsibilities towards, as he puts it, "Mister God." In reverse, in the chapter "America," Gurdjieff discusses many topics with mock seriousness—the American "dollar-business," drinking and prohibition, the Chatterlitz school of languages, a strange fellow from Chicago called Mr. Bellybutton and on and on. This chapter is really spiced with pungent wit!

One of the best elements of Gurdjieff's humour is his timing. He doesn't allow the reader to get heavy and ponderous, because he sprinkles his humour strategically throughout. Often when considering a most serious question, he interrupts with a quote from the legendary Arab philosopher, Mullah Nassr Eddin.

Also contributing to the fact that the course of the reading is not, to quote Mullah Nassr Eddin, "Roses, roses," is the liberal usage of the Karatasian language—the strange words that belong to Beelzebub's vocabulary. These words are often an unusual assemblage of syllables with three or four consecutive vowels. Some of the roots are traceable such as Triamazikamno (tri=three) coming from 'tri' for three and Egoplastikoori and Legominism (ego=I), coming from 'ego' for I; but always connected

with them are syllables not so easily traceable. It is not that Gurdjieff leaves the reader hanging, for he often goes to great length to define and illustrate these words. But an examination of their construction can no doubt shed even further light on them, and Gurdjieff offers quite an adventure in word exploration for those so inclined. There is the word zion in the names of two "searchers after truth"—King Konuzion and Makary Kronbernkzion. Then there are words which seem to come directly from various eastern languages, like the name of the space ship Karnak that Beelzebub and his company are travelling in, which means "dead body" in Armenian.

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Despite all the inherent difficulties which Gurdjieff has implanted in this book, the rewards are there. But and in keeping with Gurdjieff's philosophy, the rewards are commensurate with the reader's struggle to find them. The book is certainly well worth the struggle.

In the last chapter, Beelzebub, in an exultant experience, is graduated to a state of higher Reason, which he has earned through his efforts to develop. The ritual connected with this has the solemnity of a religious ceremony and is deeply moving and inspiring. So, "An Objectively Impartial Criticism of the Life of Man" ends with a triumphal sense of hope, of salvation, of redemption. But not before Hassein is invited to ask one final question of his grandfather. Hassein asks what hope there is for the salvation of people on Earth, and most aptly the story ends with the reply:

The sole means now for the saving of the beings of the planet Earth would be to implant again into their presences a new organ, an organ like Kundabuffer, but this time of such properties that every one of these unfortunates during the process of existence should constantly sense and be cognizant of the inevitability of his own death as well as of the death of everyone upon whom his eyes or attention rests.

Only such a sensation and such a cognizance can now destroy the egoism completely crystallised in them that has swallowed up the whole of their Essence and also that tendency to hate others which flows from it—the tendency, namely, which engenders all those mutual relationships existing there, which serve as the chief cause of all their abnormalities unbecoming to three-brained beings and maleficent for them themselves and for the whole of the Universe.

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