

Regarding *Beelzebub's Tales*

Letters to C. S. Nott and Louis Pauwels

Dennis Saurat

In his *Journey Through This World: the second journal of a pupil (Further Teachings of Gurdjieff 1969)*. C. S. Nott recounts how he became a publisher and issued some work by Denis Saurat:

J. W. D.

“I published Denis Saurat's *Three Conventions*, which brought about a close friendship. He had met Gurdjieff at the Prieuré at Orage's suggestion and had been profoundly impressed. Saurat, a son of peasants, had a deep understanding of the rich current of life that, flowing under the glittering exterior, has almost nothing in common with this exterior—I mean the life of simple people, peasants and the middle classes who themselves are almost unconscious of it. He wrote about it in *Gods of the People, The End of Fear, The Christ at Chartres*; also, he had traced the influence of the occult tradition in English literature from Spenser to Milton and Blake. Rebecca West said that he was the wisest man she knew.

“He had written for *The New Age* and *Revue des Deux Mondes*. At the time I met him he was professor of French Literature in Kings College and was head of the French Institute in London. I spoke to him about Gurdjieff's book, *Beelzebub's Tales*, and later lent him my typescript copy.

“He wrote: ”

Regarding *Beelzebub's Tales*

Dear Mr. Nott,

Thank you for allowing me to see it. It is, in my opinion, a great book and it is a thousand pities that it cannot be published. There is a very great amount of wisdom and knowledge in it and, as I became more familiar with it I realised that practically every page is full of sense and information. Beyond some excusable mannerisms and the peculiarities which give charm to every author, I see nothing in the book that could be objected to. But no doubt its allegorical or philosophical meaning which is easy enough to someone who has studied the traditions, would be completely beyond the public. I am glad to say that I found no difficulties in the book. It is a work of art of the first magnitude in its own peculiar way.

Please remember that if an opportunity should arise of meeting Gurdjieff again I would be delighted to do so. If you can convey to him my appreciation of his book—and you will note I make no restrictions—you will give me pleasure.

If only it were possible, which I do not think it is, it would give me the greatest pleasure to give a regular course of lectures to explain the book according to my lights. Of course, you will realize that each commentator would have his own way of explaining the book.

Sincerely,
D. Saurat.

“Years later, when *Beelzebub* was published, I sent him a copy. He wrote: ”

Dear Mr. Nott,

Thank you for sending *Beelzebub*, and in which I am immersed. I like it immensely—but I wonder what the French translation will be like. I do not believe you can play with French in the way English has been played with there. I cannot give any answers as to a review, and cannot think of any journal that would accept, at present, an article even. Also, I'm deep down with an attack of flu, and you seem to be the same.

Later, I'll send you some comments on *The Tales*.

Affectionately,
D. Saurat.

The commentary arrived in due course, in French, which I translate as follows:

Regarding *Beelzebub's Tales*:

Dear Mr. Nott,

I have again read with the greatest interest naturally this astonishing book by G. Gurdjieff. I believe that the most important thing, objectively, is that in this book there are a number of observations which indicate a superterrestrial source:

- The point of view about devils.
- The affirmation that there are, at present, four centres of initiates on the earth, and the situation of these centres.
- The forbidding to impart true information directly to ordinary minds.
- The difference between mental knowledge, which is an obstacle to real understanding; and the knowledge of "being" – the only real knowledge. This, perhaps, is the most important point.
- The fact that it is Buddhism (in its distorted forms) that has produced occultism, theosophy, psychoanalysis and so on.
- The fact that only revelation can teach us something.
- The suffering of God.
- We are thus in the presence of one who, in a certain measure, speaks with authority.

In the second place, very many of the ideas, though common-sensical, are based on intuitions well above the normal:

- Every criticism of modern life and of human history is perfectly just, and this is perhaps one of the most important things in the book, since it is absolutely necessary to understand that *all* our ideas have been falsified – before we have been able to correct at least some of them.
- The Greeks and the Romans have been responsible for putting in train fundamental errors – and then the Germans.
- God forgives all.
- The importance of the lawful inexactitudes in the transmission of real teaching in Art.
- The criticisms of the doctrine of reincarnation.

In the third place it is necessary to state that a great part of the book is not clear, and one has the right to suspect that G.G. has done this intentionally. Leaving his sense of humour on one side one can follow his idea that it is forbidden to teach directly, and that one can tell lies if these lies are useful to humanity; this shows that he has probably put errors or intentional inexactitudes

in his book so as to compel his followers to exercise their own judgment and thus themselves develop and reach a higher level, to which—according to the theories of G.G., these followers would not arrive at if he, G.G., taught them the truth directly. In the latter case they would be in the category which is called "mental knowledge", whereas G.G. wishes them to reach the category of "knowledge of being", and the first hinders the second.

It is on this that each reader must take his own stand. I am quite ready to tell you mine. I place among the myths which are to be rejected, completed or explained:

- The person of Beelzebub, who is evidently a transformation of G.G. himself—leaving on one side the question of who is G.G.
- All the story of the central sun, of the planets, of the earth and the moon; and of eternal retribution for a small number of beings, which contradicts the idea of a universal pardon.
- The idea of Christ as only one of the messengers; in this case it is necessary to identify the Logos, which is perfectly indicated in the chapter on purgatory.

In conclusion, it seems to me that the teachings of G.G. should be able to play a very important role in our time if they are explained by minds first of all endowed with a certain preliminary knowledge and a developed critical sense.

I think further that it is a compliment to G.G. to believe that this is exactly what he intended himself. You know as well as I, and even better, that he had a critical sense and a sense of humour extremely well developed; and further, a very poor opinion of the intellectual capacity of people to whom he spoke in general. I shall be very happy to know what you think of these points of view, and I shake you very cordially by the hand.

Once, in our talks I said, 'But so few people know about *Beelzebub's Tales*. What's going to happen to it, supposing it does get published?' Saurat said,

Nothing much may happen in our time. We are in too much of a hurry. We have no sense of real time in the West. Perhaps in fifty, or a hundred years a group of key men will read it. They will say, 'This is what we've been looking for', and on an understanding of it, may start a movement which could raise the level of civilization.

Gurdjieff is a Lohan. In China there is the cave of a hundred Lohans, presumably all that have appeared in China in over four thousand years. A Lohan is a man who has gone to schools and by incredible exertions and study has perfected himself. He then comes back into ordinary life, sits in cafes, drinks,

has women, and lives the life of a man, but more intensely. It was accepted that the rules of ordinary man did not apply to him. He teaches, and people come to him to learn objective truths. In the East a Lohan was understood. The West does not understand. A teacher in the West must appear to behave like an English gentleman.

Sincerely,

Dennis Saurat

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[After further consideration of *Beelzebub's Tales* Saurat also concluded:]

Dear Mr. Pauwels,

I do not think that Gurdjieff should be looked upon as a master whose object was to instruct disciples in a doctrine, but rather as a teacher trying to shape the intellect and character of a chosen number of pupils, whom he regarded as children under his care. One does not tell children the whole truth, one gives them carefully prepared parts of the truth that one hopes will further the development of their souls, and sometimes one even invents stories, such as Father Christmas, to encourage the children to express themselves. In his book, *All and Everything*, Gurdjieff says, when speaking of a great sage of the Earth, (page 901)

“I had full moral right to tell him the truth about myself, because of his attainments he was already ‘Kalmanuor,’ that is, a three-brained being of that planet with whom it is not forbidden us from Above to be frank. But at the moment I could in no way do this, because there was also present there the dervish Hadji-Bogga-Eddin who was still an ordinary terrestrial three-brained being, concerning whom, already long before, it was forbidden under oath from Above to the beings of our tribe to communicate true information to any one of them on any occasion whatsoever . . . This interdiction upon the beings of our tribe was made chiefly because it is necessary for the three-brained beings of your planet to have ‘knowledge-of-being.’

“And any information, even if true, gives to beings in general only ‘mental knowledge’ and this mental knowledge always serves beings only as a means to diminish their possibilities of acquiring this knowledge of being.

“And since the sole means left to these unfortunate beings of your planet for their complete liberation . . . [from their errors] is this knowledge-of-being, therefore this command was given to the beings of our tribe under oath concerning the beings of the Earth.

This almost hidden passage on pages 901-2 (that most readers never reach) gives us a clue to Gurdjieff's behavior with his pupils. His aim was to induce them to discover truth for themselves as, according to Gurdjieff's general doctrine, this is the only kind of truth of any value. Cardinal Newman gives us the essentials of this doctrine on the many occasions in which he makes his famous distinction between "notional assent" and "real assent." A man gives "notional assent" to something that his mind understands and accepts, but he hardly ever acts on this assent, which is purely intellectual, abstract and fruitless. "Real assent," on the other hand, comes not from intellect but from immediate contact with being, and this "real assent" includes not only intellect, but also desire, will and action. Newman would not have agreed with Gurdjieff that intellectual acceptance is fatal to real knowledge, but at heart Gurdjieff's thought is not far removed from Newman's, nor from that of so many of the poets, Keats amongst others, who says in the *Ode to a Nightingale* "Though the dull brain perplexes and retards," for it is his intellect that prevents him from taking in the beauty of the nightingale's song.

In Christian theories of grace there is, indeed, the same idea. It is not through the intellect that one reaches faith, on the contrary, intellect is inimical to faith. Faith is direct contact with God and comes through grace. In Gurdjieff's thought this theory applies to everything, not only to God, of whom he hardly ever speaks. In order to know things, one must discover them for oneself and all that we are told by others is only a veil.

The fact that Gurdjieff gives free rein to his sense of humour follows from this theory. In the way he presents things he is above all a humourist. I do not mean that he is a humourist and nothing else, on the contrary, I maintain that he is an extraordinary highly developed spiritual teacher. But the presentation of his doctrines and above all, perhaps, his actual behaviour towards his disciples, is dictated by his sense of humour. This can be seen in the first few pages of his book.

The first chapter is called: "The Arousing of Thought," and on the second page he says:

"In any case I have begun just thus, and as to how the next will go I can only say meanwhile, as the blind man once expressed it, 'we shall see.' "

This excellent theory and the equally excellent practice of never telling the truth are both evidently beyond human strength; Gurdjieff himself inevitably tells, from time to time, and even perhaps quite often, what he believes to be the truth.

His enormous book is a startling mixture of humorous stories, deliberate lies told in all seriousness, and ideas of which he himself is profoundly convinced. This means that one reads it at one's peril and that one would need to be cleverer than Gurdjieff to see through his diabolical method and to separate these three geological layers that he does his best to confuse.

But on the other hand, one can conceive the immense pleasure of embarking on this adventure, a pleasure that would be intellectual, moral and even spiritual. It seems to me that the best way would be to start with a prejudice against the book and to resolve, like Descartes, not to take anything that is said seriously unless one can verify it by one's own inner experience.

Perhaps I may add that according to my own personal contact with Gurdjieff (it is true that this was only one afternoon's talk through an interpreter thirty years ago), and to my later observations of many of his disciples, the method that I advocate of reading his book would have his entire approval. Gurdjieff was not proud of his disciples and tried hard to discover amongst them even a handful of promising ones. It is touching, by contrast, to see how much affection and respect disciples felt for him, and it is quite possible that Gurdjieff underestimated them. We must remember that Gurdjieff came from the East and never understood very well the European type of mind and of civilisation, but he saw our faults clearly and it is perhaps this fact that could be of most value to us.

All and Everything is a critical study of certain fundamental points of our civilisation, and of our ways of thinking. If we could understand the book it would be of immense value, but that is the great difficulty.

Most Sincerely,
Dennis Saurat

