

# Gurdjieff: The Man and the Literature

James Moore

"I have very good leather to sell  
to those who want to make themselves shoes."

*G. I. Gurdjieff*

Who was George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff? Writer? Choreographer? Psychiatrist? Musician? Doctor? Master Cook? He defies categorisation: though it is clear that he re-united segments of 'acroamatic' knowledge gleaned during a twenty year search in Asia; and brought to the West a methodology for the possible evolution of consciousness, within a cosmology of awe-inspiring scale. His call was radical. Awake! Awake from your unsuspected hypnotic sleep, to consciousness and conscience.

More than a hundred years ago Gurdjieff was a poor boy in the obscure town of Kars, on the Russo-Turkish frontier: today his name is becoming a modish verbal token, which (like Darwin, Marx, Freud, Einstein) is absurdly conceived to be self-explicatory. Those who would now narrowly appropriate him as 'the inspirer of the ecology movement' or 'the initiator of contemporary eupsychian therapies' — though doubtless they glimpse aspects — comprehend neither his scale nor the trajectory of the religious traditions.

For a truer perspective on Gurdjieff we must turn to his circle of devoted followers, who paid for their insights by effort. These were men and women magnetised not by a system of self-supportive notional abstractions but by a human being of Rabelaisian stature; by the fine energies at his disposition; by his compassion; and by his ability to transmit a *pratique*. Their journals and autobiographies constitute a rich and singular literature: Gurdjieff is assigned his inescapable historicity, yet somehow struggles free, emerging with the cohesion and the presence of a myth.

## Encounters with Gurdjieff

No definitive biography of Gurdjieff exists or is remotely in prospect.<sup>1</sup> He was born in Alexandropol c.1866, and first appears on a well-lit stage in 1912 in Moscow. To encounter him was always a test: the first meeting — certainly for those who became his disciples — was the axis on which a whole life turned; then in succeeding years, a human being with all his inherent frailty would answer, more or less truly, to Gurdjieff's insistent demand. There lay the drama. As for us, we can only live here and now; and yet to the degree that we enter into the pupils' experience by an inner act of compassion, their memoirs hold a value above the purely historical.

The composer Thomas de Hartmann (1886–1956) and his wife Olga were Gurdjieff's intimate disciples and companions for twelve years, and it is thanks to him that Gurdjieff's music has reached us. In *Our Life with Mr. Gurdjieff* they share with us the journey they shared with him: from Petrograd, seized by crisis in 1917, across the Caucasus mountains to Tiflis, finally reaching Paris in 1922. Simplicity sometimes approaching *naïveté*, characterises their writing, but the impression of Gurdjieff is only the more striking. We find him moving impartially, almost invisibly, through scenes of confusion and fratricidal turmoil; welcoming each difficulty and danger as a new opportunity for practical teaching.

In October 1922 Gurdjieff took the Prieuré at Fontainebleau-Avon, a chateau in the grounds of 200 acres; here he rapidly created conditions for self-study, unprecedented in Europe. Gurdjieff had a special rapport with his pupils' children, caring for their education in the word's real sense. Sometimes he challenged them; sometimes he led them with great delicacy towards a vital insight; always his teaching had an element of surprise and the hallmark of practicality. From eleven to fifteen Fritz Peters (1913–1980) lived at the Prieuré, and in *Boyhood with Gurdjieff* his fresh and at times uproariously funny memoir, he relives that special experience.

In spring 1924, Gurdjieff visited the USA with prepared pupils, to give public demonstrations of his sacred dances; and their influence upon key intellectuals was far-reaching. The dances also spoke categorically to the young Englishman Stanley Nott (1887–1978) who had a different, simpler background: who had travelled the world working hard at many trades, and whose feelings had been enervated by his sufferings in the trenches. 'Here,' wrote Nott, 'is what I went to the ends of the earth to find.' His allegiance to Gurdjieff proved life-long and undivided; he spent many summers at the Prieuré, and in *Teachings of Gurdjieff* conveys both his inner and outer experience with Boswellian vigor. He incorporates in full the penetrating (though not definitive) commentary on Gurdjieff's book *Beelzebub* by his friend A. R. Orage.

The decade 1925 to 1935 Gurdjieff devoted to his writing, achieved in the distracting conditions of the Café de Paix. Here, in spring 1932, he was encountered by the American authoress Kathryn Hulme (1900–1981) later to attain fame with her novel *The Nun's Story*; she hungered to become his personal pupil, but nearly four years passed before her persistence was rewarded. Her autobiography *Undiscovered Country* richly evokes her experience in a special group of four women (all sophisticated, avant-garde and single — and some frankly Lesbian) which met daily in Gurdjieff's flat in Rue Labie. At its worst the style is cloying: at its best vibrant. Gurdjieff's humanity and capacity to work with diverse types is strongly conveyed, as is the group's emotional commitment to each other and their teacher. They named their small company 'The Rope' in order never to forget their interdependence in ascent.

Urged to flee Paris before the Germans entered in 1940, Gurdjieff chose to remain in his modest flat at 6 Rue des Colonels-Rénard. Though well into his seventies, he was unsparing of his energies: giving individual counselling; teaching a new series of dances or Movements at the Salle Pleyel; and somehow maintaining in those sparse times the patriarchal hospitality of his audacious feasts. French interest in Gurdjieff — formerly slight — now burgeoned, drawing many intellectuals to him, among them René Zuber (1902–1979) the film director. His slim volume *Who Are You Monsieur Gurdjieff?* is a calm and fastidious meditation: confronted with the enigma of Gurdjieff and deeply concerned to situate him in relation to Christianity, Zuber is repeatedly brought back to question himself.

Fifteen months before Gurdjieff's death, J. G. Bennett (1897–1974) who had briefly met him in the 1920s, established a more serious — though necessarily intermittent — contact.<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Mayall (1918–1991) later to become Bennett's wife, was free to live in Paris from January 1949, and thus shared more fully in the unique world of Rue des Colonels-Rénard. Here at Gurdjieff's last suppers, his mysterious ritual the 'Toast of the Idiots' served as the vehicle of a final and intensely individual teaching. *Idiots in Paris*, the Bennetts' raw unedited diaries, captures with almost painful honesty and immediacy the last hundred days of Gurdjieff's life, and his pupils' poignant struggle for understanding. Gurdjieff died at Neuilly on 29 October 1949.

## The Teaching

Then what precisely was Gurdjieff's Teaching? Although the question seems to promise clarification, it is spoilt by its very rigour: time deadens authorised versions like hemlock, and Gurdjieff never issued one. 'I teach,' he said gnomically, 'that when it rains, the pavements get wet.' The vivifying power of his ideas entails the moment, the circumstance, the type and state of the pupil. His one constant demand is *Know thyself*, to which he adduces a metaphysic, a metapsychology and a metachemistry which absolutely defy précis; a human typology, a phenomenology of consciousness, and a quasi-mathematical scale linking macrocosm and microcosm. This complex apparatus is illuminated by one master-idea: that Man is called to strive for self-perfection, in service to our sacred living Universe.

Can we catch echoes of Pythagoras or Plato, Christ or Milarepa; see certain limited parallels with moderns like Mendeleev, Sheldon, Vernadsky, Watson? It is easy to lose oneself and one's search in a labyrinth of comparisons, and in the phylogeny of ideas. Gurdjieff himself was not content with words; his Movements and sacred dances were at once a glyph of universal laws and a field for individual search. When, approaching sixty, he turned to writing, his productions were heuristic rather than expository, and their form totally unexpected: first a cosmological epic of a special kind, then an autobiography of a special kind.

*Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson* is Gurdjieff's masterpiece and no other book brings us closer to him. Readers who can rise to the double challenge of its profundity and its quite deliberate stylistic difficulty; who can summon again and again the necessary fine attention — will find encoded here all Gurdjieff's psychological and cosmological ideas, and a fundamental critique.

On a long journey by spaceship, Beelzebub good-humouredly conveys his understanding of 'All and Everything' to his grandson Hasein. Through his impartial compassionate eyes we see life on earth as from a great distance, with microscopic clarity. Down millenia and across continents, we see Man deeply asleep, blindly and aimlessly struggling and suffering, torn by war and passion, fouling everything he touches; and yet, through a strange flaw in his nature, clinging ingeniously to the very instruments which wound, the patterns which betray.

A stark picture? Undeniably. And in other hands than Gurdjieff's it might have been cruelly nihilistic; but Gurdjieff is calling us to life. It is his genius to float an objective hope, like an Ark on these dark waters. He bequeaths us the great figure of Beelzebub, whose presence indicates man as he might be: aware with gratitude of the divine spark within him, and striving by conscious labours towards the fulfilment of his true place in the cosmic scheme.

In his next book *Meetings with Remarkable Men* Gurdjieff evokes the first and least known period of his own life; his boyhood in Kars under the benign influence of his father and his first tutor Dean Borsh; then his early manhood dedicated, in many guises, to an unremitting search for a real and universal knowledge. His language is spare and vivid, unrolling the lands of Transcaucasia and Central Asia before us, even while he hints at a parallel geography of Man's psyche, and the route he followed to penetrate it.

We journey to the interior in company with the friends of Gurdjieff's youth — princes, engineers, doctors, priests — men remarkable not from their surface arrangements but by their resourcefulness, self-restraint and compassion. We see them as though face to face; their words are lodged in us as though spoken directly in a moment of intimate quietness.

So Gurdjieff, having swept the ground clear with the awesome critique *Beelzebub*, offers us now his material for a new creation — nothing other than our hard diurnal life, but thrust into question and placed at the service of an aim, which, by its intelligence and elevation, is truly human.

Between the years 1915 and 1918, Gurdjieff liberally gave to his Russian groups an astonishing body of exact data, which had cost twenty years to search out. Prominent among his pupils at this time was Piotr Demianovich Ouspensky (1878–1947) journalist, mathematician and intellectual; already famous for his book *Tertium Organum*. The very epoch, with its mass destruction and savage contradictions, sharpened Ouspensky's lifelong hunger for values and knowledge of a different order. *In Search of the Miraculous* was published posthumously; it consists, for three parts out of four, of Gurdjieff's own words, preserved from those days and brilliantly arranged. Endorsed by Gurdjieff himself, this work undoubtedly offers the most accessible account of his psychological and cosmological ideas, while carrying us as near as any book alone can, to the special conditions of a group. The overwhelming sense of shock, excitement and revelation which fired Ouspensky in 1915, will be transmitted through these sentences and diagrams to people of every generation, who (whatever the external conditions with which they must blend) are secretly in search.

Jeanne de Salzmann became Gurdjieff's pupil in Tiflis in 1919, and through thirty years participated in each succeeding dispensation of his Work, even carrying responsibility for his groups during the last ten years of his life. *In Views from the Real World* she has collated more than forty important talks given by Gurdjieff between 1917 and 1930. We owe their very preservation to the educated memories of his followers, who were forbidden to take verbatim notes. If these are not Gurdjieff's words in every syllable, it is clearly his authentic voice, issuing his unmistakable challenge.

### **Approaches to Gurdjieff**

No-one — whether he responds to Gurdjieff or reacts against him — can measure the voltage of his intellect without receiving a certain shock. His is one of those few effectual voices, which, 'passing through a great diversity of echoes, keeps its own resonance and its power of action'.

Then let us briefly hear some precis, 'approaches', thematic and lyrical restatements — recognising them for reverberations, yet acknowledging their profound legitimacy in a living tradition, confided to living men.

After four years as one of Gurdjieff's close pupils, P. D. Ouspensky expounded his ideas in England and America for a quarter of a century. In *The Psychology of Man's Possible Evolution*, he distils from Gurdjieff's integrated Teaching its psychological essence, presenting it without flavour or aroma in only 92 pages. This formulation, based on Ouspensky's lecture notes, is so lucid and balanced that it bids to remain forever unmatched as an introduction and an *aide-memoire*.

The feeling of a pupil's actual experience — palpably missing from Ouspensky's summary of theory — is supplied in *Venture with Ideas* by Kenneth Walker (1882–1966). This warm human memoir lightly sketches Gurdjieff's psychological and cosmological teaching, within the biographical context of the author's twenty four years study with Ouspensky in England. Walker's scientific background (he was three times Hunterian Professor of Surgery at the Royal College of Surgeons) adds interest to his reception of esoteric ideas.

Men are tragically divided, but all who wish may share the primordial existential questions: who am I, and what is the significance and aim of human life? The great edifice of Gurdjieff's Teaching rests on the unshakable foundation of this innocent interrogation. The theme is calmly developed in *Toward Awakening* by Jean Vaysse (1917–1975) a pioneer of open-heart surgery and transplantation, and a close pupil of Gurdjieff in Paris. His final chapter outlines for the first time, Gurdjieffian exercises linking attention with bodily sensation.

The mountain, rooted in the earth, its summit reaching towards heaven, is an ancient symbol of man's aspirations and strivings. René Daumal (1908–1944) who studied under Gurdjieff in Paris during the war, wrote his subtle and humorous allegory *Mount Analogue* in the language of a poet and mountaineer, to remind us of the strange inner ascent to which we are called. Although he died young, his own work sustains its impact on modern French literature.

Coming years must inevitably heighten scholarly interest in Gurdjieff. Because his Teaching is experiential; because there is danger of confusing levels; because an academic with a fundamental misapprehension or even bias, can embroider it so prettily — the prospect is not wholly welcome.<sup>4</sup> And yet some auguries are good; Michel Waldberg in *Gurdjieff: An Approach to His Ideas* draws intelligently on all major texts, contriving a work of popular synthesis and commentary which sets a real standard.

### **And Now?**

Gurdjieff preferred Today over Yesterday; he did not invite us either to anatomise him or to idolise him, but to search for ourselves. Returning again and again to *Beelzebub*, we seem to catch the author's rich human voice projected toward his 'Grandsons' — pupils of the New Age; rising generations who could not meet him, but who bear the seeds of his ideas into the unknown future. And yet no pilgrimage of reading is sufficient: no book, not even a sacred book, can furnish that unfathomable moment when, in the actual presence of his teacher, the pupil's understanding is amplified and deepened.

Then where to look today? All a man's flair, discrimination and downright commonsense are solicited here, for there are many siren voices and self-advertisements. And yet it was not for nothing that Gurdjieff prepared pupils; not for nothing that he gave indications for the future.

And after his death, it was not for nothing that the cherished Movements have been progressed through decades; and a responsible nucleus painfully formed, to maintain the current that had been created.

Where then? For those whose approach to Gurdjieff is practical, this is the question which must prevail. There is first an outer contact to be found: then an inner contact to be renewed and deepened.

## **Gurdjieff; a select bibliography <sup>5</sup>**

### **The Teaching**

*Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson* by G. I. Gurdjieff (1950)

*Meetings with Remarkable Men* by G. I. Gurdjieff (1963)

*In Search of the Miraculous* by P. D. Ouspensky (1949)

*Views from the Real World* Talks of G. I. Gurdjieff (1973)

### **Approaches to Gurdjieff**

*The Psychology of Man's Possible Evolution* by P. D. Ouspensky (1978)

*Venture with Ideas* by Kenneth Walker (1951)

*Toward Awakening* by Jean Vaysse (1980)

*Mount Analogue* by René Daumal (1974)

*Gurdjieff: An Approach to His Ideas* by Michel Waldberg (1981)

### **Encounters with Gurdjieff**

*Our Life with Mr. Gurdjieff* by Thomas and Olga de Hartmann (1964, Revised 1983 and 1992)

*Boyhood with Gurdjieff* by Fritz Peters (1964)

*Teachings of Gurdjieff* by C. S. Nott (1961)

*Undiscovered Country* by Kathryn Hulme (1966)

*Who Are You Monsieur Gurdjieff?* by René Zuber (1980)

*Idiots in Paris* by J. G. and E. Bennett (1980)

## Notes

1. Attention is however invited to James Moore's subsequent biography *Gurdjieff: the Anatomy of a Myth* (Element Books Ltd., 1991); also to Paul Beekman Taylor's *Gurdjieff and Orage* (Weiser Books, 2001), *Gurdjieff's America: Mediating the Miraculous* (Lighthouse Editions Ltd., 2004) and *Gurdjieff: a New Life* Eureka Editions, 2008).
2. One cannot know how much J. G. Bennett received from Gurdjieff; but the prolixity of his authorship contrasts wryly with the brevity of his actual contact. Nor does the breathtaking catholicity of his subsequent eclecticism suggest a particular or persevering commitment to Gurdjieff's Teaching.
3. Jeanne de Salzmann Foreword (p. viii) to *Views from the Real World*.
4. A knowledge of Whitall N. Perry's intellectual affiliations with the school of Frithjof Schuon and René Guenon is helpful in situating his 1978 critique *Gurdjieff in the Light of Tradition*: the unrepresentative quotations, plucked from context and orchestrated with curious animus, mark it as polemical. James Webb undertook fundamental research, largely neglected by Perry, but his vast and more balanced work *The Harmonious Circle* (1980) is marred by indulgent speculation.
5. Scholars embarked on in-depth Gurdjieff studies are wholeheartedly referred to *Gurdjieff: an annotated bibliography* by J. Walter Driscoll and the Gurdjieff Foundation of California (New York: Garland Publishing, 1985).

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James Moore (1929-2017): website: <[www.jamesmoore.org.uk](http://www.jamesmoore.org.uk)>. In 1994 Mr Moore founded the Gurdjieff Studies Group <[www.gurdjieff.org.uk](http://www.gurdjieff.org.uk)>, centered in London (UK) which continues to practise Gurdjieff's teaching on traditional lines.

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