G. I. Gurdjieff

G. I. Gurdjieff:
Armenian Roots, Global Branches

Edited by

Michael Pittman

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

G. I. Gurdjieff: Armenian Roots, Global Branches, Edited by Michael Pittman

This book first published 2008

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-4438-0019-8, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-0019-8

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

While working on a dissertation on G.I. Gurdjieff and *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*, I was fortuitously selected to serve as a Volunteer Faculty Fellow with the Civic Education Project (CEP) for the 2003-2004 school year in Yerevan, Armenia. The culmination of that year was realized in the receipt of a grant from CEP to hold a conference on Gurdjieff, in the very country of his birth. This first conference initiated a series of conferences, all of which were insuperably supported by a number of very supportive, enthusiastic, and dedicated people. In terms of finances, the following conferences, in 2005 and 2006, were generously supported by the Albany College of Pharmacy in Albany, New York; and in the fourth year, 2007, the conference was made possible by a grant from Indications Press in New York. The conference and, in particular, the trips to Gyumri, Gurdjieff's home, and to Sanahin Monastary, where Gurdjieff spent time, were also made possible by the generosity and energy of Avetik Melik-Sargsyan. Bella Hovsepyan assisted with essential aspects of planning and coordinating for each conference, especially with facility, equipment, and restaurant arrangements. The conferences were presented with simultaneous translation in Armenian and English and Christine Soghikian deserves many thanks for serving as our tireless translator for each conference. Tatev Sargsyan also provided significant help as an intern with the conference for two years. There are many others, too many to mention, to whom I am very grateful who have been of great support both with the conferences and over the years since I first encountered Gurdjieff's writings and ideas.

Michael Pittman
Istanbul, 2008

INTRODUCTION

In 1922 G. I. Gurdjieff (d. 1949) arrived in Paris and began teaching a remarkable system of self-perfection gathered from the East and adapted for the West. It was a system of ideas and practices developed over a long period of search throughout Asia and the Middle East, and which he had been teaching, in different forms, in Moscow and Tiflis (Tbilisi), Georgia. After spending some time in Istanbul in 1920 and 1921, Gurdjieff was forced, finally, to move to Western Europe due to the political and social unrest of this turbulent time. Outside of Paris, at a chateau in Fontainebleau, Gurdjieff set up another incarnation of his renowned Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man. Yet after a serious automobile accident in the summer of 1924, he gave himself over to the writing of *All and Everything*, or *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*, with the intention of elaborating his teaching in written form.

Gurdjieff has been written about by a wide variety of authors who cover a spectrum of opinions from a critique of Gurdjieff as a charlatan to those who extol the virtues of a teacher and his teaching as the most important in the twentieth century. Director Peter Brook writes that Gurdjieff is, "the most immediate, the most valid and most totally representative figure of our times."[1] Although British author Martin Seymour-Smith includes Gurdjieff's *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson* in his work *The 100 Most Influential Books Ever Written: the History of Thought from Ancient Times to Today*, Gurdjieff's legacy remains largely ignored. Nonetheless, looking back upon the twentieth century, we can find that his ideas and writings contributed, either directly or indirectly, to a number of notable literary and cultural forms. Since his death in 1949, a growing body of secondary literature connected to his work has been produced in fields as disparate as psychology, philosophy, literature, health, ecology, and religion. The number of new publications, conferences, and websites, today, signals that the influence of Gurdjieff's ideas and writings continues to grow and mature into the twenty-first century.

[1] James Moore, *Gurdjieff: A Biography*, 1.

Gurdjieff was born in Gyumri, Armenia,[2] to an Armenian mother and a Cappadocian-Greek father, and was raised in eastern Asia Minor and the Caucasus. We have very little direct evidence or information about his early life, except that which we find in his semi-autobiographical work *Meetings with Remarkable Men*. Ultimate agreement even on Gurdjieff's birth date seems improbable. It has been argued that his birth date is either 1866 or 1872, though some sources have cited a birth date as late as 1877.[3] Gurdjieff lived in Gyumri until around 1878, according to James Moore, when he moved along with his family to Kars (presently in Eastern Turkey). Here, he attended the Kars military academy. Over the course of his early years, he returned to his family in Gyumri periodically and was there for the last time around 1920. According to his own accounting, he spent these early years traveling in Central Asia, Asia Minor, Egypt, India, and Tibet in search of undiscovered knowledge; his driving desire was to find the "sense and aim of organic and human life on Earth." That search lasted as many as fifty years before he appeared in Europe.

Gurdjieff's Writings: A Brief Introduction

For a number of years, Gurdjieff sought to convey the sense and aim of his ideas, orally, through his teachings and through his school, The Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man. In this process, he also tried to prepare as many people as he could to pass his ideas on to others. However, after his near-fatal car accident in 1924, he deduced that he needed a form of transmission for his ideas that would last beyond his own death and one which would not be so easily subject to misinterpretation and distortion. To that end, Gurdjieff wrote three main works that make up the series *All and Everything.* Gurdjieff's provocatively titled magnum opus, *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*, is a lengthy 1,238 pages. This book itself is often referred to as *All and Everything*. Gurdjieff announces at the beginning of *Beelzebub's Tales* that each of his three works will be written with a different aim. The task of the first book, *Beelzebub's Tales* itself, is "to destroy, mercilessly, without any compromises whatsoever, in

[2] Gyumri is the current and historical name of the town where Gurdjieff was born. Gurdjieff, in *Meetings with Remarkable Men*, refers to the town as Alexandropol, which is the name that was used at the time. Later, during the Soviet Period, the city was referred to as Leninakan.

[3] Gurdjieff's passport recorded a birth date of 1877, but he reportedly said that he was much older. James Moore has argued for a date as early as 1866. J.G. Bennett has argued that Gurdjieff's birth date is 1872, as has Michael Benham, which accords with other dates Gurdjieff mentions in *Meetings with Remarkable Men*.

the mentation and feelings of the reader, the beliefs and views, by centuries rooted in him, about everything existing in the world." He writes that the aim of the second book that he will write, *Meetings with Remarkable Men*, will be "to acquaint the reader with the material required for a new creation and to prove the soundness and good quality of it." And the third, *Life is Real Only Then, When "I AM,"* is intended "to assist the arising, in the mentation and in the feelings of the reader, of a veritable, non-fantastic representation not of that illusory world which he now perceives, but of the world existing in reality."[4] The semi-autobiographical *Meetings with Remarkable Men*, is briefer at 303 pages, and his last volume, *Life Is Real Only Then, When "I AM,"* runs to 177 pages. Ambitious as he was, Gurdjieff left the third work incomplete. Though, one wonders if this was intentional or not. After 1935, it appears that Gurdjieff did not write again, except, according to some sources, on certain revisions of *Beelzebub's Tales.*

Gurdjieff: Influence and Representation

Starting in Moscow as early as 1912, Gurdjieff had been teaching his ideas and methods to organized groups. In order to work with different groups of people and partly under duress of the unquiet political situation of the period, Gurdjieff moved around frequently. During this period, he met several people who went on to be his most ardent followers and interpreters, including Jeanne de Salzmann, author P.D. Ouspensky, and a Russian composer named Thomas De Hartmann. It was during the early period after Gurdjieff's arrival in Europe in 1921 that he gained significant notoriety in Europe and the United States. In October of 1922, Gurdjieff set up a school at the *Prieuré des Basses Loges* at Fontainebleau-Avon, outside of Paris. It was at the Prieuré that Gurdjieff met many notable figures, authors, and artists of the early twentieth century, many of whom went on to be close students and exponents of his teaching. Over the course of his life, those who visited and worked with him included the French author René Daumal; the renowned short story author from New Zealand, Katherine Mansfield; Kathryn Hulme, later the author of *A Nun's Life*; P.L. Travers, the author of *Mary Poppins*; and Jean Toomer, the author of *Cane*, whose work and influence would figure prominently in the Harlem Renaissance.[5] Other artists and thinkers of the time were interested

[4] G.I. Gurdjieff, *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*, 1.

[5] cf. Jon Woodson, *To Make a New Race: Gurdjieff, Toomer and the Harlem Renaissance*.

or influenced, perhaps more indirectly, such as Henry Miller, who wrote an introduction to a book about Gurdjieff by Fritz Peters; Thornton Wilder, who writes about his meeting with Gurdjieff in his memoirs; as well as T.S. Eliot and Aldous Huxley.

Upon Gurdjieff's death, the well-known architect Frank Lloyd Wright (whose wife was a long-time student of Gurdjieff's), announced at Cooper Union in New York, "The greatest man in the world has recently died. His name was Gurdjieff."[6] Since Gurdjieff's death in 1949, many books, films, musical compositions, and theater productions have been based on or inspired by his ideas. Numerous study groups, organizations, formal foundations, and even land-based communities have been initiated in his name, primarily in North and South America and Europe, and to a lesser extent, in Japan, China, India, Australia, and South Africa. In 1979, Peter Brook, distinguished British theater director and author, created a film based on *Meetings with Remarkable Men.*

For many years, Gurdjieff's ideas were more widely known through the works of his early Russian student P.D. Ouspensky, whose most well-known work, entitled *In Search of the Miraculous*, is a record of Gurdjieff's talks, primarily in Moscow and St. Petersburg (mainly from 1915 to 1918). Ouspensky's books were more widely known during this period than Gurdjieff's own *Beelzebub's Tales*, and though Gurdjieff is perhaps better known, still, *In Search of the Miraculous* is more widely read. Recognizing this fact, Martin Seymour-Smith, author of *The 100 Most Influential Books Ever Written: The History of Thought from Ancient Times to Today*, self-reflectively poses the question as to why he didn't include Ouspensky's work in his list of influential works, rather than Gurdjieff's own *Beelzebub's Tales.* He responds, pragmatically, that Gurdjieff's ideas are, of course, the source of all that appears in Ouspensky. He also argues—and rightly so—that *Beelzebub's Tales* remains without the trappings of Ouspensky's obsession with reincarnation and a language that so earnestly sought to articulate the teachings of a "mysterious East." Of *Beelzebub's Tales*, Seymour-Smith writes:

> The doctrine is the most convincing fusion of Eastern and Western thought that has yet been seen. It makes Blavatskyism or Transcendental Meditation look simpleminded or even exploitative; but, just as Kepler acknowledged in the popular astrology of his day a "pearl in a heap of

[6] Munson, *Gurdjieff International Review*.

> dung," so "The Work" grants something precious at the heart of those and other more popular movements.[7]

Gurdjieff's ideas and methods, which are often referred to as "The Work," as Seymour-Smith remarks above, are at the roots of *Beelzebub's Tales*. Here, Seymour-Smith states his contention that Gurdjieff's ideas far surpass anything else of the period. Many will perhaps agree, but *Beelzebub's Tales* remains widely and surprisingly unstudied, even by the followers and purported practitioners of his ideas.

A number of recent publications and events reveal that Gurdjieff's ideas continue to have relevance today. A new biography on Gurdjieff, published in 2004, was written by science-fiction author John Shirley. When asked in an interview about the need for a new biography, Shirley responded:

> Gurdjieff provides explanations that seem to ring true: people are asleep when they think they're awake, people are automatic in their reactions when they think they're choosing their actions. And he points the way to a kind of superb individuality, in right relation to the larger universe that literally grows within a person who cultivates it. He distills perceptions and methods that can also be found in Zen, in Sufism, in esoteric Buddhism and esoteric Christianity, into a way of looking at humanity's condition that makes practical sense.
>
> These general principles, anyway, ring true—and I don't necessarily have to agree with every last thing he said to feel that there's something essential and powerful in his teaching. There are many great traditions worth pursuing to me. The Gurdjieff teaching's balance between knowledge and understanding make it the most suited for modern life.[8]

Shirley's comments suggest the suitability of Gurdjieff's ideas in terms of present-day discourse. Other publications and events from a variety of academic, popular, personal, and religious venues signal the persistence of Gurdjieff's ideas and influence.

Another volume entitled *Gurdjieff: Essays and Reflections on the Man and His Teachings* (1999) includes a number of articles examining Gurdjieff's ideas and situates them and their influence within a number of fields, including physics, religion, philosophy, literature and ecology. Canadian Diplomat, James George, has written an insightful work on the employment of Gurdjieff's ideas in facing the current ecological crisis,

---

[7] Martin Seymour-Smith, *The 100 Most Influential Books Ever Written: The History of Thought from Ancient Times to Today*, 448.

[8] Cochran, Tracy. "Remarkable Gurdjieff: An Interview with John Shirley."

entitled *Asking for the Earth: Waking up to the Spiritual/Ecological Crisis.* A conference entitled the "All and Everything International Humanities Conference" that has as its aim the investigation of the themes and ideas presented in Gurdjieff's *Beelzebub's Tales* has taken place annually since 1996. Recent works by Paul Beekman Taylor, Professor Emeritus of the University of Geneva, Switzerland, who both knew Gurdjieff and does research on Gurdjieff, have added further depth and breadth to the field of Gurdjieff studies.[9] Gurdjieff, though not receiving great popular attention, still stands as an important figure of the twentieth century and his influence continues to grow in the twenty-first century. The appropriateness or at the least, accessibility, of Gurdjieff's ideas and influence for contemporary discourse seems to be affirmed by the recent spate of writings, music, and publications about or related to Gurdjieff. Taken as a whole, these borrowings, indications, and references suggest the need for a continuing and more thorough investigation of Gurdjieff's ideas and influence.

The Present Work

The present work represents a selection from the presentations of the conference, G.I. Gurdjieff: Caucasian Influence in Contemporary Life and Thought, or the Armenia-Gurdjieff Conference, as it came to be called, which was held in Yerevan, Armenia in the summers from 2004-2007. The motivation for starting the conferences was to form a bridge of exchange that will serve both the global academic and non-academic community that holds an interest in Gurdjieff and the local communities of Armenia and the Caucasus in general. In particular, the aim of the conference is to provide a forum of exchange on the ideas, influence, and work of G.I. Gurdjieff while making, perhaps, a small contribution to the reintroduction of the work of Gurdjieff to Armenia, which had been cut off from his ideas and works during the Soviet period. Although Gurdjieff is known more generally, many Armenians remain unfamiliar with him. By holding the conference in the very heart of Gurdjieff's homeland, it has been hoped that new global connections to the Caucasus and Armenia can be made. It is hoped that a better understanding of Gurdjieff and an appreciation for his importance can only be enhanced and encouraged by such a project.

---

[9] Recent works by Paul Taylor include *Gurdjieff's America* and *The Philosophy of Gurdjieff.*

A range of participants, primarily from Armenia, and a range of contributors, primarily from abroad, were in attendance at each conference. The papers presented reflected a range of work, from more academic studies, of especially *All and Everything* or *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*, to presentations of personal experience with Gurdjieff's ideas and Gurdjieff group work from people of different backgrounds, to presentations on the music of Gurdjieff. While not all of these chapters deal directly with the issues of Gurdjieff's background in Armenia, the significance of this fact, especially as we were gathered in Armenia to recognize his work, was always with us. In addition to the schedule of presentations, the conferences also had cultural components that included musical performances, screening of films about Gurdjieff, as well as, perhaps most interestingly, day trips to places connected with Gurdjieff's early life. The trips to Gyumri, Gurdjieff's hometown, located in the Shirak region of Armenia, included visits to his father's grave and to places that inspired Gurdjieff's own search, such as Sev-Jiam church, which are mentioned in his semi-autobiographical *Meetings with Remarkable Men*. On the occasion of the 2005 Conference, the participants made a trip together to the Lori region of Armenia and the Haghpat monastery complex and to Sanahin monastery, which Gurdjieff also mentions in *Meetings with Remarkable Men*. The 2006 Conference was noteworthy for, not only another trip to Gyumri, but for the performance of traditional ashokh music both at Gurdjieff's fathers grave and at the celebratory dinner, which also included the toasting in the Armenian-Caucasian tradition.

The first two chapters come from papers presented at the 2005 Armenia-Gurdjieff conference. The first chapter, "Gurdjieff and Greek Esoteric Thought," explores the possible connections of Gurdjieff's ideas to Greek esoteric thought.[10] This survey work highlights some of the central ideas within Gurdjieff's ideas and connects these ideas to important figures in Greek thought, including Plato and Iamblichus. The second chapter, "Laughter as Demolition and Reconstruction in *Beelzebub's Tales*,"[11] investigates the role of laughter and Gurdjieff's method of "demolition and reconstruction" in *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson* through a discussion of Russian critic and theorist M.M. Bakhtin's discussion of the work of Rabelais.

---

[10] An earlier version of this presentation was published as *Digging Up The Dog: The Greek Roots of Gurdjieff's Esoteric Ideas* by Indications Press, 2006.

[11] An earlier version of this chapter was published in the proceedings of the All and Everything International Humanities Conference, 2006.

The following three chapters were based on presentations at the 2006 Armenia-Gurdjieff Conference. The third chapter, "Introduction to The Piano Music of Gurdjieff-de Hartmann," presents a discussion of the music of Gurdjieff in two parts. The first section presents a history and review of the piano music of Gurdjieff, which also includes a discussion of some of the key works that have been published in recent years. The second section is a more reflective piece about the experience of playing the Gurdjieff music within the context of Gurdjieff's practical group work. The fourth chapter, "Preliminary Remarks on Soul-Making in *Beelzebub's Tales*," introduces, in the mode of a commentary or close reading, perhaps the central theme of Gurdjieff's writings, the soul and whether or not the human has a soul, or can acquire one. This is primarily an introduction to this subject as it is presented in the first chapters of *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*. The fifth chapter, "Gurdjieff's View of War," presents a timely and insightful discussion of Gurdjieff's view of war, particularly as it is constructed in *Beelzebub's Tales*.

The final three chapters are based on papers presented at the 2007 Armenia-Gurdjieff Conference. The sixth chapter, "Gurdjieff's View of Education in *Beelzebub's Tales*," investigates Gurdjieff's view and critique of contemporary education. "Gurdjieff and the Education of Children" presents a discussion of the principles of working with children at the Gurdjieff Foundation in New York. The final chapter, "The Transformation of Substances and Human Meaning," adding to the discussion of the soul, addresses the issue of the material universe and the role of materiality in human transformation.

Works Cited

Primary Sources

Cochran, Tracy. "Remarkable Gurdjieff: An Interview with John Shirley." *Publishers Weekly*. 22 March 2004.

Gurdjieff, G.I. *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*. New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., 1950.

—. *Meetings with Remarkable Men*. New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., 1963.

Moore, James. *Gurdjieff: A Biography*. Boston: Element Books, 1991/99.

Munson, Gorham. "Black Sheep Philosophers: Gurdjieff, Ouspensky, Orage." 1950. Reprint, *Gurdjieff International Review*, Vol. I no. 3 (1998).

Ouspensky, P.D. *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1949.

Seymour-Smith, Martin. *The 100 Most Influential Books Ever Written: The History of Thought from Ancient Times to Today*. New Jersey: Citadel Press, 1998.

Secondary Sources

George, James. *Asking for the Earth: Waking up to the Spiritual/Ecological Crisis.* Shaftsbury, Dorset: Element, 1995.

Gurdjieff, G.I. *Life is Real Only Then, When "I Am."* New York: Triangle Editions, 1975.

Hartmann, Thomas and Olga de. *Our Life with Mr. Gurdjieff.* New York: Penguin Arkana, 1972.

Needleman, Jacob and George Baker. *Gurdjieff: Essays and Reflections on the Man and His Teachings*. New York: Continuum Publishing, 1998

Woodson, Jon. *To Make a New Race: Gurdjieff, Toomer and the Harlem Renaissance*. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1999.

CHAPTER ONE

GURDJIEFF AND GREEK ESOTERIC THOUGHT

GEORGE L. BEKE

George Ivanovich Gurdjieff was certainly a serious man. He traversed continents digging up ancient knowledge, which he then brought to the Western world. But he was also a playful man. He loved to confound people, to upset their automatic expectations, and for a very important reason.

Gurdjieff realized that when the average person is presented with new information, brand new material, three things can happen: 1) The material is rejected out of hand; 2) The material is viewed skeptically, without understanding; or 3) The material is accepted whole, but still without understanding. These results occur because most people receive information mechanically, without engaging their active attention. And without active attention there can be no real understanding.

In order to engage our interest and awaken our active attention, Gurdjieff constructed a mighty puzzle, a labyrinth with twists, detours and tantalizing clues that, when deciphered and digested, could lead a person to a new and encompassing vision of the Universe.

This maze, this cosmic puzzle, is the book *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*, originally conceived as a crucial part of his grand opus, *All & Everything*. In this book, which is read religiously by students of Gurdjieff, a millennia-old "devil," Beelzebub himself, explains the secrets of the Universe to his grandson Hassein (and thus to the persevering reader) over more than a thousand pages which demand patience, unflagging interest, and most of all, active attention.

Gurdjieff's literary method, as he explained to his editors, was to "bury" every nugget of information. To gain any true understanding, we are forced to dig. When we dig, we work; we labor and toil, and finally… find! And then, every hard-won nugget becomes our own, an integral part of our understanding, which we will not forget.

In the use of this method, Gurdjieff was following the practice of the ancient Pythagoreans, which Cicero alludes to: "It is not that you are hiding things from me, as Pythagoras used to do from outsiders…"[1]

The Neoplatonist Iamblichus, a later head of the Academy, explains the evasive method of the Pythagoreans:

> Their writings were not composed in popular or vulgar diction, or in manner usual to all other writers, so as to be immediately understood, but in a way not to be easily apprehended by their readers. For they adopted Pythagoras' law of reserve, in an arcane manner concealing mysteries from the uninitiated, obscuring their writings and mutual conversations.[2]

A good example of Gurdjieff "burying the bone" is found in Chapter 18 of *Beelzebub's Tales*, titled "The Arch-Preposterous." Here Beelzebub visits the planet Saturn, the home of a scientist called Harharkh, a large bird whose invention converts metals to gold. Viewing this transmutation under a special apparatus, Beelzebub witnesses, at one point, a process similar to Death, or the decomposing of bodies on Earth.

Those familiar with Alchemy will quickly recognize the clues buried here. The planet Saturn symbolizes the metal lead, which alchemists sought to turn into gold. The large bird is the Raven, symbol of Saturn, which stands for the Black stage of the alchemical process, the Nigredo. Also called Death, it is represented by Saturn, the Old Man with a Sickle who harvests the life of mortals. The Raven is not mentioned in this chapter, and neither is Alchemy, but it is obvious that Gurdjieff is "burying" this information here, right under our noses.

With this glimpse into Gurdjieff's Pythagorean method, we can turn our attention to the larger puzzle embedded in *Beelzebub's Tales* (and in Gurdjieff's other writings), which is: "Where did Gurdjieff's esoteric ideas come from?"

Gurdjieff's father was a Cappadocian Greek, living in Armenia, and an "ashokh," or bard who recited, from memory, ancient myths and legends that had been handed down orally through thousands of years. One of the ancient myths told by Gurdjieff's father was the Babylonian story of Gilgamesh, king of Uruk, who set out in search of immortality. Decades after hearing this story as a boy, Gurdjieff was astonished to hear that archaeologists had recently discovered clay tablets in the lost city of Nineveh, telling of the quest of Gilgamesh, a tale that had been lost, and forgotten, for thousands of years.

---

[1] Walsh, *Cicero: The Nature of the Gods*, 28.
[2] Guthrie, *The Pythagorean Sourcebook and Library*, 83.

Now Gurdjieff was certainly proud of his Greek father and his knowledge of ancient traditions. He writes about boyhood with his father in *Meetings with Remarkable Men*. He returned to his father's house many times throughout his travels. And finally, he bid farewell to his father as the Turkish army was approaching, which his father chose to face, sitting calmly in his courtyard with a rifle across his lap. Years later, Gurdjieff asked that a memorial tombstone be set up for his father, by kindred souls in more favorable circumstances.

And yet, as proud as Gurdjieff is of his father, and presumably of his Greek heritage, in *Beelzebub's Tales*, he calls the ancient Greeks a bunch of "bored fishermen" who sat around inventing fantastic fables about everything under the Sun and the Moon. Is this what Gurdjieff really thought of his father and of the Greeks? Or was he once again "burying the bone," and not just the bone, but as he liked to put it, even "burying the dog ...?"[3]

In order to bring into focus Gurdjieff's connection to the ancient Greeks, we must examine four different aspects of ancient Greek culture, which spanned large distances, from southern Italy to Persia, over the course of more than a thousand years.

One is the ancient Greek religion going back at least to 700 BCE, which taught eternal truths through myths and symbols at its many great temples (Delphi, Olympus, etc.) and through its Mysteries (Eleusinian, Dionysian, etc.).

Two, the esoteric school of Pythagoras, founded around 500 BCE in the Greek colonies of southern Italy, which influenced all later Greek thinking. The members of this school took an oath of secrecy, leaving little for us to decipher, except for what survived through later writings.

Three, the Greek philosopher Plato who drew greatly from the Pythagoreans, yet whose writings were almost all wiped out by the Roman Church. Luckily, Plato's books survived in Greek Constantinople and in Arabic translations. Most of Gurdjieff's ideas can be found in Plato's writings.

And four, the Neoplatonists, heirs of Plato, who over hundreds of years, struggled to keep this ancient legacy alive, even in the hostile climate of Christian persecution when all "pagan" schools and temples were shuttered and destroyed. A thousand years later, Marsilio Ficino lit a new spark to Platonist ideas by translating Greek works, thus giving birth to the Renaissance, which brought the modern world to light.

---

[3] Moore, *Gurdjieff: A Biography*, 222.

Does Gurdjieff really have a connection to the ancient Greek view of the world? Let's take a closer look.

"KNOW THYSELF." The oracle of Apollo, the Sun god, proclaimed this to all who came to Delphi, the most sacred temple of the Greek world. At Delphi was located the sacred "omphalos," the navel of the world. And the most central aspect of Gurdjieff's teachings, echoing Delphi, is self-knowledge:

"We must strive for freedom if we strive for self-knowledge," says Gurdjieff. "The task of self-knowledge and of further self-development is of such importance and seriousness, it demands such intensity of effort, that to attempt it in any old way is impossible."[4]

What is the main attribute of Apollo, lord of Delphi? It's his seven-string Lyre, which not only gives the seven notes of the musical scale, but also alludes to the Music of the Spheres, the seven classical "planets" in the sky. The Roman politician and scholar Cicero, following the Greeks, claimed that Seven is the "key to the Universe."[5] Gurdjieff echoes this in his Law of Seven, his Heptaparaparshinokh:

> This sacred primordial cosmic law has seven deflections or "centres of gravity" and the distance between each two of these is called a "Stopinder" of the sacred Heptaparaparshinokh. This law, passing through everything newly arising and everything existing, always makes its completing processes with its seven Stopinders.[6]

The Greeks assigned the seven notes of their musical scale to the seven vowels of the Greek language, Α Ε Η Ι Ο Υ Ω. In ancient times, these seven vowels where chanted during religious rituals. We still hear echoes of this in the "Alleluiah," which according to Gurdjieff, "Not even your Pope understands what it means."[7]

These vowels also appear in *Beelzebub's Tales*, where Gurdjieff writes:

> This cosmic law is that there proceeds within every arising large and small, when in direct touch with the emanations either of the Sun Absolute itself or of any other sun, what is called "Remorse." And this sacred process "Aieioiuoa" or "Remorse" always proceeds with the "Omni-present-Active-Element-Okidanokh" also.[8]

---

[4] Gurdjieff, *Views from the Real World*, 45.
[5] Stahl, *Macrobius: Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, 74.
[6] Gurdjieff, *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*, 750-1.
[7] Patterson, *Ladies of the Rope*, 128.
[8] Gurdjieff, *Beelzebub's Tales*, 141.

What was the primary symbol of Delphi? Sculptures, coins, paintings, and ancient texts show it as the Tripod, symbol of the Three, while a triad of gods ruled the Greek cosmos: Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades. And Gurdjieff again teaches this Law of Three, which he calls his "Triamazikamno:"

> The second fundamental cosmic Law—the Sacred Triamazikmano—consists of three independent forces; this Sacred Law manifests in everything without exception, and everywhere in the Universe, in three separate independent aspects: The Holy-Affirming, The Holy-Denying, The Holy-Reconciling.[9]

At times, Gurdjieff described himself as "a teacher of sacred dances," and one of his Sacred Dances is called "The Pythia." The high priestess at Delphi, who sat on the Tripod and relayed messages from the gods while in a trance, was called the Pythia. So, we again witness the connection to the ancient Greeks. We find this connection also in Beelzebub's description of the "pythonesses," the female oracles in ancient temples: "Tiklunias were formerly called there 'pythonesses' but contemporary ones are now called 'mediums.'"[10] The Greeks named these priestesses after Python, the giant snake killed by Apollo, on whose remains the temple of Delphi was supposedly built, and who thus gave us the Pythia.

Gurdjieff founded an esoteric school (it might be said) and he discusses the idea of the "esoteric" in the books *Views from the Real World* and *Life is only Real then when I Am*. Now the word "esoteric," and the concept of the division of students within a school, comes from the Greek philosopher Pythagoras, who founded an esoteric school in Croton (southern Italy) around 520 BCE. In this school, a curtain separated the two classes of students. Those on the outside, the "exoterics" could only hear and listen, while those inside the curtain, the "esoterics," could see Pythagoras and discuss matters with him face to face.

The esoteric practices taught by Gurdjieff are characterized as "conscious labors and intentional suffering." These concepts can already be found in the *Akousmata*, the Sayings of Pythagoras: "Do not assist a man in laying a burden down; for it is not proper to be the cause of not labouring; but assist him in taking it up."[11] And again: "Hard labours are good, but pleasures are in every respect bad. For as we came into the

[9] Ibid. 138.
[10] Ibid., 518.
[11] Hermann, *To Think Like God*, 49.

present life for the purpose of punishment, it is necessary that we should be punished."[12]

The translation unfortunately makes it seem somewhat like masochism, but it's clear that "conscious labors" and "intentional suffering" were practiced by the Pythagoreans, and that Gurdjieff's ideas are practically identical.

The ancient Greeks credited Pythagoras with discovering the whole-number ratios within the musical scale, with the interval of the Octave being 1:2, the interval of the Fifth being 2:3, and the interval of the Fourth being 3:4. These ratios proved to be the foundation of all musical theory, but the Pythagoreans saw not only earthly music in terms of the Octave, but also the movements of the planets and the stars, the Music of the Spheres. Similarly, Gurdjieff held that the Octave operates throughout the entire Universe through the Law of Seven.

According to the Pythagoreans, the movement of the Planets produces an ethereal sound that most people cannot hear, except those with a purified soul like Pythagoras. Alexander of Aetolia, a Pythagorean, wrote: "The seven spheres give the seven sounds of the lyre and produce a harmony (that is to say an octave), because of the intervals which separate them from one another."[13]

This ethereal cosmic sound is also found in *Beelzebub's Tales*: "To define specific-vibration and specific gravity, these great terrestrial learned beings took as the standard unit the unit of vibrations of sound, then first called by them the 'Nirioonossian-world-sound.'"[14]

Meanwhile, Gurdjieff's Law of Three can be seen in the famous symbol of the Pythagoreans upon which they swore their oaths, the Tetraktys. Composed of descending triangles, it has one dot at the top, two dots below that, then three dots below those, and four dots at the bottom, also illustrating the musical intervals of the Octave, the Fifth and the Fourth.

Some Pythagoreans held that the Sun is a giant crystal, a mirror reflecting the light and heat of a Central Fire around which revolves the entire cosmos. Gurdjieff also writes of such a central fire: "Our Common Father Creator Almighty, having changed the functioning of the sacred laws, directed the action of their forces from within the Most Holy Sun Absolute into the space of the Universe."[15]

---

[12] Ibid., 48.
[13] Godwin, *The Harmony of the Spheres*, 18.
[14] Gurdjieff, *Beelzebub's Tales*, 829.
[15] Ibid., 756.

One of the most outlandish claims in *Beelzebub's Tales* is that "our Sun neither lights nor heats." Students of Gurdjieff nowadays rack their brains over the esoteric meaning of these words, but this is just another instance of Gurdjieff "burying the dog." Actually, Gurdjieff is merely pointing to the Pythagoreans and their idea of a Central Fire, whose light and heat our Sun reflects.

The Pythagoreans were sworn to secrecy and so, unfortunately, we know little about their teachings. But there is one Greek philosopher, greatly influenced by the Pythagoreans, whose many writings have managed to escape destruction. This, of course, is Plato.

The modern philosopher Alfred Whitehead wrote: "The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato."[16] And when we read Gurdjieff, time and time again, we see him following in the footsteps of Plato.

In his *Phaedo*, Plato explains that to meditate on one's death is the duty of one practicing philosophy. Similarly, in the last pages of *Beelzebub's Tales*, Gurdjieff writes: "The sole means for the saving of the beings of the planet Earth would be… that every one of them should constantly sense and be cognizant of the inevitability of his own death."[17]

Plato declared that "no one may join the company of the gods who has not practiced philosophy and is not completely pure when he departs from life."[18] To be pure is to be free of corporeal impulses and desires.

Gurdjieff echoes Plato: "And so, only he, who consciously assists the process of this inner struggle and consciously assists the "non-desires" to predominate over the desires, behaves just in accordance with the essence of our Common Father Creator Himself..."[19]

The reason for this necessary "inner struggle" is that Man is not a unity, but a divided being. Gurdjieff says that "Man is like a rig consisting of passenger, driver, horse and carriage."[20] The carriage is the body, the horse is the emotions, the driver is the mind, and the passenger is the possibility of consciousness, of self-awareness. This imagery comes straight from Plato's *Phaedrus*: "Let us then liken the soul to the natural union of a team of winged horses and their charioteer."[21]

Where is the "passenger" mentioned by Gurdjieff? Plato calls that the "steersman," a bit further on: "What is in this place is without color and

[16] Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 53.
[17] Gurdjieff, *Beelzebub's Tales*, 1183.
[18] Cooper, *Plato: Complete Works*, 72.
[19] Gurdieff, *Beelzebub's Tales*, 373.
[20] Gurdjieff, *Views From the Real World*, 221.
[21] Cooper, *Plato: Complete Works*, 524.

without shape and without solidity, a being that really is what it is, the subject of all true knowledge, visible only to intelligence, the soul's steersman."[22]

The divided state of Man is depicted in *Beelzebub's Tales* as a composite beast:

> The statue I saw in the city of Samlios... represented an allegorical being, each part of whose planetary body was composed of a part of the planetary body of some definite form of being existing there... The main mass was represented by the trunk of a Bull, which rested on the four legs of a Lion, and to its back were attached two large wings of an Eagle.[23]

And again, in *Republic*, Plato writes about a similar composite being:

> Let us fashion an image of the soul similar to the natures once said to have been possessed by the Chimaera, Scylla, Cerberus and many another, in which, they say, a variety of forms was begotten in one body... So picture a single model of a beast of many forms, having heads facing all directions... Above these add the form of a lion and at the top one of a man... Then join these three so that they coalesce to make one... Surround them with the form of a single man, so that one who is unable to look within but only on the surface, who discerns only the covering, the man seems clearly to be one being.[24]

In *Timaeus*, Plato writes: "I have often remarked that there are three kinds of soul located within us... Now there is only one way of taking care of things, and that is to give to each the food and motion which are natural to it."[25]

This notion of three "foods" is again found in Gurdjieff's teachings, where he divides a human being into three levels: "Each of the three stories receives "food" of a suitable nature from outside, assimilates it..."[26]

To Gurdjieff, the idea of "food" and "feeding" represented the working mechanism of the Cosmos: "This system, which maintains everything arisen and existing, was actualized by our Endless Creator in order that what is called the exchange of substances or the "Reciprocal-feeding" of everything that exists, might proceed in the Universe..."[27]

---

[22] Ibid., 525.
[23] Gurdieff, *Beelzebub's Tales*, 308-9.
[24] Cooper, *Plato: Complete Works*, 1196.
[25] Ibid., 1288-9.
[26] Gurdjieff, *Views from the Real World*, 23.
[27] Gurdieff, *Beelzebub's Tales*, 136-7.

And Plato wrote of the same "reciprocal feeding" in *Timaeus*: "Of design he [the World] was created thus—his own waste providing his own food, and all that he did or suffered taking place in and by himself."[28]

Has this cosmic system always been the same? Not according to Plato, who writes in his *Statesman*:

> There is an era in which God himself assists the universe on its ways and guides it by imparting its rotation to it. There is also an era in which he releases his control... Thereafter it begins to revolve in the contrary sense under its own impulse...[29]

And Gurdjieff talks about a similar change in the cosmic order:

> Our Endlessness, having decided to change the principle of the maintenance of the existence of this unique cosmic concentration... was compelled to create our now existing Megalocosmos... and from then on the system began to be called Trogoautoegocrat.[30]

How about Gurdjieff's Law of Three, his Triamazikamno, which he describes as: "The higher blends with the lower in order together to actualize the middle..."[31] Can this be found in Plato? Most certainly, as Plato writes in *Timaeus*:

> From an essence impartible, and always subsisting according to sameness of Being, and from a nature divisible about bodies, he mingled from both a third form of essence, having a middle subsistence between the two.[32]

What about Gurdjieff's Law of Seven, his Heptaparaparshinokh, which operates throughout the Cosmos? This can be seen in the famous Platonic Lambda (a variation on the Pythagorean Tetraktys) from the *Timaeus*' description of Creation. From the One, two arms extend downward. The arm to the left bears a triad of even numbers (2, 4, 8) while the arm to the right has a triad of odd numbers (3, 9, 27), giving seven numbers that Plato saw as defining the laws of creation.

Plato also writes in *Timaeus*: "Such was the mind and thought of God in the creation of time. The sun and moon and five other stars, which are

---

[28] Cooper, *Plato: Complete Works*, 1238.
[29] Ibid., 311.
[30] Gurdjieff, *Beelzebub's Tales*, 753.
[31] Ibid., 751.
[32] Cooper, *Plato: Complete Works*, 1239

called the planets, were created by him in order to distinguish and preserve the numbers of time... in seven orbits seven stars."[33]

But the most compelling piece of evidence connecting Gurdjieff to Plato is the story of the island of Atlantis. In *Beelzebub's Tales*, Gurdjieff writes: "During this second serious catastrophe to that planet, the continent Atlantis... was engulfed together with other large and small terra firmas..."[34]

This of course comes straight out of *Timaeus*, where Plato writes: "Some time later excessively violent earthquakes and floods occurred, and after the onset of an unbearable day and night, your entire warrior force sank below the earth all at once, and the Isle of Atlantis likewise sank below the sea and disappeared."[35]

Plato founded a school in Athens, the Academy, which lasted for nine hundred years. The heads of the Academy, the Platonists and the later Neoplatonists, polished and refined Plato's thinking until it became a shining beacon of spirituality and philosophy in the ancient world. The Neoplatonists, especially, formulated esoteric teachings that have remained with us for over a thousand years.

For example, Gurdjieff claims that "A modern man lives in sleep, in sleep he is born and in sleep he dies."[36] This notion of "sleep" can already be found in the writings of the Neoplatonists: "Hermes presides over every species of erudition, leading us to an intelligible essence from this mortal abode, governing the different herds of souls, and dispersing the sleep and oblivion with which they are oppressed."[37]

In order to awaken from sleep, Gurdjieff teaches self-remembering, or becoming present. In the *Enneads*, Plotinus (ca. 204-270 CE) gives one of the clearest descriptions of self-remembering: "It is not that the Supreme reaches out to us seeking our communion: we reach towards the Supreme; it is we that become present..."[38] And again: "We must turn the perceptive faculty inward and hold it to attention there."[39]

Gurdjieff talks about "higher centers" in man, higher faculties which lie dormant within us: "These centers are in us; they are fully developed and are working all the time, but their work fails to reach our ordinary consciousness."[40]

---

[33] Ibid., 1242.
[34] Gurdieff, *Beelzebub's Tales*, 177.
[35] Cooper, *Plato: Complete Works*, 1232.
[36] Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, 66.
[37] Taylor, *Iamblichus on the Mysteries*, 337.
[38] McKenna, *Plotinus: The Enneads*, 545.
[39] Ibid., 360.
[40] Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, 142.

And again Plotinus writes about this:

> Within our nature is such a centre by which we grasp and are linked and held; and those of us are firmly in the Supreme whose being is concentrated There… But how is it that although we have such great possessions, we are not aware of them?[41]

The Neoplatonists also discussed the Law of Three, and the Law of Seven as the key to the Universe, but the most revealing connection is that, like Gurdjieff, they held that we are not born with an immortal soul. Rather, as Iamblichus taught, "the perfection of this aetheric and luminous body effects the immortalization of the soul."[42]

And so, as we travel through a thousand years of Greek esoteric thought, what links to Gurdjieff do we find?

From most ancient Greece, we have the "Know Thyself" of Delphi, the Law of Three in its Tripod, and the Law of Seven, where the seven Greek vowels connect to the seven notes of the Octave. And Gurdjieff's sacred dances bring us back to the Pythia and the pythonesses of Delphi.

From Pythagoras, we get "esoteric" ideas, such as "conscious labors" and "intentional suffering," and the Music of the Spheres heard in the movement of the seven planets. And Gurdjieff's Sun, which "neither lights nor heats," points directly back to the Pythagoreans.

Coming to Plato, we find the contemplation of one's death, the struggle with desires, and the divided nature of Man, as shown in the image of the chariot team, as well as in the composite beast of the Sphinx. Here too we have Gurdjieff's self-feeding world, the change in the cosmic order, and most importantly, the story of Atlantis, which is now found only in Plato's work.

Finally, the Neoplatonists tell us that man is asleep, that he must remember himself in order to wake up, and that once awake, he will enjoy higher faculties. The perfection of these higher faculties, and of the "higher bodies," will serve to make the soul immortal.

As a concluding thought, let's consider this gem from Plato's *Republic*, which has certainly been echoed by Gurdjieff:

> One who is just does not allow any part of himself to do the work of another part or allow the various classes within him to meddle with each other. He regulates well what is really his own and rules himself. He puts himself in order, is his own friend and harmonizes the three parts of

[41] McKenna, *Plotinus: The Enneads*, 360.
[42] Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul*, 52.

himself … From having been many things he becomes entirely one, moderate and harmonious. Only then does he act.[43]

Works Cited

Cooper, John M., ed. *Plato: Complete Works*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997.

Godwin, Joscelyn, ed. *The Harmony of the Spheres: A Sourcebook of the Pythagorean Tradition in Music*. Rochester: Inner Traditions International, 1993.

Gurdjieff, G. *Beelzebub's Tales to his Grandson*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1950.

—. *Views from the Real World: Early Talks of G. I. Gurdjieff*. New York: Penguin Compass, 1984.

Guthrie, Kenneth Sylvan, trans., and Fideler, David, ed. *The Pythagorean Sourcebook and Library*. Grand Rapids: Phanes Press, 1988.

Hermann, Arnold. *To Think Like God: Pythagoras and Parmenides*. Las Vegas: Parmenides Publishing, 2004.

MacKenna, Stephen, trans. *Plotinus: The Enneads*. London: Penguin Books, 1991.

Moore, James. *Gurdjieff: A Biography*. Boston: Element Books Limited, 1999.

Ouspensky, P. D., *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching*. San Diego/New York/London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977.

Patterson, William Patrick. *Ladies of the Rope: Gurdjieff's Special Left Bank Women's Group*. Arete Publications, 1998.

Shaw, Gregory. *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus*. Pennsylvania State University Press, 1971.

Stahl, William Harris, trans. *Macrobius – Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1990.

Taylor, Thomas, trans. *Iamblichus on the Mysteries*. San Diego: Wizard Bookshelf, 1997.

Thring, Mel. *Quotations from G. I. Gurdjieff's Teaching: A Personal Companion*. London: Luzac Oriental, 1999.

Walsh, P. G., trans. *Cicero: The Nature of the Gods*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Whitehead, Alfred. *Process and Reality*. Toronto: Collier-Macmillan Canada, Ltd., 1969.

[43] Cooper, *Plato: Complete Works*, 1075.

CHAPTER TWO

LAUGHTER AS DEMOLITION AND RECONSTRUCTION IN *BEELZEBUB'S TALES*

MICHAEL PITTMAN

> "Yes, my boy, when you will exist among them and will be a witness of these incongruous being-manifestations, then, even in spite of the fact that you know the cause of these incongruities, you will be unable, as they express it, not to 'laugh' inwardly and at the same time with the whole of your Being you will pity these unfortunates, and with your 'inner laughter' there will gradually be mixed by itself what is called 'an-essence-palnassoorian-grief.'"
> —Beelzebub to his grandson, Hassein[1]

In *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*, Gurdjieff attempts to break down and destroy in the reader all knowledge about the past, while simultaneously building and recreating a new model for representing and thinking about the world. Russian author, M.M. Bakhtin's analysis of the chronotope in early forms of narrative in "The Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel" from *The Dialogic Imagination*, paves the way for an in-depth analysis of François Rabelais' Renaissance novel, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. In this essay, Bakhtin, writing around the same time that Gurdjieff was writing, addresses the significance of the chronotopic elements in *Gargantua and Pantagruel* as well as the roots of the text that are traceable to pre-class folklore. In addition to the discussion of the roots of oral storytelling genres, Bakhtin gives a highly nuanced analysis of *Gargantua and Pantagruel* through the lens of what he calls "Rabelaisian Laughter." While there is a great divergence in the work of Rabelais and Gurdjieff in terms of their style and approach, their works have remarkable parallels, especially in light of Bakhtin's analysis of Rabelais.

---

[1] Gurdjieff, *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*, 1080.

It can be said that both Gurdjieff and Rabelais aim to purge and then restore, each from their own context, in Bakhtin's words, "an authentic world and an authentic man." In the work of both Gurdjieff and Rabelais, there is both a polemical and an affirmative task, though their means are often different. In *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Rabelais achieves this in seven series that involve the human body, human clothing, food, drink and drunkenness, sexuality (copulation), death, and defecation. From Bakhtin's point of view, the excess of bodily functions, defecation, and sex portrayed in Rabelais serve to overthrow the view of the world provided by medieval hierarchical structures, as determined by religious and scholastic authority. This carnivalesque presentation is simultaneously overwhelming and effective as a result of Rabelaisian laughter. Rabelais' goal at that time was to resuture the present (the Renaissance) with the Classical period of thought represented by the Greeks. Gurdjieff prosecutes his own aim through a rather different chronotope, but one that also employs similarly effective modes of prosecution, such as distancing language, allegorization, invented histories, and reversals of supposed cultural histories.

Like Rabelais, Gurdjieff seeks to destroy in the reader all previous associations, connections, and habits of thinking about the world and human beings. As he announces on the first page of *Beelzebub's Tales*, the goal of his work is, "To destroy, mercilessly, without any compromises whatsoever, in the mentation and feelings of the reader, the beliefs and views, by centuries rooted in him, about everything existing in the world."[2] In so doing, a vision of a new world is marked out and recast. In addition to the use of extraliterary sources, one of the most important elements of this prosecutorial task, as executed by Gurdjieff, is the presence of laughter. It is through this prosecutorial task that a whole series of matrices and connections that new ones are opened up. Through the process of destruction, a space is opened up, not simply as a result of the critique offered, or implied, but of the way of being offered in Gurdjieffian laughter. Gurdjieff attempts this on at least two levels: external structures, histories, and false or misguided traditions and matrices are exploded, while inner assumptions, groundless beliefs, attitudes, and prejudices are imploded. Within this new space, through the double-edge of corrosion and the laughter, the possibility for a balanced view of the human being is created, that is, as a three-brained being with mind, emotions, and body equally and fully engaged and with a concomitant center that Gurdjieff refers to as the "I."

[2] Gurdjieff, G.I. *Beelzebub's Tales*, 1.