

## WRITINGS

Gurdjieff left an enduring legacy of great value for future generations in the form of his writings, Movements and sacred dances, and music. In a sense, these three facets of his teaching represent a living expression of the ‘law of three,’ whereby the Movements can be equated with the active, affirming force, music with the passive, receptive force and his writings with the reconciling, harmonizing force. Each form engages all three aspects of the human being while focusing their centre of gravity in one primary function: Movements (body), music (feelings) and writings (mind). But the full appreciation and ability to receive the spiritual nourishment inherent in each form requires the active, simultaneous participation of all three centres in a state of harmonious balance.

The written teachings imparted by Gurdjieff and his students have their roots in ancient oral traditions. The storytelling traditions of the Middle and Far East, which greatly influenced Gurdjieff in his search for objective knowledge, are essentially an oral transmission of esoteric knowledge. In the context of a spiritual teaching, oral transmission is an example of a direct conscious influence from one person (teacher) to another (student). But such an oral teaching, which plays a primary role in many of the world’s spiritual traditions, is often misunderstood:

It is not simply a question of words spoken, rather than written down. The oral tradition may here be seen to be the entire work of often invisible psychological, social and physical conditions created by a master, not the least of which is the specific, often silent intensity of the atmosphere created by the being of the teacher and the community of pupils. It is an indispensable aspect of all spiritual transmission. (1)

Gurdjieff was introduced to the oral transmission of ancient knowledge by his father, who was a renowned *ashokh* (bard, storyteller), and clearly assimilated various oral teachings from many different spiritual traditions during his extended search for esoteric knowledge. With his students, Gurdjieff placed great significance on a direct transmission of higher knowledge from teacher to pupil, believing that the inner sense of certain ideas and exercises could only be communicated in the context of oral tradition:

A definitive characteristic of a living teaching or way is that it cannot be found in any book. Many books may make us sensitive to the existence of the path and help us find the threshold, but rare are those which can go further to serve as a precise map for orientation along the way . . . The word “teaching” should refer strictly to a direct relational experience that take place in the presence of a teacher, in particular through oral transmission. (2)

Students have reported how Gurdjieff would privately share teachings and exercises with individuals or small groups based on their current situation and level of spiritual development. In these encounters he would provide specific teachings, exercises or tasks, challenge and shock pupils, or redirect their efforts along more productive lines.

Gurdjieff was always careful to stress to his students that they should not share the teachings and exercises he transmitted to them: “This that I tell you is for you alone and it must not be discussed with other people.” (3) Gurdjieff’s oral instructions made a deep impression on his students:

He would speak with the exactitude of an old and experienced physician prescribing treatment to his patients, choosing his words very carefully and talking in grave and convincing tones. At such times his words fell on our ears with immense weight for they seemed to be backed not only by his own wisdom, but by the authority of a long line of unseen and unknown teachers stretching back into a distant and misty past. (4)

When Gurdjieff began writing in the mid 1920s he would have drafts of his chapters read aloud to his students. In many ways his writings, especially *Beelzebub’s Tales to His Grandson*, are constructed in a way that mirrors the storytelling and oral traditions of his past. He placed great importance on the proper cadence, rhythm and pronunciation of the often complex words and sentences comprising the text. (5) Readings of Gurdjieff’s three series of writings, *All and Everything*, remained a mainstay of his teaching until his death in 1949. Today, the Gurdjieff Foundation includes group readings of *Beelzebub’s Tales* and *Meetings with Remarkable Men* as well as oral teachings transmitted by senior students to novice practitioners, as essential components of the Work: “The Gurdjieff Work remains above all an oral tradition, transmitted under specially created conditions from person to person, continually unfolding, without fixed doctrinal beliefs or external rites, as a way towards freeing humanity from the waking sleep that holds us in a kind of hypnotic illusion.” (6) In keeping with Work tradition, these ‘inner work’ oral teachings are communicated strictly under the supervision of the Foundation and are not shared with the general public.

In the early phases of his teaching, before his serious automobile accident in 1924, Gurdjieff transmitted his ideas through lectures, discussions, conversations and individual instruction. To focus their attention on the immediate content of his talks, he did not allow students to take notes. But records of his teaching during this period have survived and form the basis of many of the books written by his students which were published following his death:

A few far-sighted listeners – with astonishing powers of memory and in most cases without Gurdjieff’s knowledge – made notes afterwards, either alone or with some of the others, of whatever they had heard. The notes kept by different people were gradually collected and have been compared, translated where necessary, and tested by reading them aloud to some of those who heard the original talks. Incomplete as they are, even fragmentary in some cases, they are an authentic rendering of Gurdjieff’s approach to work on oneself, as it was developed informally at the necessary moment. (7)

While some of the accounts of Gurdjieff’s pupils have been published and have entered the public domain, others remain in unpublished national, university and private libraries. During Gurdjieff’s lifetime unpublished records of his talks and meetings were

quietly circulated among his closest pupils and drafts of his writings were regularly read aloud by his students. With the exception of *The Herald of Coming Good*, which was privately printed in 1933 and withdrawn by the author a year later, none of Gurdjieff's writings were published in his lifetime.

The first authoritative comprehensive exposition of Gurdjieff's vast system of psychological and cosmological ideas, P.D. Ouspensky's *In Search of the Miraculous*, appeared in print in October 1949 shortly before Gurdjieff's death. In 1950 *Beelzebub's Tales* was published in New York by Harcourt Brace and in London by Routledge & Kegan Paul. *Meetings with Remarkable Men* was published in 1963 by Dutton and Routledge & Kegan Paul and the third series, *Life is Real Only Then, When "I Am"* was issued in 1975 by Triangle Editions. Accounts and memoirs by Gurdjieff's pupils began to appear in print shortly after his death and have continued unabated to the current day. There are now hundreds of books and countless articles devoted to Gurdjieff's life and teachings. The corpus of literature by and about Gurdjieff may be placed into four general categories:

- Books written by Gurdjieff himself
- Books written by students of Gurdjieff
- Books, monographs and articles produced by outside observers, journalists, scholars, critics and current 'Work' students
- Biographies of Gurdjieff

A number of guides and annotated bibliographies of this literature have been published (8), the most extensive and reliable being Walter Driscoll's *Gurdjieff: An Annotated Bibliography*.

### **Writings of Gurdjieff**

Following his serious automobile accident in July 1924, Gurdjieff decided to transmit his teachings in written form as a series of books. He recounts how his accident forced him to completely change his previous teaching plans: "Since I had not, when in full strength and health, succeeded in introducing in practice into the life of people the beneficial truths elucidated for them by me, then I must at least, at any cost, succeed in doing this in theory, before my death." (9)

During his recovery period after the accident, Gurdjieff planned the design, structure and content of his future writings. He began formally writing in December 1924 and continued almost without interruption until May 1935, when he suddenly stopped writing altogether.

Gurdjieff typically wrote in pencil in ruled notebooks, fueled by strong black coffee, cigarettes and Armagnac. Although he sometimes composed quietly in his room at the Prieuré or outdoors on the terrace, his preferred location was in public places like the

Café de la Paix in Paris or the Café Henri IV in Fontainebleau. During motor trips with his students he would frequently stop and write by the roadside or at neighbourhood cafés and restaurants.

He completed a rough draft of his first series of writings, entitled *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*, in 1927 but decided to rewrite the manuscript and it was not until 1930 that it was more or less finished. He began his second series, *Meetings with Remarkable Men*, in 1928 and completed it in the early 1930s. He turned his attention to a third series, *Life is Real Only Then, When "I Am,"* but left it unfinished when he decided to stop writing altogether in May 1935.

There are a number of different accounts by his pupils of the process of writing, translating and editing his texts. The general sense is that Gurdjieff wrote brief notes in Armenian which led to extended dictations in Russian to a pupil or secretary, usually Olga de Hartmann. These were then roughly translated into English or French by Russian- or Armenian-speaking pupils and then sent to noted English editor and literary critic A.R. Orage in New York for a more polished translation. When the first draft of Gurdjieff's writings were sent to Orage in 1925, he was "baffled" and they were returned as "completely unintelligible." Subsequent efforts were more successful, and soon Orage was an enthusiastic editor.

Gurdjieff continued to write prodigiously, but in 1927 he realized that the first version of *Beelzebub's Tales* was completely inaccessible and incomprehensible to anyone but the most perceptive and discerning student. Virtually no one who had read or heard the manuscript could fathom his intended meaning, and he decided to completely rewrite the text. By 1930 he was satisfied with a provisional typescript and had 102 copies privately printed. But he continued to revise the manuscript as he carefully observed listeners' reactions to oral readings of the book:

If Gurdjieff had *Beelzebub's Tales* read aloud to his pupils and the meaning was too readily understood, he would alter the offending passage in the book, lengthen his already endless sentences, and conceal entirely the already obscure symbolism. "Must dig dog deeper," he would say; and his students would have to scabble for the bone. (10)

Finally, in January 1949 in New York City, Gurdjieff announced to his students that he had decided to publish *Beelzebub's Tales*. Some of his followers were against the decision, arguing that there were numerous mistakes, grammatical errors and faulty punctuation, and that the text required proper editing. But Gurdjieff disagreed: "It is a rough diamond. There's not time now to edit it. It will have to go." (11) *Beelzebub's Tales* was eventually published in February 1950, followed by *Meetings with Remarkable Men* in 1963 and *Life is Real Only Then, When "I Am"* in 1975. Gurdjieff stipulated that his writings should be read in strict order as it was important to be acquainted with earlier works before proceeding to later ones. And in the opening to the first series, "Friendly Advice," he counseled his readers:

Read each of my written expositions thrice:  
First – at least as you have already become mechanized to read all  
your contemporary books and newspapers;  
Second – as if you were reading aloud to another person;  
And only third – try to fathom the gist of my writings.  
Only then will you be able to count upon forming your own impartial  
judgment, proper to yourself alone, on my writings. And only then  
can my hope be actualized that according to your understanding you  
will obtain the specific benefit for yourself which I anticipate, and  
which I wish for you with all my being.

Gurdjieff made it clear that the explicit aim of his writings was to transmit his teachings to future generations, what he called a ‘Legominism.’ Each of his books was written for a different purpose which is reflected in the writing style and terminology of each. In his preface to the first series, he describes his intention:

FIRST SERIES: 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.

SECOND SERIES: to acquaint the reader with the material required for a new creation and to prove the soundness and good quality of it.

THIRD SERIES: to assist the arising, in the mentation and in the feelings of the reader, of a verifiable, nonfantastic representation not of that illusory world which he now perceives, but of the world existing in reality.

Gurdjieff intended his writings to challenge readers by demanding “special attention, time, dedication and real effort to master his style, to separate allegory from fact, as well as truly absorb his new and difficult ideas – both spiritual and practical – so as to use them as tools for self-study.” (12) His writings were designed to operate on many levels and touch all aspects of the human being:

The principal aim of Gurdjieff’s writings was not to provide historical information, but to serve as a call to awakening and as a continuous source of guidance for the inner search that is the *raison d’être* of his teachings. His writings are cast in forms that are directed not only to the intellectual function but also to the emotional and even subconscious sensitivities that, all together, make up the whole of the human psyche. His writings therefore demand and support the search for a finer quality of self-attention on the part of the reader, failing which the thought contained in them is unverifiable at its deeper levels. (13)

Although the three series of *All and Everything* were published posthumously, Gurdjieff did make one abortive effort to publicly disseminate his ideas during his lifetime. In September 1932 he began hastily crafting *The Herald of Coming Good* subtitled, “First Appeal to Contemporary Humanity.” It contained the first public

information about Gurdjieff's life and search for esoteric knowledge, including the fact that at one time he was a professional hypnotist and used some of his early pupils as guinea pigs for his "experiments." Some of his current followers were shocked and appalled by the revelation. The book was eccentrically written and replete with preposterous and unverifiable assertions.

Gurdjieff was unable to find a publisher and distributed copies privately to his followers and journalists. The latter quickly dismissed its "abysmal" literary quality and some even characterized it as "the work of a man who was no longer sane." Even some of his own followers reached the same conclusion: "Hundreds of copies were sent to Ouspensky who had them burned (hypothesizing that the author had contracted syphilis and gone mad)." (14) Gurdjieff later had regrets about publishing it: "If you have yet not read this book entitled *The Herald of Coming Good* then thank the circumstances and do not read it." (15)

*Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*, Gurdjieff's magnum opus, is considered by his followers and many others as a masterpiece of spiritual literature and "the first truly comprehensive modern myth." Its 1200+ pages are a vast and epic platform for the transmission of his profound psychological and cosmological ideas:

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 teaching, a bible. It is a highly unusual mixture of entertainment and esotericism, humor and seriousness, obscurity and clarity. (16)

Yet when *Beelzebub's Tales* was first published in 1950, it was ridiculed and misunderstood by literary critics who described the book as "unreadable," "insufferable nonsense" and "a paranoid fantasy." However, over the last 60 years critical perceptions have changed and *Beelzebub's Tales* is now recognized by many in the literary and academic worlds as a monumental achievement.

The book takes the form of a science fiction epic in which, on a long spaceship journey, the wise fallen angel Beelzebub imparts to his young grandson Hassein his understanding of the "peculiar three-brained beings" living on Earth. On a series of extended visits to the planet ranging from pre-history to current times, Beelzebub provides "an objectively impartial criticism" of the human condition and the direction of conscious evolution and spiritual awakening. Embedded in the vast narrative, in encoded form, are Gurdjieff's fundamental psychological and cosmological ideas, with special attention paid to the Law of Three and Law of Seven.

*Beelzebub's Tales* operates on many levels, from the literal to the purely symbolic and allegorical. One of the great challenges for the reader is to separate the one from the

other. In the first chapter of the book, “The Arousing of Thought,” Gurdjieff warns against taking all that he writes as literal. And clearly, some of the assertions he makes in *Beelzebub’s Tales* are not to be taken seriously (“the sun neither lights nor heats” and “apes descended from humans”).

In a conversation recorded by Ouspensky, Gurdjieff stipulated that esoteric knowledge cannot be transmitted strictly through logic or ordinary language: “the people who have possessed objective knowledge have tried to express the idea of unity in ‘myths,’ in ‘symbols,’ and in particular ‘verbal formulas’ which having been transmitted without alteration, having carried on the idea from one school to another, often from one epoch to another.” (17) In *Beelzebub’s Tales* Gurdjieff used a variety of linguistic devices (myth, allegory, metaphor, symbolism, parable, aphorism and pictorial image) to reach the inner world of the reader or listener. He took advantage of paradox, contradiction, ambiguity and repetition to disrupt automatic patterns of thinking, reasoning and assessment. He also employed other non-linear techniques such as wit and humour in his narrative, often by quoting wise sayings from the legendary Eastern “wise fool” Mullah Nasr Eddin.

Gurdjieff’s style of writing was deliberately challenging to the reader or listener:

The periods are few and far between, and to reach Gurdjieff’s meaning, the reader has to hack through a jungle of verbiage apparently arranged so as to lose him in a thicket of subordinate clauses. The whole is spiced with Gurdjieff’s cumbrous sense of humor and flavored with terms coined from every language under the sun . . . this book can have no casual reader as it is frankly impenetrable. (18)

His often outlandishly long sentences are laden with subsidiary clauses and parenthetical ideas that require a great effort of attention on the part of the reader to discern their meaning. At first sight these digressions appear rambling and disconnected, but closer study adds new insights and dimensions to the ideas being explored. Further complicating the matter is Gurdjieff’s ample use of odd-sounding neologisms (invented words) like ‘soliakooriapa.’ While some of the roots of these multisyllabic words are sometimes traceable (e.g. ‘Triamazikamno’ where tri = three), generally their overt meaning escapes easy comprehension.

Gurdjieff’s unusual vocabulary and sentence structure forces the reader to abandon normal verbal associations, open to new ideas and possibilities and develop fresh perspectives. Anna Challenger argues that Gurdjieff chose his challenging writing style based on his belief that the harder people worked for something the more they would benefit:

The casual reader, first confronted with the intimidating length of the work and then prevented from easily understanding it because of the difficult style and idiosyncratic terminology, is in no position either to agree or disagree, accept or reject what is written. The struggle that takes place in the reader of *Beelzebub’s Tales* is with his or her inner nature: whether to take the

easier path of giving way to the law of inertia, justifying the decision on the basis of the length and extreme difficulty of the work, or whether to make the effort of will required by the task of trying to fathom such a writing . . . Gurdjieff's insistent style demands constant affirmation from the reader and each affirmation results in a victory of will over inertia. In this way, Gurdjieff creates the possibility for the reader to strengthen will and create being. (19)

Perhaps the greatest challenge in reading and understanding the book is its richness of content and multiple levels of meaning. In a talk to his students in 1943, Gurdjieff addressed this point:

It is a very interesting book. Everything is there. All that exists, all that has existed, all that can exist. The beginning, the end, all the secrets of the creation of the world; all is there. But one must understand, and to understand depends on one's individuality. The more man has been instructed in a certain way, the more he can see. Subjectively, everyone is able to understand according to the level he occupies, for it is an objective book, and everyone should understand something in it. One person understands one part, another a thousand times more . . . In *Beelzebub* there is everything, I have said it, even how to make an omelet. Among other things, it is explained; and at the same time there isn't a word in *Beelzebub* about cooking. (20)

Gurdjieff recommended reading *Beelzebub's Tales* at least three times before trying to "fathom the gist" of it. Repeated and attentive reading of the book yields progressively deeper insights and understanding, especially if one avoids premature interpretations and the tendency to evaluate the text from the standpoint of habitual associations and previous knowledge:

Gurdjieff advised us to read, reread and then read this Book again many, many times. Read it aloud with others and read it to yourself. Even if you read it thirty, even fifty times, you will always find something you missed before – a sentence which gives with great precision the answer to a question you have had for years – a connection to quite another part of the Book. You will eventually build up a network of real ideas that will be your own knowledge, not second-hand, but the priceless, hard-won fruit of your own struggle for understanding. (21)

A revised edition of *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson* was published in 1992, initiated and directed by Jeanne de Salzmann in collaboration with senior members of the Gurdjieff Foundation. It was based on the "greater ease of expression" of the 1956 French translation and study of the original Russian manuscript, which was eventually published in 2000 by Traditional Studies Press of Toronto. The stated purpose of the revision was to render a somewhat simpler and more contemporary English version than the original 1950 publication: "to clarify the verbal surface while respecting the author's thought and style." (22)



The publication of the new edition was controversial in Work circles. The editors of the new version were criticized for their failure to consult with other Gurdjieff groups and for the perceived liberties they took with the original English manuscript. In retrospect the controversy seems somewhat overblown. The new edition closely follows the original text in most places, with relatively minor stylistic and cosmetic changes which modify some of the more awkward sentence structures and recasts the cultural and time-bound expressions of Gurdjieff's teachings in a more contemporary framework. The general consensus is that both versions are reliable, but that the original 1950 translation should be considered the definitive exposition of Gurdjieff's teachings.

A number of commentaries on *Beelzebub's Tales* have been written by students of Gurdjieff and by scholars. (23) Commentaries by students, especially A.R. Orage and John Bennett, naturally carry more weight as they were directly involved in Gurdjieff's work and have a deeper appreciation and understanding of the ideas he was trying to convey in his book than independent observers. At their best the commentaries can offer insightful observations, illuminate certain passages and chapters and provide fresh avenues to explore.

Readings from *Beelzebub's Tales* formed an important part of Gurdjieff's teaching to his groups in France, England and America for almost 25 years. Today, they continue to be a fixture of the activities of the various groups associated with the Gurdjieff Foundation as well as other independent groups and organizations. Generally, discussion of the meaning of the book is discouraged, as it tends to dilute the direct impact of reading or hearing Gurdjieff's own words.

The second series, *Meetings with Remarkable Men*, was completed by Gurdjieff in the early 1930s but not published until 1963, in part because at that time interest in Gurdjieff and his teachings was rapidly growing throughout the world. *Meetings* is much more readable and easier to approach than *Beelzebub's Tales*. On the surface it seems like a grand adventure through unfamiliar lands, cultures and times:

It is an adventure based on the extraordinary early life of G.I. Gurdjieff and his search through remote and uncharted regions for those ancient truths which might serve to develop the consciousness of contemporary man. It receives its substance from the exciting and often deeply moving accounts of those who reared and trained him, and of those who shared his unusual journey. It is an adventure of the mind – growing, being formed, setting out after inner knowledge, discovering it and putting it to the test of practice. Thus it is an adventure in two worlds, and it will be the reader's delight and enrichment to discern where one world ends and the other begins. (24)

But the book also reflects deeper levels, as it blends autobiography, travelogue, parable and allegory to tell the story of his childhood, education and travels in search of ancient esoteric knowledge. The autobiographical content may not be entirely factual and many of the details are impossible to verify. He was not alone in his search, as he was

accompanied by a group of fellow seekers – doctors, priests, archeologists, engineers – who were called the “Seekers of Truth.”

Following a lengthy introduction, the book is structured as a series of stories, each chapter titled with the name of one of the “remarkable men” he knew in his early life, including his father, companions of early adulthood and fellow seekers. The various characters of the narrative are presented almost as role-models, each remarkable for a certain characteristic or quality – courage, endurance and perseverance in the face of difficulties, ingenuity, resourcefulness, overcoming laziness, self-restraint, tolerance, compassion. Yet each has normal human weaknesses and failings. They worked with the normal circumstances of everyday life to create within themselves a new level of being. All were serious seekers who were not easily satisfied with the answers they received for their burning spiritual questions. Whether these remarkable men (and one woman) ever existed is open to question and they may represent composite portraits of individuals Gurdjieff met in the course of his travels which illustrate fundamental human types and their individual searches for spiritual truth.

The foundation of the book is the nature of the search for objective truth, the obstacles preventing a full actualization of our latent spiritual possibilities and the means to accomplish this sacred task. In *Meetings* Gurdjieff provides “the material required for a new creation” that would lead to the development of being, presence and conscience congruent with the reality of everyday life and appropriate for the conditions of our contemporary world.

The book ends with a lengthy epilogue, “The Material Question,” that was added to the original manuscript. It is an account of Gurdjieff’s response to a question at a meeting in New York City in 1924 about how he financed his extensive searches for esoteric know-ledge and the establishment of his Institute. With frank honesty Gurdjieff reveals the considerable ingenuity, versatility and sustained initiative he exercised to achieve his aims.

In the late 1970s Jeanne de Salzmann and senior members of the Gurdjieff Foundation initiated a Work project to create a film adaptation of *Meetings with Remarkable Men*. Directed by Peter Brook, the full length feature film was commercially released in 1979.

In the early 1930s Gurdjieff began work on the third series of *All and Everything*, which he called *Life is Real Only Then, When “I Am”* (the title itself teaches). In May 1935 he suddenly stopped writing; the manuscript was never completed and part of it was lost. (25) Many of Gurdjieff’s followers have wondered why his last work was left unfinished. In the Foreword to the third series Jeanne de Salzmann writes:

Why did Gurdjieff prepare only a few chapters – to which he attached a special significance – and then completely stop writing in order to devote himself to a small group of pupils, with whom he worked until the end? . . . Gurdjieff had an indirect way of making people feel the truth. He only gave out these chapters to be read aloud at a precise moment in his

presence, to a particular group, or to certain persons he had designated, bringing them suggestions or images which made them face themselves and their inner contradictions. This then, was no longer the teaching of the doctrine, but the incarnate Presence of a knowledge, of a reality, which touched one directly and inevitably evoked a response. After this, the chapters were put away. (26)

Gurdjieff did not feel that it was absolutely necessary to publish the third series and instructed Mme de Salzmann shortly before his death: “To publish the Third Series is not necessary. It was written for another purpose. Nevertheless, if you believe you ought to do so one day, publish it.” (27) The book is very revealing about Gurdjieff’s inner life as he describes some of the struggles and intense suffering he experienced to realize his aim. A lengthy prologue and introduction are followed by five chapters dealing primarily with A.R. Orage’s New York groups and the shocks administered by Gurdjieff to reorient the direction of their work. The enigmatic final chapter “The Inner and Outer World of Man” ends in mid-sentence and, according to John Bennett, were the last words Gurdjieff ever wrote.

Gurdjieff intended that the third series be made available only to selected individuals who had thoroughly assimilated the contents of his earlier books. Mme de Salzmann discusses his purpose in writing the third series:

Gurdjieff had not intended it for publication. It had other ends to serve. Moreover, he never finished writing it, considering that it had already played its part – which was to show to his more advanced pupils, who could understand because it was their own question, the personal subjective sufferings, moral and physical, through which a man must pass; and what he must, in spite of everything, sacrifice if he would attain the aim that he had set himself and that needs to be stronger than all else. Furthermore, he never read any of it to unprepared people. Only the pupils who had been with him the longest could understand. (28)

A final book, although not written by Gurdjieff, expresses his teachings in his own words. *Views From the Real World: Early Talks of Gurdjieff*, published in 1973, is a collection of 40 wide-ranging talks and lectures given by Gurdjieff to his students between 1917 and 1930. Collected by Jeanne de Salzmann, the talks were reconstructed from the memories of students (who were not permitted to take verbatim notes) and verified for authenticity by Olga de Hartmann who was present at all the meetings.

The words issuing from the pages of the book are clearly Gurdjieff’s authentic voice and have an unmistakable power as we hear how he directly instructed his students and outlined his approach to work on oneself. The volume also contains a long essay, “Glimpses of the Truth,” briefly mentioned in Ouspensky’s *In Search of the Miraculous*, and written by one of Gurdjieff’s Moscow pupils around 1914. Although not as definitive an expression of his teachings as his written works, *Views From the Real World* serves as excellent supplementary reading for those familiar with his ideas.

## Books Written by Students of Gurdjieff

Books and memoirs by Gurdjieff's primary students are second in importance only to Gurdjieff's own writings. The books span a 35 year period of work and study with Gurdjieff, from 1914 to 1949, and range in geographical setting from Russia to New York City. Collectively these voices create a composite portrait of their teacher and his mission, and show the staggering depth and power of the Work ideas and teaching techniques employed by Gurdjieff to reach the innermost consciousness of his students. Although the accounts of students often seem, in the words of James Webb, "like a series of disconnected snapshots," others sense an underlying element behind the variety of impressions:

It is therefore not surprising that the personal accounts about Gurdjieff can have such a diversity of expression. But all of them – although they often fall into awkward misinterpretations, or gossip, or even vanity and name-dropping – give flashes or flavors of the same fundamental experience. One cannot remain indifferent to the intimate happenings of these accounts. And depending on the reader's own capacity to separate the wheat from the chaff, he can find some wonderful glimpses of Gurdjieff. (29)

The books penned by Gurdjieff's pupils focus primarily on either the ideas or on personal interactions and learning experiences provided by their teacher. Some combine both aspects. By far the best exposition of the theoretical side of the teaching is P.D. Ouspensky's *In Search of the Miraculous* which presents Gurdjieff's psychological and cosmological teachings clearly and in great depth. Many of the theory books which followed, by Maurice Nicoll, Kenneth Walker, C.S. Nott, John Bennett and others, closely mirrored Ouspensky's presentation and, with the exception of Nicoll's five volume *Psychological Commentaries on the Teaching of Gurdjieff and Ouspensky*, added little that was new.

The more personal memoirs of pupils capture the flavour of Gurdjieff's style of teaching and provide insights into how he taught through example, working with the ordinary events of daily life, and challenging his students' conditioned mechanical behaviour. The latter, as many students have testified, involved "treading heavily on the most sensitive corns of everyone he met." (30) There is, however, a subjective component to their narratives as Gurdjieff worked with each pupil individually according to their temperament, needs and level of development:

Scores of personal accounts of the impression made by Gurdjieff on those who worked with him for many years, or even met him only casually, have appeared in books and periodicals. Each is necessarily subjective, for Gurdjieff was an enigma presenting a different face to every person and to every occasion . . . The principal reason why personal impressions have so little value is that Gurdjieff was from start to finish a seeker experimenting with different ways of living and behaving and with different means for accomplishing his life's work. (31)

Selective memory and factual inaccuracy also enter into each student's account. Paul Beekman Taylor documents "erroneous dates and movements, speculation based on hear-say evidence and unfortunately pure invention." (32) He specifically singles out Fritz Peters, C.S. Nott and John Bennett for exaggerations, subjective interpretations of events and factual transgressions.

Gurdjieff's level of being and spiritual development also impacted the nature of his relationships with pupils and their recollections of interactions with him:

Another aspect, and not the least as regards the specific character of Gurdjieff's teaching, was the special awakening influence conveyed by his own presence. All who approached him on a right basis were unforgettably marked by it. Though he certainly made a strong impact on people in general, it is particularly interesting to consider the different and special relationships that he established with his pupils . . . The only purpose of an authentic teacher is to awaken others. And this awakening always takes place through laws – simple but difficult to apply – according to which real consciousness awakens consciousness just as true love awakens love. (33)

A further complicating factor was Gurdjieff's frequent role playing or "conscious acting," following his admonition to "outwardly play a role but inwardly remain free." Many of his students admitted that they did not really know him. (34)

First-hand accounts of Gurdjieff's encounters with his pupils shed light on the sophistication and variety of means he employed to awaken them to their higher possibilities: "According to traditional conceptions, the function of a master is not limited to the teaching of doctrines, but implies an actual incarnation of knowledge, thanks to which he can awaken others, and help them in their search simply by his presence." (35) One of the most interesting aspects of these books is their clear illustration of how Gurdjieff's teaching methods changed in response to the requirements of 'time, place and people,' while remaining faithful to the inner essence and dynamic of the Fourth Way:

What was furthermore remarkable was his way of teaching and addressing each one according to his particular capacities, inadequacies, and needs. He evidently gave Ouspensky more material about ideas than most of the others; with Thomas de Hartmann, the Russian composer, he specially developed a certain work on music; with some others he went more deeply into the study of the flow of energies through intensive work on various exercises and "sacred movements." Along with the conditions provided in common, everyone received an appropriate food. More generally speaking, near him there seemed to be no limits for transforming daily life into meaningful conditions for inner work. (36)

Before his death there were only a scattering of articles about Gurdjieff and his teachings in newspapers, periodicals and the occasional book chapter penned by writers and journalists. His pupils generally remained silent. But in October 1949, with Gurdjieff's authorization, Ouspensky's *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an*

*Unknown Teaching* was published. When the typescript was first read to Gurdjieff, he was astonished, as Ouspensky had captured in print exactly what he had been taught: “It was as if I hear myself speaking.” (37)

*In Search of the Miraculous* was destined to become the most comprehensive and accessible record of Gurdjieff’s teaching by a pupil. Ouspensky’s level of objectivity and honesty is remarkable. He presents the psychological and cosmological ideas in a specific sequence, often elaborating in later passages. *In Search* is unparalleled in its descriptions of authentic group work and the nature of the teacher-pupil relationship. Many Work teachers recommend that students read *In Search* before tackling the more challenging *Beelzebub’s Tales to His Grandson*.

Thomas and Olga de Hartmann were among Gurdjieff’s earliest students and accompanied him on a perilous journey from Russia across the Caucasus mountains to Tiflis. Gurdjieff collaborated with Thomas de Hartmann in hundreds of musical compositions and his wife served as his secretary and personal assistant for many years. Their intimate, poignant memoir *Our Life with Mr. Gurdjieff* is considered a classic of the Gurdjieff literature. In simple yet moving prose they share their vivid experiences with Gurdjieff and how he used every conceivable event in life for inner work and self-understanding.

Fritz Peters, from the age of eleven, lived for four years at Gurdjieff’s Institute in France. Peters viewed Gurdjieff, for whom he had great respect and affection, and daily life at the Prieuré through the eyes of a boy. His account of those years reveals Gurdjieff’s natural rapport with children and his insistence on a practical education which developed all sides of their being. *Boyhood with Gurdjieff*, with its humour, innocence and colourful impressions, is unique in the literature surrounding Gurdjieff.

Englishman Charles Stanley Nott studied with both Ouspensky and Gurdjieff, but clearly regarded the latter as his real teacher. He wrote two important books, *Teachings of Gurdjieff: The Journal of a Pupil* published in 1961 and *Journey Through This World* published in 1969. The first book also contains a valuable section of notes on A.R. Orage’s commentaries on *Beelzebub’s Tales*. Nott had travelled the world working at many trades and brought a different background to his studies with his two teachers than many of their more intellectual followers. The books powerfully convey both his inner and outer experiences with Ouspensky and Gurdjieff, especially the intensity of working under Gurdjieff’s direction, for whom he felt a deep bond and appreciation throughout his life.

In the 1930s Gurdjieff formed a women’s group in Paris that became known as “The Rope.” (38) Two of its members were the writers Margaret Anderson and Kathryn Hulme, famous for her novel *The Nun’s Story*. Both wrote memoirs of this period: Anderson *The Unknowable Gurdjieff* and Hulme *Undiscovered Country*. Their detailed accounts of their parallel experiences with Gurdjieff richly evoke the atmosphere of his Paris flat with its otherworldly ambience, splendid meals and searching conversations.

The two books convey how Gurdjieff worked with the emotional center and challenged his students to observe and overcome their conditioned selves, in part by the perceptive nicknames he gave each of the members of The Rope. The books show how Gurdjieff was able to work with all types of students and adapt his teachings to the possibilities of the situation.

During the 1930s and 1940s Gurdjieff worked intensively with a number of French groups. One of his students was gifted writer and spiritual searcher René Daumal. During that time he wrote the unfinished masterpiece *Mount Analogue*, inspired by Gurdjieff's teachings, but not published until 1959. This brilliant allegory describes the experiences of a group of men and women seeking and ascending a sacred mountain together. Their many perils and adventures are metaphors for the stages and challenges of the spiritual path.

During the German occupation of France in the 1940s, film director René Zuber studied with Gurdjieff and recorded his impressions and experiences in *Who Are You, Monsieur Gurdjieff?*. Zuber was deeply affected by Gurdjieff's challenging teachings and enigmatic presence. His artful observations illustrate how Gurdjieff spontaneously taught through everyday life experiences and interactions and dialogues with his pupils, exposing their mechanical reactions and automatic patterns of behaviour.

Noted French surgeon Jean Vaysse studied Gurdjieff's teachings under the supervision of Jeanne de Salzmann for over 25 years and was authorized to lead groups of his own. In *Toward Awakening* he examines some of the central psychological concepts of the teaching from a fresh perspective and illuminates them with practical examples from everyday life. Of special interest is his chapter discussing specific exercises in attention leading to heightened awareness of bodily sensations.

In 1941 Solange Claustres was introduced to Gurdjieff by Jeanne de Salzmann and worked closely with him until his death in 1949. Since that time she has conducted Movements classes in Europe and America and led her own Work groups. Although encouraged by Mme de Salzmann to write about her experiences with Gurdjieff, she was reluctant and her first book, *Becoming Conscious with G.I. Gurdjieff*, was not published until 1999 in France and later translated into English in 2005. Her memoir is a testament to her deep understanding of Gurdjieff's practical teachings and provides real insight into how he worked with his pupils to lead them to a realization of their current state and the possibilities that awaited them when they awakened to their real natures as conscious human beings. In this important Work book she weaves accounts of her experiences with Gurdjieff with descriptions of the Movements and discussions of his inner exercises and psychological teachings. Her meeting with Gurdjieff in 1941 changed her life forever: "I want to bear witness in my writing to my profound gratitude to this man who nourished me in such a substantial way." (39)

One of the most perceptive accounts of Gurdjieff's work with individuals and groups in the period following the Second World War is Annie Lou Staveley's *Memories of*

*Gurdjieff*. Staveley studied with Jane Heap in London for two decades and, along with other members of the group, met Gurdjieff for the first time in 1946. Her slim volume wonderfully captures the atmosphere of Gurdjieff's Paris flat and his ingenious methods of teaching his students, often in subtle indirect ways that would not normally be recognized as a spiritual teaching. When asked by someone, "What do you teach?" he responded "I wish you to know that when rain falls streets are wet." (40)

Gurdjieff attracted a number of notable students from England, each of whom also worked with Ouspensky for extensive periods of time. Maurice Nicoll met Ouspensky in 1921 and studied with Gurdjieff at the Prieuré. In 1931 Ouspensky gave him permission to teach and he led groups in England until his death in 1953. He wrote hundreds of weekly papers, letters and commentaries for members of his groups. These were later collected for the five-volume *Psychological Commentaries on the Teachings of Gurdjieff and Ouspensky*. The volumes are very focused and exact in their description of Work ideas and provide many practical insights into how to work with the teachings. When the books were published in the 1950s they were warmly received by Jeanne de Salzmann, Gurdjieff's principal successor following his death. Nicoll possessed a brilliant mind and his own original books such as *The New Man* and *Living Time* are excellent and highly recommended. (41)

Kenneth Walker was a London physician who studied with Ouspensky for 24 years before meeting Gurdjieff in 1948. Walker was immediately struck by Gurdjieff's presence and vast knowledge. He wrote three well-received books, *Venture with Ideas*, *A Study of Gurdjieff's Teaching* and *The Making of Man*, which combine autobiographical content, important elements of the teachings he received from Ouspensky and Gurdjieff and personal reminiscences of the two men. Walker's intelligence, keen perception and good sense radiate throughout these books.

John Bennett worked briefly with Gurdjieff at the Prieuré and more extensively in the late 1940s, following many years of study with Ouspensky. He produced a number of books and numerous monographs on Gurdjieff and his teachings. His most significant books, and most useful from a Work perspective, are *Gurdjieff: Making a New World*, *Witness* and *Idiots in Paris*. The first is an in-depth, extensively researched study of Gurdjieff's life and mission, the sources of his teaching and a discussion of many of his most important ideas. It is undoubtedly Bennett's best book. *Witness* is an autobiography that includes a number of revealing chapters on his experiences with Gurdjieff. *Idiots in Paris* combines the diaries of Bennett and his wife Elizabeth to chronicle their life-altering experiences with Gurdjieff in 1948-9.

John Pentland was a member of the British aristocracy who met Ouspensky in 1936, but later admitted that his years of study with him had yielded nothing of real value. That changed when he met Gurdjieff in 1948 and they soon developed a fruitful teacher-student relationship. Gurdjieff appointed Pentland to lead the Work in America following his death; this he did with distinction, serving for many years as president of the New York and California Gurdjieff Foundations and guiding many pupils in their Fourth Way



studies. *Exchanges Within* is a collection of his talks and dialogues during meetings with students covering a span of many years. The emphasis is more on the practical experiential side of the Work than the theoretical underpinnings. Pentland's insightful analysis of the role of attention, sensation and flow of energy in the process of human transformation are especially helpful for the serious student.

Jacob Needleman is a professor of philosophy at San Francisco State University and a longtime student of the Work. He has edited two excellent collections of writings by direct students of Gurdjieff and others who have studied his teachings. *Gurdjieff: Essays and Reflections on the Man and His Teaching*, co-edited by George Baker, is an impressive volume of scholarly studies, discussions of Gurdjieff's music and Movements and portraits of personal teaching encounters with Gurdjieff. The latter form the heart of the book and include many previously unpublished accounts by pupils such as Solange Claustres, Michel Conge, Pauline de Dampierre, Marthe de Gaigneron, Henriette Lannes, Genevieve Lief and Henri Tracol. *The Inner Journey: Views from the Gurdjieff Work*, published in 2008, is an anthology of articles selected from the journal *Parabola: Myth, Tradition and the Search for Meaning*. The collection is wide in scope and interweaves the writings of Gurdjieff and Ouspensky with contributions by many senior Work practitioners such as Peter Brook, Margaret Flinsch, Christopher Fremantle, John Pentland, Ravi Ravindra, Paul Reynard, Michel de Salzmänn, William Segal and P.L. Travers. The volume is a significant addition to the Gurdjieff literature and shows the growing influence of Gurdjieff's ideas in the contemporary world.

Jeanne de Salzmänn is widely regarded in Work circles as Gurdjieff's greatest student. Before he died he entrusted her with the preservation and continuation of his teachings, a task she performed admirably until her death in 1990 at the age of 101. *The Reality of Being*, published in 2010, is based on notebooks of her reflections on Gurdjieff's teachings over the course of many decades, carefully edited by a small group of her family and followers. The chapters are arranged according to themes which give the book a unifying structure. *The Reality of Being* is unlike any other in the Gurdjieff literature and potentially ranks with *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*, *Meetings with Remarkable Men* and *In Search of the Miraculous* as a masterful exposition of the nature of 'work on oneself.' De Salzmänn makes only passing reference to the theoretical side of Gurdjieff's teachings, instead focusing on the central core of the practical work of self-observation, self-remembering, attention and flow of energies throughout the organism. In a sense the book is a contemplative inquiry into the nature of what it means to be fully human and a testament to the depth of her spiritual understanding and development.

## **Secondary and Ancillary Literature**

The last few decades have witnessed a proliferation of books and articles about Gurdjieff by people who in fact never met or worked with him. This literature falls into three broad categories: critical appraisals, scholarly and academic works and offerings by practitioners of the Work who studied with direct students of Gurdjieff. As would be

expected with such a wide range of written works, there is a great disparity in terms of quality, value, relevance and level of understanding of Gurdjieff and his teachings. Some books are valuable additions to the Gurdjieff corpus, while others make marginal contributions or are mere polemic axe-grinding efforts. Michel de Salzman sounds a warning about subjective, ill-informed commentators who distort the reality of Gurdjieff's teachings:

One cannot blame premature attempts for their failure to meet an almost impossible challenge, for their failure to convey, outside its proper ground, the metaphysical essence of the teaching, which is self-realization and the correlative capability for true action. But did those responsible for these attempts ever consider that naïve and pretentious intentions in this realm could very well engender in others thought and reactions that are deeply misleading? (42)

Books penned by authors critical of Gurdjieff and his spiritual perspective tend to be the most likely to offer mystification, distortion and misunderstanding to their readers. A prime example of this approach is Louis Pauwels' *Gurdjieff*, published in France in 1954. The book caused an immediate uproar in Gurdjieffian circles and not without reason. By turns sensational, biased, indiscriminate and implausible (linking Gurdjieff with Nazi ideologues), *Gurdjieff* can be assigned to the garbage bin of amateurish speculation. Years later Pauwels acknowledged the book's failings, calling it a "sin of youth."

A much more sophisticated critique of Gurdjieff and his teachings is *Gurdjieff: In the Light of Tradition* by scholar Whithall Perry. Originally published in the journal *Studies in Comparative Religion*, it appeared in book form in 1978. Perry writes from the perspective of the traditionalist school of René Guenon and Frithjof Schuon who disclaimed Gurdjieff's Fourth Way as contrary to traditional spiritual teachings. (43) Although on the surface Perry's arguments appear to carry weight, deeper investigation reveals a fundamental misunderstanding of Gurdjieff and his work and the book can be best classified as a polemic.

Perhaps the most interesting critique of Gurdjieff and his successors is *The Teachers of Gurdjieff* by Rafael Lefort, widely believed to be a pseudonym of Sufi author and teacher Idries Shah. (44) Gurdjieffians immediately attacked the book as a "distasteful fabrication" and "intentionally abusive invention."

The book relates the journeys of seeker Lefort in search of the source of Gurdjieff's teachings, concluding that they were of Sufi origin. Many of the events described in the book are factually impossible (Gurdjieff's imputed teachers were long dead by the 1960s when Lefort reportedly met them). But John Bennett insightfully argues that the book "is recognizable as a set of fables written to express a point of view and not in any sense a factual account." (45) A careful reading of the book reveals that Lefort regards Gurdjieff as an authentic teacher who was sent to the West to prepare the ground for a more comprehensive spiritual teaching appropriate for the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But Lefort also argues that Gurdjieff's successors created a rigid mechanical system of ideas and practices, based

on their incomplete understanding of his teachings, that conditioned people and prevented real spiritual growth.

Although Gurdjieff brought a complex, thought-provoking system of psychological and cosmological ideas to the West, his teaching is essentially experiential at its heart and can lose its meaning and centre of gravity when approached from a strictly intellectual or scholastic perspective: “When this background in experience is lacking, one is unable to give the Work ideas their real weight; they become abstract, lose their depth, and are manipulated more or less happily under the sole control of subjective appreciation.” (46) The academic mind has been trained to quantify, systematize and create taxonomic categories to explain any phenomenon under study. Practical, experiential study in a field is not a necessary requirement and when the scholarly approach is applied to esoteric and spiritual ideas it leads to an inability to properly value the subtlety and depth of these transformative teachings:

We must agree that in all fields ideas can be well conveyed by properly prepared people. It is, however, evident that in the case of “experiential” disciplines, which are normally included in spiritual teachings at a very high degree of sophistication, ideas taken too literally can only lead to sterile theorizing and distortion when their symbolic or practical significance is not understood. And we should not forget that the most important part of Gurdjieff’s teaching is necessarily conveyed under the cloak of analogy and symbolism. (47)

Although scholars and academics may lack actual involvement in a living school, their work is not entirely without value and may have a useful, though limited, function in introducing the teaching to a wider audience or clarifying certain ideas and concepts by providing a fresh, quasi-objective perspective.

Perhaps the best example of the confluence of scholarly expertise and genuine insight is Michel Waldberg’s *Gurdjieff: An Approach to His Ideas*. Based on a 1966 lecture at the Musée de l’Homme in Paris, the book presents Gurdjieff’s major psychological and cosmological teachings by creatively synthesizing material from *Beelzebub’s Tales* and *In Search of the Miraculous*. Especially helpful is his treatment of the complex structure and content of *Beelzebub’s Tales* by a detailed analysis of key passages from the book. Waldberg’s effort has been widely applauded and his book is recommended by many Work practitioners.

*Waking Up*, by well known transpersonal psychologist Charles Tart, is also a useful introduction to Gurdjieff’s teachings, especially his psychological system. Tart has a solid practical grounding in Gurdjieff’s ideas and integrates them with many current findings in the fields of psychology and psychotherapy.

A third academic book of interest is *Philosophy and Art in Gurdjieff’s Beelzebub* by Dr. Anna Challenger. The text is an outgrowth of her PhD dissertation and provides an in-depth and thoughtful analysis of *Beelzebub’s Tales*, Gurdjieff’s theory of art and the

possible sources of his teaching. Her Sufi perspective colours some of her interpretations but does not fundamentally detract from her generally intelligent insights and overriding respect for Gurdjieff and his teaching mission.

A final category of ancillary literature consists of works by individuals who studied with direct students of Gurdjieff. Many of Gurdjieff's pupils were very gifted in their own right, had assimilated the essence of his theoretical and practical teachings, and were given permission by him to teach others. They passed on their knowledge to a new generation of students who in turn have shared what they have experienced and learned. These books vary widely in quality and significance. Many reflect the "law of diminishing returns" whereby the transmission of a valid spiritual teaching is progressively weakened with the passage of time. But others have real substance and constitute a significant contribution to the Work.

Rodney Collin was a student of Ouspensky in the 1930s and 1940s who was given a Work task to reconstruct the system of ideas he had learned from his teacher in the framework of the natural sciences and historical record. The result was *The Theory of Celestial Influence*, published in 1954. Collin's vision in writing the book was to show the underlying unity and archetypal pattern of laws and influences at work at all levels of the universe. In his effort to harmonize the scientific world view with traditional esoteric teachings (principally those of Gurdjieff and Ouspensky) he explores the ideas of scale, time and dimension, the rise and fall of civilizations, physiological processes in the human body, and many other fascinating topics. Although Collin does not completely succeed in his task -- partly because the scientific knowledge available to him at the time has been expanded and in some cases superseded -- his ambitious book is impressive in its scope and vision and presents a universe imbued with purpose and metaphysical meaning.

Another author who has attempted to connect scientific concepts with Gurdjieff's teachings is Dr. Keith Buzzell, a physician and longtime student of the Work. His primary teachers were Irmis Popoff, who studied with Ouspensky and Gurdjieff, and Annie Lou Staveley, the founder of Two Rivers Farm in Oregon.

Buzzell has written two impressive books: *Perspectives on Beelzebub's Tales* and *Explorations in Active Mentation*. He cites as his inspiration in writing the volumes Gurdjieff's 'third oblongian striving': "To know ever more and more concerning the laws of World-creation and World-maintenance." The focus of his books is the vast cosmological teaching presented in *Beelzebub's Tales*, interpreted in light of modern scientific knowledge. The books are very challenging, offering original insights and a highly creative exploration of Gurdjieff's central psychological and cosmological ideas. Both books are accompanied by exceptional, high quality diagrams and illustrations, which illuminate the text and encapsulate the complex ideas the author so carefully explores.

William Patterson is a prolific writer of Fourth Way books and a student of John Pentland. Patterson has also written, directed and produced an award-winning trilogy of DVDs on Gurdjieff's life and mission. His first book, *Eating the "I"*, is a frankly autobiographical narrative of his involvement in the Work, revealing for its depiction of the tense, humourless atmosphere of the Gurdjieff Foundation of New York.

Patterson is a skilled and absorbing writer who is very knowledgeable about Gurdjieff's teachings and carefully researches and documents his books. At their best they are major contributions to the Gurdjieff literature. Notable titles include *Taking with the Left Hand*, *Ladies of the Rope* and his latest offering *Spiritual Survival in a Radically Changing World-Time*. However, some other books, especially *Struggle of the Magicians*, which is sharply critical of three of Gurdjieff's important students – P.D. Ouspensky, A.R. Orage and John Bennett – are less successful. The main fault of the book is Patterson's excessive canonization of Gurdjieff and judgemental assessment of Ouspensky, Orage and Bennett, by all accounts brilliant, though flawed, students. (48)

### **Biographies of Gurdjieff**

The would-be biographer of Gurdjieff is faced with a number of daunting challenges. The first difficulty, common to many biographies of exceptional people, can be encapsulated by the dictum "the lesser cannot measure the greater." This highlights the inherent problem for any biographer to capture in print a person of Gurdjieff's great complexity, magnitude and spiritual evolution.

Gurdjieff's own personal history also poses a significant challenge to a biographer. There is virtually no independent verification of any of the events of Gurdjieff's life before he began publicly teaching in Russia in 1912; the researcher has to rely on his own account of those years in his semi-autobiographical *Meetings with Remarkable Men* and other writings.

Factual biographical investigation and evaluation is also hindered by Gurdjieff's decision in 1930 to burn his passports, correspondence and other items of evidentiary value. Throughout his life he made ambiguous and contradictory statements about many aspects of his life, including his age and date of birth (scholarly opinion ranges from 1866 to 1877). Some believe that Gurdjieff deliberately "covered his tracks" as an integral part of his teaching mission.

Gurdjieff was also notorious for spinning wild improbable tales, playing roles and engaging in controversial, often shocking, behavior, much in the manner of teachers following the 'Path of Blame.' He was quoted many times as saying that "truth can sometimes be served by lies." Separating the reality from the "acting" and dissimulation is a major, if not impossible, hurdle for any serious biographer or researcher.

Academics and biographers have often turned to Gurdjieff's writings for valid autobiographical information but have been confronted by the very real possibility that many of the events described in his books are more "mythological" than literal:

Gurdjieff mythologized his life and so it is not possible to accept these events and dates as accurate. Each of his texts contain autobiographical material, but this is shaped according to the function of the specific text. Thus the roles that Gurdjieff presents himself playing vary in all four texts. Gurdjieff gives his readers clues to this unreliability, through anomalies and contradictions in his texts. (49)

*Meetings with Remarkable Men* has been the primary source of information about Gurdjieff's early life and his search for ancient esoteric knowledge. James Moore discusses some of the challenges confronting the biographic analysis of this book:

Gurdjieff confides an impressionistic version of his early manhood, 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. Well and good on the level of essential meaning. Yet judged by more straight-laced historical criteria the book is unhelpful. The disciplined biographic mind stands aghast at its contradictions and omissions: dates quiver and dance in the heat; the hero's footprints are lost in the shifting sand, and frequently enough the entire narrative disappears over the rim of some telling allegory. (50)

Biographers have also turned to students and followers of Gurdjieff for biographical detail, but with decidedly mixed results. Some who were approached were forthcoming and supplied letters, notes, diary entries and other generally unavailable material. But others presented a palpable barrier of secrecy and silence and were reluctant to share unpublished texts, be personally interviewed or questioned by correspondence. James Webb even charges the circle around Gurdjieff of withholding information, mystification and deliberate or unconscious distortion, creating serious problems for a biographer:

They result from a deliberate policy of obstruction on the part of some of Gurdjieff's followers. There can be no real quarrel with this, because these followers are acting in complete good faith, protecting what they see as the integrity of the ideas with which they have been entrusted. There is no reason whatever for someone to cooperate in an undertaking of which he or she may thoroughly disapprove. I have been refused permission to quote from certain unpublished writings, and it is also probable that a large quantity of potentially useful information has been withheld or suppressed. (51)

Even cooperative, well-intentioned students may be unreliable sources of historical information. Professor Paul Beekman Taylor argues that many of the accounts of Gurdjieff's pupils are biased, misleading, contradictory, speculative and in some cases pure invention. (52)

Despite these formidable obstacles there have been a number of well researched comprehensive biographies of Gurdjieff which, although not without flaws, contribute to a meaningful understanding of his life, teachings and spiritual significance.

John Bennett met Gurdjieff in Constantinople in 1921, studied briefly with him at the Prieuré and later more extensively in Paris from 1948-49. Bennett's *Gurdjieff: Making a New World* is not a biography in the traditional sense but has been creatively described as an "interpretive biography." He conducted original research with the support of Gurdjieff's family and close students and his writing is knowledgeable, informative and insightful. Even biographer James Moore, who is a frequent critic of Bennett, acknowledges the strengths of the volume:

His biographical contribution *Gurdjieff: Making a New World* is a noble failure: its geographical, historical, and linguistic allusions are exciting; it is unsurpassed in differentiating epochs in Gurdjieff's life; and it conveys a strong and restless interest in his purpose and evolving methods and paradigms. Bennett takes Gurdjieff's stature and crucial importance for granted, and develops his exegesis fearlessly – as though with an eye to a 21<sup>st</sup> century which has set Gurdjieff high in the pantheon of innovative thinkers. (53)

However, Bennett's book is certainly open to the valid criticism that some of his material concerning Gurdjieff's travels, sources of knowledge and life mission are purely speculative and coloured by the author's own subjective preoccupations.

James Webb's 1980 biography of Gurdjieff, *The Harmonious Circle: The Lives and Works of G.I. Gurdjieff, P.D. Ouspensky, and Their Followers*, has been surrounded with controversy since its publication. His 608-page tome was ambitious in scope, extensively researched, and scholarly and detached in its approach. Much of the content was based on original archival research and personal interviews with many of Gurdjieff's principal students and followers. James Moore complimented Webb shortly after the publication of his book for his "pioneer achievement." He wrote: "Accept my sincere congratulations on your attainment: the intricate research, the scrupulous drafting, the exciting new perspectives, your patient struggle against unprecedented delays." (54)

But others have not been so kind. Paul Beekman Taylor has accused Webb of factual inaccuracies, accepting rumor as reality, refusing to reveal anonymous unpublished sources, and misquoting and misrepresenting some of the people he interviewed. Critics have also assailed Webb for taking quotations out of context, subjectively interpreting Gurdjieff's actions and intentions, and engaging in wild unsubstantiated speculation.

Webb was strongly impacted and deeply troubled by his experiences writing "a definitive biography" of Gurdjieff and his followers. By 1978, two years before the publication of his book, he was exhibiting symptoms of schizophrenia and paranoid delusions. (55) In May 1980, shortly following the publication of his biography, James Webb tragically committed suicide.

James Moore's 1991 *Gurdjieff: The Anatomy of a Myth* is arguably the most successful biography of Gurdjieff. Moore had previously published *Gurdjieff and Mansfield* in 1980, which detailed the relationship between Gurdjieff and writer Katherine Mansfield at the Prieuré shortly before her death in January 1923.

Moore was introduced to Gurdjieff's ideas by Dr. Kenneth Walker and studied at the Gurdjieff Society of London with Henriette Lannes beginning in 1956. Moore has always been something of an iconoclast and controversial figure. He was even expelled from the London society in 1994 after writing an article in a scholarly religious journal criticizing innovations in the Work initiated by Jeanne de Salzmann and senior members of the Gurdjieff Foundation.

For his biography, Moore drew upon published and unpublished sources and conducted interviews with many of Gurdjieff's senior students. His scholarship and mastery of the English language is impressive and the book is certainly an interesting and entertaining read. Moore's writing style is unique and he even admits that while some readers respond "warmly" to his syntactic gymnastics, "others hate it." His writing is replete with obscure metaphoric allusions, witticisms and dry English humour. But behind the unorthodox stylistic veneer there is a solid foundation of conscientious scholarship and thoughtful weighing of evidence.

A more serious concern is the author's unapologetic lionization of Gurdjieff which clouds his objectivity. His portrait of Gurdjieff is overwhelmingly sympathetic, leading one reviewer to describe his book as "a hagiography" as he makes every excuse possible for Gurdjieff's sometimes outrageous behavior.

Ultimately, a definitive biography of Gurdjieff may be an impossibility or must await a new generation of scholars and students of the Fourth Way who can more successfully accomplish this daunting task.

## NOTES

- (1) Jacob Needleman "Introduction" in Lizelle Reymond and Sri Anirvân *To Live Within* (Sandpoint, Idaho: Morning Light Press, 2007), p. xi.
- (2) Michel de Salzmann "Footnote to the Gurdjieff Literature" in Jacob Needleman (ed.) *The Inner Journey: Views from the Gurdjieff Work* (Sandpoint, Idaho: Morning Light Press, 2008), pp. 165-166.
- (3) Kenneth Walker *Venture with Ideas* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1972), p. 157.
- (4) Kenneth Walker *Venture with Ideas* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1972), p. 157.



- (5) *Guide and Index to G.I. Gurdjieff's Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson* (Toronto: Traditional Studies Press, 2003).
- (6) Jacob Needleman "Introduction" in Lizelle Reymond and Sri Anirvân *To Live Within* (Sandpoint, Idaho: Morning Light Press, 2007), p. xviii.
- (7) "Editor's Note" in G.I. Gurdjieff *Views from the Real World: Early Talks of Gurdjieff* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1973), p. x.
- (8) A number of previous bibliographic compilations and guides to the literature have been published or are available on websites devoted to the study of Gurdjieff and his system. These include:
- Walter Driscoll *Gurdjieff: An Annotated Bibliography* (New York: Garland, 1985)
  - "Annotated Bibliography" (*Gurdjieff International Review*, 1998) [www.gurdjieff.org/bibliography4.htm](http://www.gurdjieff.org/bibliography4.htm)
  - James Moore "Gurdjieff: The Man and the Literature" (*Gurdjieff International Review*, Fall 1998, Vol. II No. 1) [www.gurdjieff.org/moore1.htm](http://www.gurdjieff.org/moore1.htm)
  - Walter Driscoll "An Introduction to the Writings of G.I. Gurdjieff" (*Gurdjieff International Review*, Fall 1999, Vol. III No. 1) [www.gurdjieff.org/driscoll3.htm](http://www.gurdjieff.org/driscoll3.htm)
  - Michel de Salzmann "Footnote to the Gurdjieff Literature" in Jacob Needleman (ed.) *The Inner Journey: Views from the Gurdjieff Work* (Sandpoint, Idaho: Morning Light Press, 2008)
- (9) G.I. Gurdjieff *Life is Real Only Then, When "I Am"* (New York: Triangle Editions, 1975), p. 4.
- (10) James Webb *The Harmonious Circle: The Lives and Work of G.I. Gurdjieff, P.D. Ouspensky, and Their Followers* (Boston: Shambhala, 1987), p. 430.
- (11) C.S. Nott *Journey Through This World* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1969), p. 242.
- (12) Jessmin and Dushka Howarth *It's Up to Ourselves: A Mother, A Daughter, and Gurdjieff* (New York: Gurdjieff Heritage Society, 2008), p. xiv.
- (13) Jacob Needleman (ed.) "Introduction" to *The Inner Journey: Views from the Gurdjieff Work* (Sandpoint, Idaho: Morning Light Press, 2008), pp. xxi-xxii.
- (14) James Moore *Gurdjieff: The Anatomy of a Myth* (Rockport, Massachusetts: Element Books, 1991), p. 249.

- (15) G.I. Gurdjieff *Life is Real Only Then, When "I Am"* (New York: Triangle Editions, 1975), p. 50.
- (16) Terry Winter Owens and Suzanne Smith "A Commentary on *Beelzebub's Tales*" (*Gurdjieff International Review*, Winter 1997/1998, Vol. I No. 2) [www.gurdjieff.org/owens1.htm](http://www.gurdjieff.org/owens1.htm)
- (17) P.D. Ouspensky *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1949), p. 279.
- (18) James Webb *The Harmonious Circle: The Lives and Work of G.I. Gurdjieff, P.D. Ouspensky, and Their Followers* (Boston: Shambhala, 1987), pp. 310-311.
- (19) Anna Challenger *Philosophy and Art in Gurdjieff's Beelzebub* (Amsterdam: Rodopi Press, 2002), p. 74.
- (20) G.I. Gurdjieff "On Attention and Understanding of *Beelzebub's Tales*" (*Gurdjieff International Review*, Fall 1998, Vol. II No. 1) [www.gurdjieff.org/gurdjieff1.htm](http://www.gurdjieff.org/gurdjieff1.htm)
- (21) A.L. Staveley "Commentary on *Beelzebub's Tales*" (*Gurdjieff International Review*, Spring 1999, Vol. II No. 3) [www.gurdjieff.org/staveley2.htm](http://www.gurdjieff.org/staveley2.htm)
- (22) Dust cover of G.I. Gurdjieff *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson* (New York: Viking Arkana, 1992).
- (23) A number of insightful commentaries on *Beelzebub's Tales* have been published or are available on the Internet. They are useful to anyone approaching this difficult text, providing a basic orientation to Gurdjieff's unusual language and challenging ideas:
- A.R. Orage "Commentary on *Beelzebub's Tales*" in C.S. Nott *Teachings of Gurdjieff: The Journal of a Pupil* (York Beach, Maine: Samuel Weiser, 1962)
  - Kenneth Walker "A Commentary on All and Everything" in *The Making of Man* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963)
  - John Bennett "Gurdjieff's Style and Terminology" in *Gurdjieff: Making a New World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973)
  - John Bennett *Talks on Beelzebub's Tales* (Sherborne: Coombe Springs Press, 1977)
  - Michel Waldberg *Gurdjieff: An Approach to His Ideas* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981)

- Henri Tracol “Thus Spake Beelzebub” *The Taste For Things That Are True* (Dorset, England: Element Books, 1994)
- Terry Winter Owens and Suzanne Smith “Commentary on Beelzebub's Tales.” (*Gurdjieff International Review*, Winter 1997/1998, Vol. I. No. 2)  
[www.gurdjieff.org/owens1.htm](http://www.gurdjieff.org/owens1.htm)
- Terry Winter Owens “The Struggle to ‘Fathom the Gist’ of *Beelzebub’s Tales*” (*Gurdjieff International Review*, Winter 1997/1998, Vol. I No. 2)  
[www.gurdjieff.org/owens3.htm](http://www.gurdjieff.org/owens3.htm)
- John Bennett “Gurdjieff’s All and Everything: A Study by J.G. Bennett” (*Gurdjieff International Review*, Spring 1999, Vol. II No. 3)  
[www.gurdjieff.org/bennett3.htm](http://www.gurdjieff.org/bennett3.htm)
- Manuel Rainoird “Beelzebub, A Master Stroke.” (*Gurdjieff International Review*, Spring 2000, Vol. III No. 2) [www.gurdjieff.org/rainoird.htm](http://www.gurdjieff.org/rainoird.htm)
- Anna Challenger *Philosophy and Art in Gurdjieff’s Beelzebub* (Amsterdam: Rodopi Press, 2002)

(24) Terry Winter Owens “A Commentary on *Meetings with Remarkable Men*”  
[www.gurdjieff.org/owens2.htm](http://www.gurdjieff.org/owens2.htm)

(25) In his biography *The Harmonious Circle: The Lives and Work of G.I. Gurdjieff, P.D. Ouspensky, and Their Followers* (Boston: Shambhala, 1987), p. 544, James Webb discusses this question:

At Gurdjieff’s death the Third Series was left in a fragmentary state. Two chapters alone seem to have been completed, and others exist only in note form. A chapter on “The Four Bodies of Man” which Gurdjieff announced in *Meetings with Remarkable Men* is said to have been destroyed by the author himself. What remains of the Third Series is too incomplete to give any real idea of Gurdjieff’s intentions for the book.

(26) Jeanne de Salzmann “Foreword” to *Life is Real Only then, When “I Am”* (New York: Triangle Editions, 1975), p. xi.

(27) Jeanne de Salzmann “Foreword” to *Life is Real Only then, When “I Am”* (New York: Triangle Editions, 1975), pp. xiii-xiv.

(28) Jeanne de Salzmann “Foreword” to *Views From the Real World: Early Talks of Gurdjieff* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1973), p. vii.

- (29) Michel de Salzman "Footnote to the Gurdjieff Literature" in Jacob Needleman (ed.) *The Inner Journey: Views from the Gurdjieff Work* (Sandpoint, Idaho: Morning Light Press, 2008), p 172.
- (30) John Bennett *Gurdjieff: Making a New World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 3.
- (31) John Bennett *Gurdjieff: Making a New World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), pp. 1-2.
- (32) See the web document by Paul Beekman Taylor "Inventors of Gurdjieff"  
[www.gurdjieff.org/taylor1.htm](http://www.gurdjieff.org/taylor1.htm)
- (33) Michel de Salzman "Footnote to the Gurdjieff Literature" in Jacob Needleman (ed.) *The Inner Journey: Views from the Gurdjieff Work* (Sandpoint, Idaho: Morning Light Press, 2008), pp. 171-2.
- (34) A number of students have written about this "unknowable" aspect of Gurdjieff:
- P.D. Ouspensky: "Our feelings of this 'acting' in G. was exceptionally strong. Among ourselves we often said we never saw him and never would."
  - Margaret Anderson: "Gurdjieff is not only unknown. Perhaps he is unknowable."
  - Jean Toomer: "I do not know G. I have never known G. I never will."
  - Sophia Ouspensky: "I do not pretend to understand Georgy Ivanovitch. For me he is X . . . No one knows who is the real Georgy Ivanovitch, for he hides himself from all of us. It is useless to try to know him."
- (35) G.I. Gurdjieff "Translator's Note" in *Meetings with Remarkable Men* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), p. x.
- (36) Michel de Salzman "Footnote to the Gurdjieff Literature" in Jacob Needleman (ed.) *The Inner Journey: Views from the Gurdjieff Work* (Sandpoint, Idaho: Morning Light Press, 2008), p. 172.
- (37) C.S. Nott *Journey Through This World* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1969), p. 243.
- (38) For an excellent overview of the group see William Patterson's *Ladies of the Rope* (Fairfax, California: Arete Communications, 1999).
- (39) Solange Claustres *Becoming Conscious with G.I. Gurdjieff* (Utrecht, Netherlands: Eureka Editions, 2009), p. 17.

- (40) A.L. Staveley *Memories of Gurdjieff* (Aurora, Oregon: Two Rivers Press, 1978), pp. 71-72.
- (41) *The New Man* (London: Stuart & Watkins, 1950) is a unique interpretation of the parables and miracles of Christ from an esoteric perspective. In Nicoll's own words, "All sacred writings contain an outer and an inner meaning. Behind the literal words lies another range of meaning, another form of knowledge." *Living Time* (London: Stuart & Watkins, 1952) contains a series of thought-provoking essays and reflections on the meaning of time and the different levels of reality existing in the human being and the universe. Dr. Nicoll draws from an impressive range of Eastern and Western metaphysical and philosophical traditions to support his arguments.
- (42) Michel de Salzmann "Footnote to the Gurdjieff Literature" in Jacob Needleman (ed.) *The Inner Journey: Views from the Gurdjieff Work* (Sandpoint, Idaho: Morning Light Press, 2008), p. 164.
- (43) Frithjof Schuon and René Guénon are associated with a metaphysical school sometimes referred to as the 'Primordial Tradition.' They believed that authentic spiritual transmission could only take place through initiation into a formal religious tradition like Christianity or Islam. Gurdjieff's unorthodox approach and unconventional behaviour were anathema to René Guénon and his followers and subject to their frequent criticisms and attack.
- (44) Idries Shah has come under attack by a number of Gurdjieff's followers, none more virulent than James Moore ("Neo-Sufism: The Case of Idries Shah" *Religion Today* Vol. 3(3), 1986, pp. 4-8). Ironically, many of the accusations hurled by Moore at Shah (misdirection, dissimulation, obfuscation) could also apply to Gurdjieff. For a more balanced and nuanced critique of Idries Shah and his work see Yannis Toussulis *Sufism and the Way of Blame: Hidden Sources of a Sacred Psychology* (Wheaton, Illinois: Quest Books, 2010). In fairness to Shah his numerous books of Sufi teachings -- especially his collections of traditional teaching stories and Mulla Nasrudin tales -- are highly regarded by many students and teachers from a wide variety of spiritual traditions.
- (45) John Bennett *Gurdjieff: Making a New World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 81.
- (46) Michel de Salzmann "Footnote to the Gurdjieff Literature" in Jacob Needleman (ed.) *The Inner Journey: Views from the Gurdjieff Work* (Sandpoint, Idaho: Morning Light Press, 2008), p. 168.
- (47) Michel de Salzmann "Footnote to the Gurdjieff Literature" in Jacob Needleman (ed.) *The Inner Journey: Views from the Gurdjieff Work* (Sandpoint, Idaho: Morning Light Press, 2008), p. 169.

- (48) Patterson is not without his detractors and has a controversial reputation in Work circles. He has been accused of self-inflation and excessive self-promotion through his website, book advertising, public seminars and workshops, DVDs and in-house journal. Patterson routinely criticizes and attacks other spiritual teachers and teachings, lionizes Gurdjieff as a “Messenger from Above,” implying he is at the level of Jesus, Buddha and Mohammed. And he characterizes Gurdjieff’s magnum opus *All and Everything* as the last great spiritual message in a line that includes the Koran, Old and New Testaments, the Rig-Veda and other sacred texts. Such pronouncements diminish his stature as a writer and call into question his spiritual authority as a self-appointed teacher of the Fourth Way.
- (49) Sophia Wellbeloved *Gurdjieff: The Key Concepts* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 21.
- (50) James Moore *Gurdjieff: The Anatomy of a Myth* (Rockport, Massachusetts: Element Books, 1991), p. 24.
- (51) James Webb *The Harmonious Circle: The Lives and Work of G.I. Gurdjieff, P.D. Ouspensky, and Their Followers* (Boston: Shambhala, 1987), p. 13.
- (52) See the web document by Paul Beekman Taylor “Inventors of Gurdjieff”  
[www.gurdjieff.org/taylor1.htm](http://www.gurdjieff.org/taylor1.htm)
- (53) See the web document by James Moore “Gurdjieff: A Biographer Digresses”  
[www.Gurdjieff-Bibliography.com](http://www.Gurdjieff-Bibliography.com)
- (54) See the web document by James Moore “Gurdjieff: A Biographer Digresses”  
[www.Gurdjieff-Bibliography.com](http://www.Gurdjieff-Bibliography.com)
- (55) Hints of Webb’s precarious mental state can be surmised from the Preface to his book:

It eventually became clear that an attempt was being made to ensnare me forcibly in the sort of activities about which I had hoped to write from a detached point of view. I must admit that this attempt was temporarily successful, and I am certain that it greatly helped me to understand the nature of Gurdjieff’s curious disciples. Yet the ethics of the situation continue to puzzle me. At one point I suspected that I had been manipulated into writing the sort of book that the hierarchy wanted written: at another that the attempt to engage me in the Work was designed to ensure that no book would be written at all.