

Concordances between George Ivanovich Gurdjieff and William Shakespeare: A Personal View

Peter Dodd

Abstract

This article is a personal reflection on the powerful influence of William Shakespeare (1564-16126) and George Ivanovich Gurdjieff (c. 1866-1949) on the author. Attention is paid to the duo's interest in and use of language, and their somewhat mysterious lives and personae. In this analysis I focus on role-playing, the Ray of Creation, and the wrong work of centres.

Keywords: G. I. Gurdjieff, William Shakespeare, literature, transformation, role playing, Ray of Creation, centres

Introduction

Gurdjieff was a very great enigma. Funny, I thought someone said that before, in more ways than one. First and most obvious is the fact that no two people who knew him would agree on who or what he was. If you look at the various books that have been written about G, and you look at his own writings you will see that no two pictures are the same. Everyone who knew him upon reading what other people had written about him feels they have not got it right. Each one of us believes they saw something no one else saw. This is no doubt true. This is due to the peculiar habit he had of hiding himself, of appearing to be something than that he really was.¹

Two statues, weighing an estimated 700 tonnes each stand against a backdrop of desert hills; they are 70 feet (20 meters) tall, and are known as the Colossi of Memnon. They are situated on the flood plain in modern Luxor, Egypt (ancient Thebes), on the Nile River, hard by the Valley of the Kings. They were the guardians of the now destroyed Ramesseum mortuary temple, and represent Amenhotep III, who was born around 1400 BCE and died around 1350 BCE. The huge blocks of stone were brought north from a quarry near Heliopolis, some 650 kilometres away, and were erected about 3500 years ago. They dominate the flood plain and the landscape. Early in the nineteenth century, an Italian explorer, tomb raider, and circus strong man, Giovanni Battista Belzoni, stole a huge statue from the mortuary temple site, which he sold to the nascent British Museum.² This inspired Percy Bysshe Shelley's (1792-1822) sonnet, 'Ozymandias' (Ozymandias is the Hellenized form of the forename of Ramesses II, Usermaatre).³ Belzoni also filched the alabaster sarcophagus of the Pharaoh Seti I which he sold to Sir John Soane (it may be seen in Soane's Museum in Lincoln's Inn Fields).⁴

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¹ John Godolphin Bennett, *Gurdjieff: A Very Great Enigma* (Newburyport, MA: Red Wheel/ Weiser, 1984 [1969]), p. 1.

² 'Giovanni Battista Belzoni', *The British Museum* (2024). At: <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/term/BIOG53085>.

³ John Rodenbeck, 'Travelers from an antique land: Shelley's inspiration for *Ozymandias*', *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, Issue 24 (2004), pp. 121-148.

⁴ 'Sarcophagus of Seti I', *Sir John Soane's Museum, London*. At: <https://www.soane.org/sarcophagus-seti-i>.



Figure 1: The Colossi of Memnon (statues of Pharaoh Amenhotep III). Circa 1350 BCE (reproduced under Wikimedia Commons).

Shelley's remarkable sonnet remains a well-known piece of poetry in an era when poetry has lost much of its cachet and popularity, possibly because it evokes the sublime, and has a message cautioning against trust in worldly power and possessions:

I met a Traveller from an antique land,
Who said, "Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read,
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed:
And on the pedestal, these words appear:
"My name is OZYMANDIAS, King of Kings.
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away."⁵

In my life, I have been touched by many influences, from many different sources, but the two men that represent my personal 'Colossi of Memnon' are George Ivanovich Gurdjieff (c. 1866-1949) and William Shakespeare (1564-1616). As with the now almost abstract visual aspect of these vast and extraordinary statues, damaged and weathered by time, flooding, earthquakes, and man both Gurdjieff and Shakespeare are similarly shrouded, cloaked, and obscured; and yet, their strength and power are seen, and palpably felt by, and touch, me.

⁵ Johnstone Parr, 'Shelley's Ozymandias', *Keats-Shelley Journal*, Vol. 6 (1957), pp. 31-35, at p. 31.



Figure 2: George Ivanovich Gurdjieff (reproduced under Wikimedia Commons).

Much as with Gurdjieff and Shakespeare, these two statues for me represent two mirrored aspects of a single source. I find in both men concordances, where one reflects the other, and the other, reflects the one. Three centuries separate their lives; Gurdjieff's putative birthdate being c. 1866, and Shakespeare's being 1564. The first concordance I note is that Shakespeare was born on the 23 April, which happens to be St George's Day. Gurdjieff was reported to have referred to St George as his patron saint, and invariably pointed out he was a "very *expensive* saint," because "He is not interested in money, or in merchandise like candles. He wishes *suffering* for merchandise, an *inner-world* thing. He is interested only when I *make something* for my inner world; he *always* knows. But . . . such suffering is expensive. . .".⁶

You will, I am almost certain, recall that Gurdjieff gave a lecture at the Prieure, arriving some hours after the lecture was scheduled to begin, and, with his audience, not surprisingly, restive. Gurdjieff ascended the dais slowly, and carefully looked round at each of the assembled throng in the Study House, and said: "Patience is mother of the Will; if you have no mother, how can you be born?"⁷ He then left. I considered Shakespeare's Christian name. Can one of you remind us? William. I note that William is a portmanteau word, which when deconstructed reads "WILL – I AM." Is it a coincidence that 39 plays are attributed to Shakespeare, and Gurdjieff is credited with the 39 Series of Movements?⁸

⁶ Gurdjieff Electronic Publishing, 'Gurdjieff and Money: Part II Observations of His Pupils', *Gurdjieff International Review* (2005). At: <https://www.gurdjieff.org/material12.htm>.

⁷ G. I. Gurdjieff, 'Sayings', *The Austin Gurdjieff Society* (2024). At: <https://austingurdjieff.org/2021/04/21/sayings/>.

⁸ 'William Shakespeare's Plays', *Folgerpedia* (2024). At: https://folgerpedia.folger.edu/William_Shakespeare%27s_plays.

Both Shakespeare and Gurdjieff were, and are, ambiguous and obscured. We see them, as Paul wrote in the *First Letter to the Corinthians*, “through a glass, darkly.”⁹ Shakespeare’s life and achievements are often questioned, and the idea that someone other than William Shakespeare of Stratford-upon-Avon wrote the great plays and poems is often mooted. Gurdjieff’s life and achievements are similarly mysterious. Consider, for example the titles of biographies of Gurdjieff, by some of those who knew him: *Who are you, Monsieur Gurdjieff?* By Rene Zuber; *The Unknowable Gurdjieff* by Margaret Anderson; Gurdjieff, A Very Great Enigma by John Godolphin Bennett; and Kathryn Hulme’s *Undiscovered Country* (which is a quotation by Shakespeare, taken from *Hamlet*).¹⁰ Another quotation, from Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, was used as a book title: *Merely Players* by Claude Fayette Bragdon.¹¹



Figure 3: The Chandos Portrait of William Shakespeare, attributed to John Taylor, c. 1610 (reproduced under Wikimedia Commons).

Four centuries after his death academics and enthusiasts (presumably, with their rent paid for the next six months) still happily scratch their heads and wonder “Who did write the plays, attributed to Shakespeare?,” whilst writing learned tracts and purloining other people’s identities. Over eighty names have been suggested as authors preferred to the Bard of Stratford. The common argument is: “How could the son of a glove maker, living in the virtual geographical and agricultural centre of England, have acquired such a wide ranging knowledge

⁹ I Corinthians, 13:12, *King James Version*. At:

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20Corinthians%2013%3A12&version=KJV>.

¹⁰ Rene Zuber, *Who Are You Monsieur Gurdjieff?* (London and New York: Penguin, 1990); Margaret Anderson, *The Unknowable Gurdjieff* (London and New York: Penguin Arkana, 1991 [1962]); Bennett, *Gurdjieff: A Very Great Enigma* (1969); and Kathryn Hulme, *Undiscovered Country: A Spiritual Adventure* (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1966).

¹¹ Claude Fayette Bragdon, *Merely Players* (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2005 [1929]).

of the Bible, foreign languages, the court etiquette of the Elizabethan and Jacobean period, foreign geography, cryptography, folklore, heraldry, horticulture, the law, and legal terms, medicine and psychology, seamanship and war, just to note a few of the subjects he wrote on? How could he possibly have acquired a vocabulary of over twenty thousand words?” Related questions for Gurdjieff are: How could the son of a carpenter (smiles ... who else can I think of that had a carpenter for a father?) living in the back of a Central Asian beyond put together an astonishing corpus of thoughts and suggestions and deeds that comprise “The Work”? Caroline Spurgeon, a leading Shakespeare scholar, wrote in *Shakespeare's Imagery*, an exegesis of themes employed by Shakespeare, that his main attributes were courage, balance, wholesomeness, his manner was gentle, honest, and brave, and his overall character was “Christ-Like.”¹²

My maternal great-grandmother, Lily Hanbury (1875-1908), was a noted actress at the cusp of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. My grandmother told me she was in a cast with Herbert Beerbohm Tree, the Tom Cruise of the day, and performed in front of Queen Victoria in 1897, her Diamond Jubilee Year. She took me under her wing when I was a child (my grandmother, not Queen Victoria), and introduced me to her great love - the English language, and the words and plays of William Shakespeare - and, very patiently, she read many of his plays to me, often encouraging me to participate as a ‘actor’ in her readings. Of course, being aged about seven or eight, the plots, language and syntax of Shakespeare were far beyond my capacity to make head or tails of the plays, but I was given this advice which stays with me today – “Let the words stroke you, as you stroke Bob (my dog).” I remember clearly that we read *Hamlet*, *The Tempest*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Macbeth*, and *Othello*, and there may well have been others.

Certain aphorisms, observations, and parts of the texts began to have for a small boy a musical and rousing quality - perhaps distant bells, or pipes – and I recall being enchanted by, for example, this, from *The Tempest*:

Full fathom five thy father lies;
Of his bones are coral made;
Those are pearls that were his eyes:
Nothing of him that doth fade,
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange.
Sea-nymphs hourly ring his knell:
Ding-dong.
Hark! now I hear them,—ding-dong, bell.¹³

Word Pictures: Mentation by Form.

I recognised this literary ‘style’ in Gurdjieff’s *Meetings With Remarkable Men*, Chapter 9, “Professor Skridlov.” Gurdjieff writes: “Amu Darya, clear early morning. The mountain peaks

¹² Caroline Spurgeon, *Shakespeare's Imagery and What It Tells Us* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935).

¹³ William Shakespeare, ‘Song: Full fathom five thy father lies,’ *Poetry Foundation* (2024). At: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47418/song-full-fathom-five-thy-father-lies>.

are gilded by the rays of the still hidden sun. Gradually the nocturnal silence and the monotonous murmur of the river give place to the cries of awakened birds and animals, to the voices of people, and the clatter of the steamboat's wheels."¹⁴

At the end of the sixteenth, and beginning of the seventeenth century, Shakespeare was reaching his audience through the medium of the theatre, and his published poems and sonnets. He has done so, continuously, for over four centuries. Mr Gurdjieff published his *magnum opus*, *Beelzebub's Tales to his Grandson*, the first volume of the trilogy "All and Everything," in 1950, some three quarters of a century ago, expressing the hope that "One day *Beelzebub's Tales* will be read in churches and on street corners."¹⁵ Shakespeare has a considerable head start on Gurdjieff; so, as the blind man said in the adage, we shall see that which transpires.

In his works, Shakespeare is credited with creating some 1,700 neologisms; words like critic, manager, unearthly, unaware, lonely, rant, gloomy, kingship, majestic, swagger, generous, hurry, fashionable, bedazzled, inter alia appear in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.¹⁶ Gurdjieff's neologisms come a distant second at around 511, and Hanbledzoin, Djartklom, and Heptaparaparashinokh (let alone Krhrrrhrihihi) may have to wait a while longer to be entered in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Over the years, I have dragged friends to Shakespeare plays, who would complain, "I cannot understand what William Shakespeare is saying about, it is too complicated." That comment, too, has been levelled at some of Mr Gurdjieff's writings, you may not be amazed to hear.

J. G. Bennett reports a conversation with Gurdjieff in which he referred to Shakespeare as a "passive pederast" (which is a reasonable statement - insofar as I am concerned - when some of the 154 sonnets are reviewed).¹⁷ Sonnet 108, addressed to "A lovely Boy" runs:

What's in the brain that ink may character
Which hath not figured to thee my true spirit?
What's new to speak, what now to register,
That may express my love or my dear merit?
Nothing, sweet boy; but yet like prayers divine
I must each day say o'er the very same,
Counting no old thing old, thou mine, I thine,
Even as when first I hallowed thy fair name.
So that eternal love in love's fresh case
Weighs not the dust and injury of age,
Nor gives to necessary wrinkles place,
But makes antiquity for aye his page,
Finding the first conceit of love there bred
Where time and outward form would show it dead.¹⁸

¹⁴ G. I. Gurdjieff, *Meetings With Remarkable Men* (London and New York: Penguin Arkana, 1985 [1963]).

¹⁵ G.I. Gurdjieff, *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson* (New York: Penguin Arkana, 1999 [1950]).

¹⁶ Charlotte Brewer, 'Shakespeare, Word-Coining and the OED', in *Shakespeare Survey: A Midsummer Night's Dream*, ed. Peter Holland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 345-357. At: https://oed.hertford.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Brewer_2012.pdf.

¹⁷ John Godolphin Bennett and Elizabeth Bennett, *Idiots in Paris: The Diaries of J.G. Bennett and Elizabeth Bennett, 1949* (London and Newburyport, MA: Red Wheel/ Weiser 1991).

¹⁸ William Shakespeare, 'Sonnet 108', *Folger Shakespeare Library* (2024). At: <https://www.folger.edu/explore/shakespeares-works/shakespeares-sonnets/read/108/>.

Do the spiritual and physical relationships between Shakespeare and “the lovely boy” run concurrently?

In the same Bennett book, Gurdjieff is reported as accusing Shakespeare and Alexander Pushkin as ruining the English and Russian languages. Rather like Shakespeare, Gurdjieff appears to have been very, very, well informed. He reports that he had read every book on psychology and neuropathology in the Kars Military Library, grumbled about Madame Blavatsky’s myriad inaccuracies in *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), although I cannot find that those writing on him reported on his “reading habit,” or, as my mother put it to me, “you always have your nose in a book.”

Let us now consider some Shakespeare plays, and notice where I see that some of Gurdjieff’s and Shakespeare’s themes are paralleled. Some themes - not all, as time does not permit. I shall be addressing “role playing,” “the Ray of Creation,” and “the wrong work of centres.”

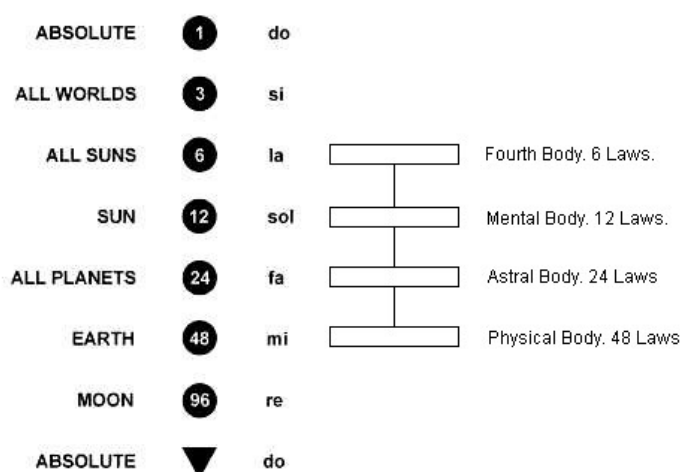


Figure 4: Higher Bodies placed in the Ray of Creation (reproduced under Wikimedia Commons).

Role Playing: Gurdjieff

It is generally accepted that all humans play various roles throughout their lifetime; some are determined by age and stage of development (the various stages of school, for example, for those between early childhood and adulthood), others by family structures and occupations (aunt, cousin, doctor, undertaker), and there are also particular spaces in which more visible and publicly-acknowledged role-playing (usually called acting) take place, like film sets and theatre stages.¹⁹ The idea of acting and the theatre as models for individuals and their journey through life Shakespeare remarked in *As You Like It* (1599), “All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players. They have their exits and their entrances; And one man in his time plays many parts.”²⁰ The concepts of inner considering and external considering, false

¹⁹ See Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Monograph Series, 1956).

²⁰ William Shakespeare, ‘*As You Like It*, Act II, Scene VII [All the world’s a stage]’, *Poets.Org* (2024). At: <https://poets.org/poem/you-it-act-ii-scene-vii-all-worlds-stage>.

‘personality’ versus authentic ‘essence’, and of bringing one’s chaotic, fragmented selves together in a ‘Real I’ are core to the Gurdjieff teaching. Using the imagery of performance and the stage, Charles Stanley Nott (1887-1978) wrote:

The sign of a perfected man, and his particularity in ordinary life must be that in regard to everything happening outside him, he is able to, and in every action, perform to perfection externally the part, corresponding to a given situation, but at the same time never blend or agree with it. In my youth, I worked on myself for the purpose of attaining such a blessing and I finally reached a state where nothing from outside could really touch me internally; and so far as acting was concerned, I brought myself to such perfection as was never dreamed of by the learned people of ancient Babylon for the actors on the stage.²¹

Gurdjieff’s pupils were aware of his capacity to play roles; for example, Margaret Anderson wrote a memoir of her time with him titled *The Unknowable Gurdjieff*.²² In part, her aim was to show that Gurdjieff was, in many ways, unknowable, and he was a master at playing a part, a part in tune with whatever was required.²³ For example, Fritz Peters, Anderson’s nephew who lived at the Prieuré as a child, describes a scene in which he entered Gurdjieff’s room when the master was apparently in a fit of volcanic rage whilst dressing down Alfred Orage. For a split second he turned to Peters, smiled and winked, and then continued his angry outburst at Orage.²⁴

Gurdjieff also played roles with his self-presentation, creating an Eastern mystique among his followers, playing on their knowledge of exotic locations and attraction to teachings that had as their source something other than mainstream Western ideas. Gurdjieff’s most important early pupil, Pyotr Demianovich Ouspensky (1878-1947), described their first meeting:

We arrived at a small cafe in a noisy though not central street. I saw a man of an oriental type, no longer young, with a black mustache and piercing eyes, who astonished me first of all because he seemed to be disguised and completely out of keeping with the place and its atmosphere ... this man with the face of an Indian raja or an Arab sheik whom I at once seemed to see in a white burnoose or a gilded turban, seated here in this little cafe . . . in a black overcoat with a velvet collar and a black bowler hat, produced the strange, unexpected, and almost alarming impression of a man poorly disguised, the sight of whom embarrasses you because you see he is not what he pretends to be and yet you have to speak and behave as though you did not see it.²⁵

²¹ C. S. Nott, *Teachings of Gurdjieff: A Pupil’s Journal* (1961). At: https://archive.org/stream/teachings-of-gurdjieff-c-s-nott/teachings%20of%20gurdjieff%20c%20s%20nott_djvu.txt.

²² Margaret Anderson, *The Unknowable Gurdjieff* (London: Penguin Arkana, 1991 [1962]).

²³ Carole M. Cusack, ‘Pupil Memoirs as Hagiography in the Gurdjieff Work’, *Postscripts: The Journal of Sacred Texts, Cultural Histories, and Contemporary Contexts*, Vol. 12, No. 2, 2021, pp. 223-235.

²⁴ Fritz Peters, *Boyhood with Gurdjieff. Gurdjieff Remembered. Balanced Man* (California: Bardic Press, 2005).

²⁵ P. D. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous: The Teachings of G. I. Gurdjieff* (San Diego, New York and London: Harcourt Inc, 2001), p. 7.

Gurdjieff in his lifetime played many parts, yet, for the most part, he chose to be an invisible man, presenting the appropriate facade at the apposite moment.²⁶

Role-Playing: Shakespeare

In his acclaimed tragedy, *Hamlet* (1599-1601), Shakespeare has the eponymous hero – after the encounter with the ghost of his father, in which he was directed to “Remember,” and to avenge his father’s death – say to Marcello and Horatio:

Here, as before, never, so help you mercy,
How strange or odd some'er I bear myself
(As I perchance hereafter shall think meet
To put an antic disposition on)
That you, at such time seeing me, never shall,
With arms encumbered thus, or thus head shake,
Or by pronouncing of some doubtful phrase.
As, “Well, well, we know,” or “We could an if we would.”²⁷

Hamlet chooses to show his “antic disposition,” and indicates that he is inwardly detached from the role, separating “I” from “it,” putting him automatically into the necessary state of self-remembering – “who is I and who is it?”

The villainous Iago, in *Othello*, role-plays constantly. He acts as Othello’s devoted servant, and to Rodrigo says, “In following him, I follow but myself. Heaven is my judge, not I for love and duty, but seeming so, for my peculiar end.”²⁸ Yet, the audience are informed of his motives when Iago utters the phrase, “I am not what I am” (a graceful inversion of Yahweh’s response to Moses, “I am that I am,” when Moses asks for God’s name in *Exodus*).²⁹ In the play, Iago orchestrates, by the manipulation of others, and his role-playing, the downfall of Othello, and the death of Desdemona.

In *Henry IV, Part I*, Shakespeare introduced Prince Hal, the son of Henry IV. The King grumbles that the Earl of Northumberland has a virtuous and honourable son, Harry Hotspur, whereas, his son, Prince Hal, leads a dissolute and wayward life, with low-life companions, led by the reprobate Sir John Falstaff, and have as their headquarters, The Boar’s Head Tavern in Eastcheap, presided over by the landlady and procuress, Mistress Quickly.³⁰ Prince Hal, in a soliloquy, proclaims that he is playing a role:

I know you all, and will awhile uphold
The unyoked humour of your idleness.
Yet herein will I imitate the sun,
Who doth permit the base contagious clouds

²⁶ Incidentally, the root of the word personality comes from the Latin *persona*, a mask (generally understood to be worn by an actor).

²⁷ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Folger Shakespeare Library (2024). At: <https://www.folger.edu/explore/shakespeares-works/hamlet/read/>.

²⁸ William Shakespeare, *Othello*, Folger Shakespeare Library (2024). At: <https://www.folger.edu/explore/shakespeares-works/othello/read/>.

²⁹ *Exodus*, 3:14. At: <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Exodus%203%3A14&version=KJV>.

³⁰ By the way, they are closed on Sundays.

To smother up his beauty from the world,
 That, when he please again to be himself,
 Being wanted, he may be more wondered at
 By breaking through the foul and ugly mists
 Of vapours that did seem to strangle him.
 If all the year were playing holidays,
 To sport would be as tedious as to work;
 But when they seldom come, they wished-for come,
 And nothing pleaseth but rare accidents.
 So when this loose behaviour I throw off
 And pay the debt I never promised,
 By how much better than my word I am,
 By so much shall I falsify men's hopes;
 And, like bright metal on a sullen ground,
 My reformation, glittering o'er my fault,
 Shall show more goodly and attract more eyes
 Than that which hath no foil to set it off.
 I'll so offend to make offence a skill,
 Redeeming time when men think least I will.³¹

As the death of Hal's father approaches, he takes his rightful place as heir apparent, renounces his former drinking companions, and to Falstaff says, "I know thee not old man, fall to thy prayers." In his now kingly role, Henry V defeats the French at Harfleur, his rallying speech concluding with "Cry God for Harry, England, and St George." St George is England's patron saint, as well as the patron saint of Mr Gurdjieff.

The Ray of Creation

Gurdjieff's postulation of the Ray of Creation parallels his Law of the Octave. There are eight levels, with each level under different orders of Laws, from the lowest to the highest. There are: the Absolute with 192 Laws; the Moon with 96 Laws; the Earth with 48 Laws; all Planets with 24 Laws; the Sun with 12 Laws; all Suns with 6 Laws; all Worlds having 3 Laws; and the Absolute, with 1 Law.³² I am under 48 Laws. As a three-brained being I have the possibility of being capable of lightening the Sorrow of Our Common Father. I may be capable of creating, by my work, a higher body - the Astral or Keshdjan body - and thence be subject to 24 Laws. But, I have the alternate possibility to devolve, to become food for the Moon, and thus be under 96 Laws. In Chapter 5 of *In Search of the Miraculous*, Gurdjieff is reported as saying that if we "lived" on the moon (and I have put "lived" in inverted commas) "our life and activity would be still more mechanical and we should not have the possibilities of escape from mechanicalness that we now have."³³

I view with horror the idea and possibility that I can "live on the Moon" whilst I live on the Earth. I see this condition sharply defined in the Stalins, the Pol Pots, the Hitlers, the

³¹ William Shakespeare, *Henry IV, Part I*, Folger Shakespeare Library (2024). At: <https://www.folger.edu/explore/shakespeares-works/henry-iv-part-1/read/1/2/>.

³² Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous: The Teachings of G. I. Gurdjieff*, p. 137.

³³ Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous: The Teachings of G. I. Gurdjieff*, p. 83.

Putins, and with no apologies to the Republicans, the frightful Donald Trump, those beings who are – nominally - our lords and masters. Further Gurdjieff says “all evil deeds, all crimes, all self-sacrificing actions, as well as the actions of ordinary, everyday life, are controlled by the moon.”³⁴

In my view, four “levels” are illustrated in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. 1) The level of “All Planets” under 24 Laws is the court of Athens, a city the Greek legends advise was founded by Theseus. Theseus, let us remember, killed the Minotaur, the half-animal half-man creature - a hybrid creature - the offspring of King Minos’ wife Pasiphae, who had offended Poseidon. The Minotaur was kept in a labyrinth, from which there was no escape. The Persian cult of Mithraism, which the Romans adopted, similarly regarded the bull as a symbol of man’s lower nature.

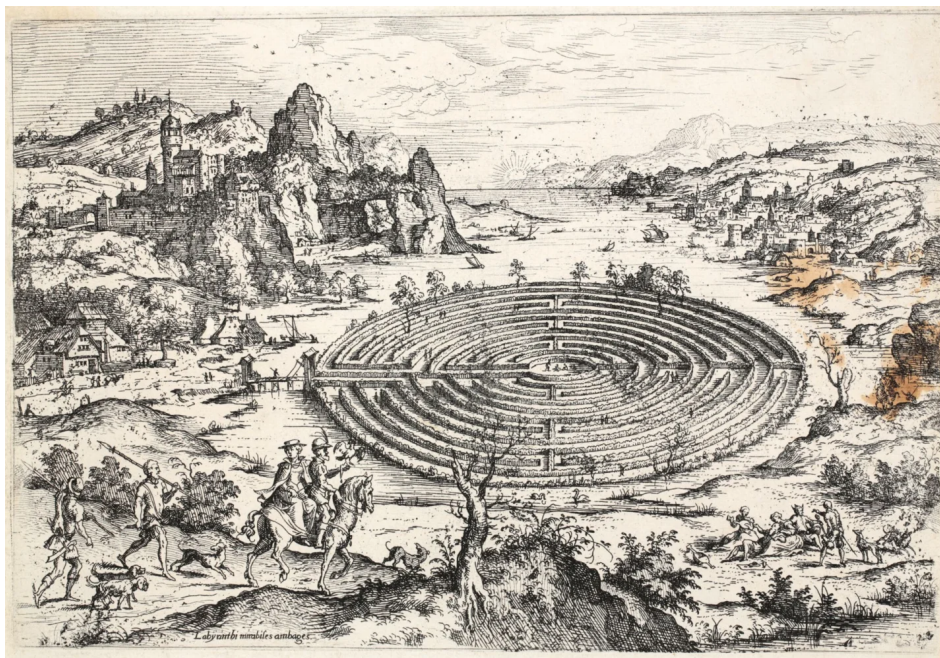


Figure 5: Hieronymus and Matthijs Cock, “The Labyrinth of Crete, c. 1551 - 1558” (in the public domain, accessed from the Museum of Fine Arts, Ghent).

After killing the Minotaur, Theseus escaped the labyrinth (with the help of Ariadne and her thread) and is venerated as a wise and just ruler. Gurdjieff, in Chapter 2 of *In Search of the Miraculous*, observes, “No one can escape from prison without the help of those who have escaped before.”³⁵ In the play, the nuptials of Theseus and Hippolyta represent the union of male and female aspects, where both parties are transmuted.

2) The level of Earth is under 48 Laws. On this level live the four young people, Hermia and Helena, Demetrius and Lysander, and Egeus, father of Hermia, who wishes her to marry Demetrius. His daughter is recalcitrant; she prefers Lysander. If Hermia does not obey her father, she will either be executed or sent to a nunnery. Hermia confides in her close friend

³⁴ Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous: The Teachings of G. I. Gurdjieff*, p. 85. As is, in my view, that which is jocularly referred to as “American cooking.”

³⁵ Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, pp. 39-40.

Helena, and subsequently in Lysander, and the four friends flee into the labyrinth of the forest.³⁶ The inconstancy of mortal “love” is exposed by the midsummer night’s dream they experience in the forest.

3) And perhaps there is an even lower level; perhaps the level of the Moon, under its 96 Laws. Who might be here? I propose the troupe of actors that Shakespeare describes as the “Rude Mechanicals,” a well-intentioned group of Athenian tradesmen, comprising Peter Quince, Snug the Joiner, Nick Bottom the Weaver, Flute the Bellows mender, Snout the Tinker, and Peter Starveling a tailor, who meet in the forest to rehearse the play they hope will be selected as entertainment for the marriage feast of Theseus and Hippolyta.

Shakespeare use the “rude mechanicals’ actions, and their subsequent play “the Lamentable Comedy and Cruel Death of Pyramus and Thisbe” (a comedy, please note) to mockingly mirror the “so-called higher level,” the level of the Earth, in which the four young lovers exist, a world of illusion, where the ephemeral is invariably mistaken for the real. This error also applies to Titania, the Queen of the Fairies, who is enchanted by Nick Bottom when he has been transformed by magic to have an ass’s head, demanding a “honey-bag.” The Rude Mechanicals are blithely and cheerfully ignorant, blustering and vain, and they entertain. Am I a Rude Mechanical? Discuss.

4) The Elementals comprise the Queen of the Fairies, Titania, her attendant fairies, Cobweb, Peaseblossom, Mustard Seed, and Moth, and Oberon and his capricious, mischievous nominal servant, Puck. Puck, despite serving Oberon, is his own man (or sprite) - Puck, with whom incidentally, I can identify - says of himself:

I am that merry wanderer of the night.
I jest to Oberon and make him smile
When I a fat and bean-fed horse beguile,
Neighing in likeness of a filly foal:
And sometime lurk I in a gossip’s bowl,
In very likeness of a roasted crab,
And when she drinks, against her lips I bob
And on her wither’d dewlap pour the ale.
The wisest aunt, telling the saddest tale,
Sometime for three-foot stool mistaketh me;
Then slip I from her bum, down topples she,
And ‘tailor’ cries, and falls into a cough;
And then the whole quire hold their hips and laugh,
And waxen in their mirth and neeze and swear
A merrier hour was never wasted there.³⁷

Puck has a line that could just as easily have been spoken by Mr Gurdjieff: “Lord, What Fools these mortals be.” When the midsummer night has ended, Theseus and Hippolyta and their courtiers arrive to prepare for their marriage and the four lovers are awakened - by an awakened man, Theseus - into a world where they may, just may, have learned something.

³⁶ William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Folger Shakespeare Library (2024): At: <https://www.folger.edu/explore/shakespeares-works/a-midsummer-nights-dream/read/>.

³⁷ Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (2024).

The Three Brains, Disconnectedness and the Possibility of Unification

The three brains in humans need to operate harmoniously to be a “Man” and to have one's own “I.” Gurdjieff conveyed an aspect of his teaching in the form of a metaphor of a horse (emotional centre), a carriage (moving centre), a driver (intellectual centre) and owner (“Real ‘I’, Master, or conscious human being”).³⁸ The three bodies/ parts of man/ hackney carriage are disconnected, as he explains at length in *Beelzebub's Tales*, and NOTHING WORKS PROPERLY. The horse is poorly fed and badly treated, the carriage in a state of disrepair, and the driver a pompous, lazy, self-aggrandising apology for a human being, more interested in tips, theorising and pontificating, having the insolence to assume the authority, quite wrongly, of saucily “adjusting the fulcrums of others” than taking responsibility for his immediate world. And the Master, True Will, is conspicuously absent. Ouspensky quotes Gurdjieff as saying, “in order to regulate and accelerate the work of the lower centres, the primary object must consist of freeing each centre from work foreign and unnatural to it. and bringing it back to its own work which it can do better than any other centre.”³⁹

Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, in my view, wonderfully examines the condition of discreteness, or disconnectedness of an embryonic Man. Prince Hamlet has returned to Denmark from Wittenberg to attend the funeral of King Hamlet, his father, and the marriage of his mother to the King's brother, Claudius, where “the funeral baked meats did coldly furnish forth the marriage table.”⁴⁰ The Prince, by his mother's marriage to Claudius, is deprived of his natural succession to the throne of Denmark. The ghost of King Hamlet is seen by Hamlet; he instructs his son to avenge his murder. How does Hamlet respond to this shattering advice? There is no obvious emotional reaction, but he insists on writing down his conversation with his father's ghost. “Remember!” is the adjuration uttered by father to son. Hamlet has entered the prison of his intellect - and, being self-sequestered from his lady, Ophelia, who to me represents an aspect of his emotional part, he is locked in his logical, rationalising mind – thus, his remark, “Denmark's a prison” reflects the macrocosm and microcosm of his life. The intellectual man is imprisoned in a labyrinth of theoretical illusions and possibilities.

He intellectually knows, but cannot “understand,” or BE. Vacillation is Hamlet's state. This is demonstrated in his great soliloquy, “To be or not to be, that is the question,” and later by:

And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pith and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry
And lose the name of action.

Shakespeare uses the device of a play-within-a play, and Hamlet organises the troupe of players to perform “The Murder of Gonzago” in which a scene shows a king being killed at his rest.

³⁸ It is important to note that this image is used by both Plato (in the *Phaedrus*) and the *Katha Upanishad*. See Robert E. Black, “From Charioteer Myth to Shoulder Angel: A Rhetorical Look at Our Divided Soul,” *Colloquy*, Vol. 10 (2014), pp. 36-49.

³⁹ Ouspensky, *I Search of the Miraculous*, Chapter IX.

⁴⁰ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*. At: <https://www.folger.edu/explore/shakespeares-works/hamlet/read/1/2/>.

Claudius storms off, and Hamlet then begins to be motivated to carry out his father's revenge. Hamlet is sent to England with two supposed friends, and he discovers they plan to have him killed. He has his father's signet ring, and with this ring as the skeleton key, begins to exit the prison of his logical mind. Returning to Denmark, he finds himself at Ophelia's funeral; although she is not present, this awakens his emotions. Hamlet is becoming a balanced three-brained being, accepting her sacrifice, and waking his intuitive mind. For me, this wonderful couplet expresses mine own view of the Gurdjieff work: "There's a divinity that shapes our ends, Rough hew them how we will."⁴¹

Horatio recognises the emergence of Hamlet's true and royal nature: "Why, what a king is this!" By the play's end, Hamlet has all his three bodies operating in harmony, and the Master in him is operating the coach, horse, and driver. Early in the play, Polonius gives advice to his son Laertes, advice as germane today as it was at the end of the sixteenth century:

This above all; to thine own self be true
and it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.⁴²

Hamlet's speech beginning "What a piece of work is man" is an adaptation from the fifteenth century author and humanist, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's (1463-1494) "Oration on the Dignity of Man." And Hamlet's speech beginning "Oh God! I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself the king of infinite space," show Shakespeare's familiarity with the writings of Hermes Trimegistus, which are foundational to Western esoteric thought.

In my view, both Will – I - Am Shakespeare and George Ivanovich Gurdjieff had very good leather to sell: "Now I'll unclasp a secret book and to thy quick-conceiving discontents I'll read you matter deep and dangerous, as to o'erwalk a current roaring loud on the unsteadfast footing of a spear."⁴³ Further, the mode of theatre as a process to untangle internal conflicts has received medical and psychological support from therapists such as Jacob L. Moreno (1889-1974), who with his wife Zerka developed the Psychodrama treatment model, wherein participants explored internal conflicts by acting out their emotions and interpersonal interactions on stage.⁴⁴

Conclusion

In *Meetings With Remarkable Men*, Mr Gurdjieff describes how he and Sarkis Pogossian found ancient manuscripts detailing the "Sarmoung Brotherhood" in an "underground chamber" in the ruined Armenian city of Ani:

⁴¹ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*. At: <https://www.folger.edu/explore/shakespeares-works/hamlet/read/1/2/>.

⁴² Shakespeare, *Hamlet*. At: <https://www.folger.edu/explore/shakespeares-works/hamlet/read/1/2/>.

⁴³ Shakespeare, *Henry IV, Part I*. At: <https://www.folger.edu/explore/shakespeares-works/henry-iv-part-1/read/1/3/>.

⁴⁴ Michele Augusto Riva, Luca Grassi, and Michael Berlingheri, 'Psychiatry in History: Jacob L. Moreno and Psychodrama,' *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, Vol. 217, No. 1 (2020), p. 369.



Figure 6: Church of the Holy Redeemer, Ani (reproduced under Wikimedia Commons).

Our worthy Father Telvant has at last succeeded in learning the truth about the Sarmoung Brotherhood. Their organisation actually did exist near the town of Siranoush, and fifty years ago, soon after the migration of peoples, they also migrated and settled in the valley of Izrumin, three days journey from Nivssi.... What struck us most was the word “Sarmoung,” which we had come across several times in the book called *Merkhavat*. This word is the name of a famous esoteric school which, according to tradition, was founded in Babylon as far back as 2500 BC, and which was known to have existed somewhere in Mesopotamia up to the sixth or seventh century AD; but about its further existence one could not obtain anywhere the least information. This school was said to have possessed great knowledge, containing the key to many secret mysteries.⁴⁵

Several of Gurdjieff’s pupils sought to identify the source of the Master’s teaching, looking for a literal, historical Sarmoung Brotherhood. J. G. Bennett was one, and also a formidable linguist. He identified the term “Sarmoung” with bees and used the metaphor of apiarists for those “who collect the precious ‘honey’ of traditional wisdom and preserve it for further generations.”⁴⁶ In Bennett’s last, unfinished, book *The Masters of Wisdom*, he suggests:

There is a persistent belief that there has existed, and indeed still exists, a hidden group of men who, possessed of wisdom above and beyond that of ‘normal’ human understanding, who have periodically intervened in troubled world affairs to restore harmony and inject a new spiritual potential for human evolution. His hypothesis is that a demiurgic intelligence has guided the affairs of mankind working through the agency of advanced human beings. He referred to these people as the Khwajagan, a community of Sufis who are recorded from the 10th - 16th centuries.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Gurdjieff, *Meetings With Remarkable Men*, Chapter V, “Mr X or Captain Pogoissian.”

⁴⁶ John Godolphin Bennett, ‘Is There an ‘Inner Circle’ of Humanity?’, in *Gurdjieff: Making a New World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), pp. 38-60.

⁴⁷ John Godolphin Bennett, *The Masters of Wisdom* (London and Newburyport, MA: Red Wheel/ Weiser, 1980 [1977]).

William Shakespeare lived mostly in the sixteenth century, and towards the end of his life, in the early years of the seventeenth century, a curious and secretive movement arose, the *Fraternitatis Rosae Crucis* (the Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross, later termed Rosicrucians). This group was introduced by Johannes Valentinus Andrae (1586-1654) in his work *Fama Fraternitatis Rosae Crucis* (1614) as a secret society led by enlightened men whose aim was to work toward a “universal re-education of mankind” based on ancient “esoteric truths.”⁴⁸

Do you, my patient readers, believe there is a divinity that is “shaping our ends” In Chapter 38 of *Beelzebub's Tales*, on “Religion,” Gurdjieff speaks of the five founders of the major religions, Moses, Buddha, Jesus Christ, Mohammed and Lama, as being sent by His Endlessness to this poor planet to assist in maintaining his creation and cosmogony. The precepts of all these teachers were modified and adulterated by humans, such that “Only-information-about-its-specific-smell” remains.⁴⁹

Just as the works of Shakespeare have endured, so I believe that the works of Gurdjieff, too, will endure. I see the fusion of Gurdjieff's and Shakespeare's *weltanschauung* in the latter's *As You Like It*, as noted above, where Jaques says:

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts.⁵⁰

Both Gurdjieff and Shakespeare, in their lives and works, indicated that the “players” - you and I - needed to cast off their acquired roles, roles imposed by life, and “to thine own self be true and it must follow, as the night the day, Thou canst not then be false to any man.”⁵¹

Edmund Spenser (1552-1599), a contemporary of Shakespeare, in *The Faerie Queene*, Book II gives a partial description of a particular mathematical shape you may be familiar with;

The frame thereof seemd partly circulare,
And part triangulare, ô: worke diuine;
Those two the first and last proportions are,
The one imperfect, mortall, foeminine;
Th'other immortall, perfect, masculine,
And twixt them both a quadrate was the base,
Proportioned equally by seuen and nine;
Nine was the circle set in heauens place,
All which compacted made a goodly Diapase.⁵²

⁴⁸ Frances Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001 [1972]). As an aside, Madame Blavatsky, co-founder of the Theosophical Society, refers to “The Great White Lodge of Hidden Masters,” hidden mystics who guide human affairs in her *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), which, as has already been mentioned, Gurdjieff sniffed at.

⁴⁹ Gurdjieff, *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*, Chapter 38, m ‘Religion’.

⁵⁰ Shakespeare, ‘*As You Like It*, Act II, Scene VII [All the world's a stage]’ (2024).

⁵¹ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*. At: <https://www.folger.edu/explore/shakespeares-works/hamlet/read/1/2/>.

⁵² Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, Book II, Canto IX, *Project Gutenberg* (2024). At: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/15272/15272-h/15272-h.htm>.

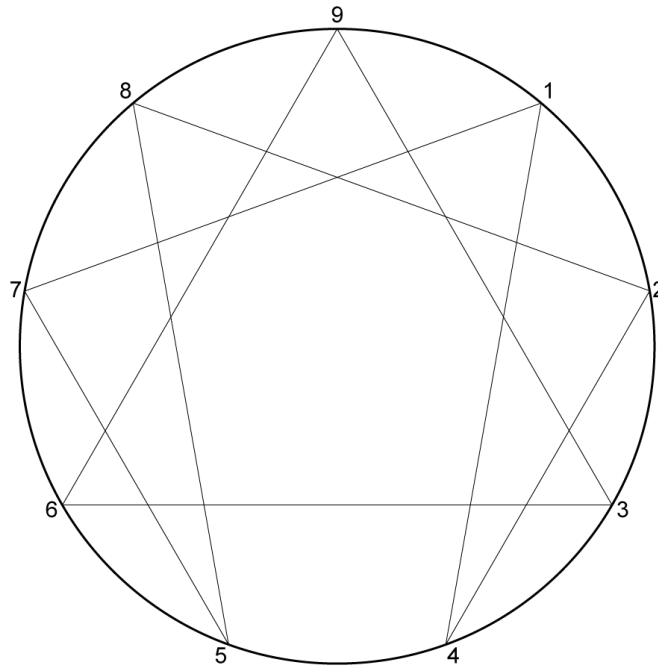


Figure 7: Enneagram by Sebastiaan van Oyen (reproduced with permission).

“Diapase” comes from the root “diapason,” which refers to the intervals of an octave; the consonance of the highest and lowest notes of the musical scale. I give this example to show that the study of Elizabeth literature can be illuminating for Work practitioners or anyone touched by the genius of Gurdjieff. For those desiring to read more, I recommend Peter Ackroyd’s *Shakespeare: The Biography* (2005),⁵³ and the ineffable Dame Frances Yates’ *Majesty and Magic in Shakespeare’s Last Plays* (1978), *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment* (1972), *Theatre of the World* (1969), and *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age* (1979).⁵⁴ Finally, Beryl Pogson’s fascinating *In the East My Pleasure Lies: An Esoteric Interpretation of Some Plays of Shakespeare* (1950) brings the study of Gurdjieff and Shakespeare full circle.⁵⁵

⁵³ Peter Ackroyd, *Shakespeare: The Biography* (London: Vintage Books, 2005).

⁵⁴ Frances Yates, *Majesty and Magic in Shakespeare’s Last Plays* (Shambhala, 1978); Frances Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001 [1972]); Frances Yates, *Theatre of the World* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1969); Frances Yates, *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001 [1979]). The final title will take you into the very exalted company of Giordano Bruno and John Florio.

⁵⁵ Beryl Pogson, *In the East My Pleasure Lies: An Esoteric Interpretation of Some Plays of Shakespeare* (London: Stuart and Richards, 1950).