

G. I. Gurdjieff and the Work: New Research

Special Editor: Carole M. Cusack

George Ivanovich Gurdjieff (1877–1949), originator of the esoteric teaching termed the Work or the Fourth Way, has in recent decades begun to receive scholarly attention and to be recognized by those outside his lineage as a major force in the modern manifestation of Western Esotericism, alongside his older contemporary Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891), founder of Theosophy, and Rudolf Steiner (1851–1925), founder of the Anthroposophical Society.¹ Key issues in the study of Gurdjieff remain open questions: issues remain in terms of the relation of the Work to religious traditions like Christianity, Buddhism, and Sufism; his development as a teacher is shrouded in mystery; and works by his pupils are multiplying and constitute excellent sources for academic research.² One sign of a developing and expanding field is that research topics diversify and new connections are made, extending beyond esotericism and religion to drama and literature, among other areas.³ The research in this special issue falls into three main categories: aspects of Gurdjieff's biography and the Work tradition; drama and literature influenced by Gurdjieff and Fourth Way ideas; and broader shifts in esotericism, both inside and outside Gurdjieff's teaching lineage.

The first article, Michael Benham's "In Which Year was G. I. Gurdjieff Born?," argues that documents exist that confirm that Gurdjieff's birth year is 1877, and that his own self-presentation as a much older man was a cultural construction life from his Armenian and Caucasian background, this is very powerful new research that challenges previous ideas.⁴ The second piece, David Seamon's "Thinking about the Gurdjieffian Enneagram Phenomenologically: The Case of a Phenomenology of Relationship," extends the application of Gurdjieff's Enneagram to a very detailed

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¹ Early academic recognition included Harry T. Hunt, *Lives in Spirit: Precursors and Dilemmas of a Secular Western Mysticism* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2003), 225–250. More recent important monographs include Johanna J. M. Petsche, *Gurdjieff and Music: The Gurdjieff/de Hartmann Piano Music and its Esoteric Significance* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015) and Joseph Azize, *Gurdjieff: Mysticism, Contemplation, and Exercises* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

² Michael S. Pittman, *Classical Spirituality in Contemporary America: The Confluence and Contribution of G. I. Gurdjieff and Sufism* (London and New York: Continuum, 2012); Johanna J. M. Petsche, 'Gurdjieff and Blavatsky: Western Esoteric Teachers in Parallel', *Literature & Aesthetics*, vol. 21, no. 1 (2011), 98–115; and Steven J. Sutcliffe, 'Hard Work: Locating Gurdjieff in the Study of Religion/s', *Journal for the Academic Study of Religion*, vol. 27, no. 3 (2014), 262–284.

³ Important work in these fields include Catharine Christof, *Rethinking Religion in the Theatre of Grotowski* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), and Jeremy Johnson, *Diane Cilento, Karnak and the Spirit of Performance* (University of Sydney, PhD, Theatre and Performance Studies, 2023).

⁴ See James Webb, *The Harmonious Circle: The Lives and Work of G. I. Gurdjieff, P. D. Ouspensky and Their Followers* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1980); James Moore, *Gurdjieff: The Anatomy of a Myth. A Biography* (Shaftesbury and Rockport, MA: Element, 1991); and Paul Beekman Taylor, *G. I. Gurdjieff: A New Life* (Utrecht: Eureka Editions, 2008).

analysis of Doris Lessing's novel *The Diaries of Jane Somers* (1984).⁵ The analysis of literature and the Work is a key stream in this special issue, and Seamon's careful unpacking of how the Enneagram can be used in literary criticism is exemplary scholarship.

Next is Joseph Azize's contribution, "Gurdjieff and the Traditionalist/Perennialist Schools," an exercise in the documentation of the relationship between the Work and another major twentieth century esoteric movement, Traditionalism, founded by René Guénon (1886-1951), another contemporary of Gurdjieff. The conclusion that Gurdjieff's method of contemplation is traditional but apart from that he is emphatically not is well-defended.⁶ This is followed by Cynthia Bourgeault's "G. I. Gurdjieff: Trinitarian Master" which is a companion piece. The focus here is Gurdjieff's Law of Three as a Trinitarian metaphysic, with the sources examined to demonstrate the truth of this proposition being Gurdjieff's magnum opus, *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson* (1950)⁷ and the unpublished exercises traceable to Gurdjieff's pupil René Daumal (1908-1944).

Martin Zwick's "Spiritual Exercises in Novarodok Mussar and the Early Work" explores Gurdjieff in parallel with his older contemporary Yoseph Yozel Horwitz (1847-1919). The Work has not been brought into relation with Judaism to date, and Zwick is careful not to claim too much, but documents some strong resemblances. David G. Robertson's "Sex and Subtle Bodies in the Work and the Gnosis" examines a little-known movement that was influenced by Gurdjieff, which he calls the Gnosis. This was founded by Samael Aun Weor (1917-1977), a Colombian-Mexican esotericist with a strong interest in sex magic.⁸ Next is Anthony Blake's "On What 'Esoteric' Could Mean in the Twenty-First Century," an extensive essay that covers material from the ancient world to the twenty-first century, building on many decades of Work practice and scholarship.⁹

The hinge of this issue is the hitherto unpublished play, *The Prophet* (1959) by Stuart Holroyd (1933-2025). This play is based on accounts of Gurdjieff's time in Paris at his flat at 6 Rue des Colonels Renard during World War II.¹⁰ He is transformed into 'Gurdensky', a spiritual teacher whose four male pupils are torn between the desire for spiritual cultivation and a yearning to join the revolution (only his female pupil Eva gives him her undivided loyalty). Gurdensky plays off both sides—the revolutionary Jaroslav Cotyn and the leader of the enemy troops, Captain

⁵ Doris Lessing, *The Diaries of Jane Somers* (New York: Vintage, 1984).

⁶ Joseph Azize, 'The Practice of Contemplation in the Work of Gurdjieff', *International Journal for the Study of Religion*, vol. 6, no. 2 (2015), 137–156.

⁷ G. I. Gurdjieff, *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson* (New York: E.P. Dutton and Co. 1964 [1950]).

⁸ PierLuigi Zoccatelli, 'Sexual magic and Gnosis in Columbia: Tracing the influence of G. I. Gurdjieff on Samael Aun Weor', in *Occultism in a Global Perspective*, eds Henrik Bogdan and Gordan Djurdjevic (London: Taylor & Francis, 2013), 135-150; Johanna J. M. Petsche, 'Gurdjieff on Sex: Subtle Bodies, Si I2, and the Sex Life of a Sage', in *Sexuality and New Religious Movements*, eds Henrik Bogdan and James R. Lewis (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 127-148.

⁹ Anthony Blake, 'Supplementary Essay: Understanding What is Esoteric', *Correspondences*, vol. 8, no. 2 (2020), 1-25. At:

https://correspondencesjournal.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/19899_20537158_blake.pdf.

¹⁰ Elizabeth Bennett and J. G. Bennett, *Idiots in Paris: Diaries of Elizabeth Bennett and J. G. Bennett* (Santa Fe, NM: Bennett Books, 2010[2008]).

Scriashev—against each other, and historical details, such as the lavish food Gurdjieff was able to source despite the Nazi occupation of Paris, are used effectively by Holroyd, who remembered enjoying “exploiting the comedic and dramatic potentials of the subject of Gurdjieff in war-time Paris while engaging with such questions as whether the essential change was political or spiritual.”¹¹

Next follows a block of articles that deal with various aspects of Gurdjieff, the Work, and theatre. First is Richard J. Nierenberg’s “‘I know thee not, old man’: An Esoteric View of Prince Hal’s Rejection of Falstaff, and the Monarchy of Individual Evolution” which reads *Henry IV, Parts 1 and 2* in an esoteric fashion to contrast the view that Prince Hal is unveiled as the king he always was with the alternative view that he develops throughout the play’s action. Hal’s banishment of his former close associate Falstaff is framed in the Gurdjieffian terms of the lower self being transcended in becoming a “new man.”¹² Catharine Dada’s “The Aesthetics of *The Empty Space* in the Theatre: Exploring the Writing and Theatrical Work of Peter Brook” investigate the distinguished English theatre director Peter Brook (1925-2022), who, with his wife Natasha Parry was a friend and pupil of Gurdjieff’s nominated successor Jeanne de Salzmann. Brook headed the Institut Gurdjieff in Paris until his death, and his writings on theatre are heavily influenced by Work ideas.¹³ The third theatre article is Jeremy Johnson’s “Karnak and the Spirit of Performance,” a highly original work that brings to the fore the Australian actress Diane Cilento as a distinguished pupil of John Godolphin Bennett (1897-1974) and an original and influential teacher in the Work tradition herself,¹⁴ at her property Karnak in far-north Queensland.

The twelfth article is Jon Woodson’s “An Esoteric Reading of *The Great Gatsby*: F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Allegory of the Gurdjieff Work,” which continues Woodson’s research into American literary cultural production influenced by A. R. Orage (1873-1934).¹⁵ Steven J. Sutcliffe approaches the subject of fictional portrayals of Gurdjieff in “‘I make a new God’: Maurice Conchis and (traces of) G.I. Gurdjieff in John Fowles’s *The Magus* (1965).” This study focuses on a cult novel of the 1960s, John Fowle’s *The Magus* (1968), and examines the ‘magus figure’ Maurice Conchis as a ‘type’ of Gurdjieff, adducing considerable evidence for a relationship between the two.¹⁶ The final article is Carole M. Cusack’s “Gurdjieff and the Angry Young Men: Stuart Holroyd, Colin Wilson and Waking Up in 1950s Britain,” which examines Holroyd and his friend Colin Wilson’s participation in the British literary

¹¹ Stuart Holroyd, *His Dear Time’s Waste: A 1950s Literary and Love-Life Memoir*, second edition (London: Obscuriosity Press, 2014), 243-244.

¹² Maurice Nicoll, *The New Man: An Interpretation of Some Parables and Miracles of Christ* (Santa Fe, NM: Martino Fine Books, 2019[1950]).

¹³ Carole M. Cusack, ‘An Enlightened Life in Text and Image: G. I. Gurdjieff’s *Meetings With Remarkable Men* (1963) and Peter Brook’s “Meetings With Remarkable Men” (1979)’, *Literature & Aesthetics*, vol. 21, no. 1 (2011), 72-97.

¹⁴ Diane Cilento, *My Nine Lives* (Sydney: Penguin, 2006).

¹⁵ Jon Woodson, *Oragean Modernism: A Lost Literary Movement, 1924-1953* (CreateSpace, 2013).

¹⁶ John Fowles, *The Magus* (London: Pan Macmillan 1973 [1968]).

movement “the angry young men,” and how their work is influenced by Gurdjieff, whom they both read in the 1950s.¹⁷

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¹⁷ Leslie Paul, “The Angry Young Men Revisited,” *The Kenyon Review*, vol. 27, no. 2 (1965), 344-352.