

GUEST REVIEW BY THOMAS HEAD

G. I. Gurdjieff

All and Everything: Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson.

Harcourt Brace, 1995 (reprint of the 1950 first edition with unspecified errata corrections).

Hardcover in dust-jacket, 1238p.

The subject here is not the book itself, which is a great classic of esoteric teaching, but how that book may reasonably and profitably be approached by a new reader. To comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable was at all times of the essence of Gurdjieff's method. So perhaps it is not that surprising when the first edition of *Beelzebub's Tales* made its appearance, in 1950, the book-reviewing establishment yelled in chorus, "Hey, what's that!" These loud, saponaceous¹ ladies and gentlemen would have preferred, I suspect, not to review *Beelzebub* at all: but since Gurdjieff had been for 35 years a salient figure on the intellectual landscape of two continents, and since he *was* taken seriously by people of manifest brilliance and high position in the literary firmament, the book could hardly be passed over in silence. So they proceeded, instead, to bury it under a Niagara of abuse. Looming large in the bulk of these early reviews were such adjectives as "puerile," "confused," "nonsensical," "long-winded," "tedious," "ridiculous," and so forth. What (it is reasonable to ask) did Gurdjieff do in his book to provoke such a torrent of vilification?

The question is worth raising because many a sincere reader, approaching *Beelzebub* with the greatest good will, has also been put off by it—and for reasons similar, if not quite identical, to the stated objections of these early reviewers. Compressed into a nutshell, these objections were fourfold: 1. *Beelzebub* is difficult to read. 2. It is written in no sort of a style. 3. It is honeycombed with new and strange words, whose meanings are not always apparent. 4. The book runs on and on, seldom (if, indeed ever!) coming to the point.

To the first indictment, one can only reply, "Guilty as charged—but so what?" For even the seraphic aesthetes who populate the highest literary circles have long since accepted, at least in principle, that a book can make large demands on its readers without thereby exposing itself is nugatory². For example, here is the opening of the third section of [James Joyce's] *Ulysses*: "Ineluctable modality of the visible: at least that if no more, thought through my eyes. Signatures of all things I am here to read, seaspawn and seawrack, the nearing tide, that rusty boot. Snotgreen, bluesilver, rust: coloured signs. Limits of the diaphane. . . " and so on, for another 14 pages. What I am suggesting is that you do not begin either *Beelzebub* or *Ulysses* by reading it. You begin each book simply by watching the words as they fall. Reading becomes possible only when you have mastered the author's method; and in *Beelzebub* as in *Ulysses*, it is the book itself that teaches you the method. In this respect if no other, the approaches to Joyce and Gurdjieff are almost identical.

As to the second indictment, the fact is that *Beelzebub* has a quite definite style—but it is an oral, as opposed to a literary, style. Such, indeed, is what we might expect when we recall that Gurdjieff's father, to whom he was always close, was an *ashokh*—a bardic poet in the oral tradition. *Beelzebub* was written as if to be read aloud; and indeed each chapter was read aloud, many times and to different audiences, during the six years that Gurdjieff needed to write the book and the fourteen more that he gave to its revision. Perhaps the trouble hereabouts is compounded by the fact that many sincere people do approach *Beelzebub* expecting what the author at no time means to give—namely, syllogism and logical debate. But on closer acquaintance it becomes clear that the book is more like an epic poem than a philosophy—or rather is an epic poem inside a philosophy. Once we have mastered Gurdjieff's method well enough to share with him—at the level of his feelings and emotions—the love and grief and fury that charge almost every word, we find that his poem contains both comedy to make us good-natured and tragedy to educate

us against pain; while the philosophy gives us, in equal measure, a highly *practical* wisdom to help us understand the meaning that human life can have.

The third indictment was that Gurdjieff resorts to new and strange neologisms which deliberately obscure the meaning of his book. In point of fact, he is striving for the utmost clarity. According to Gurdjieff, most of what we are pleased to call our thinking is only our suggestibility: that is, our tendency to rely slavishly upon the opinions of others while at the same time imitating their behavior. Now, this is really nothing new; every valid esoteric teaching says much the same thing, and every such teaching treats our suggestibility as an obstacle to be overcome—though the methods of doing so may vary widely. Thus P. D. Ouspensky proceeds by using, for the most part, common words, to which, however, he gives quite new and different meanings. Gurdjieff, by contrast, prefers to assault the chains of suggestibility by using long neologisms and other jawbreakers that haul the reader up short. These new words are formed mostly from Armenian, Greek, Russian, and Turkish—with a little Pahlavi and Sogdian thrown in to add spice. But in order to read and understand *Beelzebub*, no acquaintance with these languages is necessary. All of Gurdjieff's special terms are defined by their contexts: and in the course of working out their meanings for himself, the reader acquires the valuable habit of treating meaning as the active, and the words as the passive, force in the work of real communication.

There remains the fourth indictment—namely, that *Beelzebub* seldom brings any argument to an explicit point. Affirmed as stated. But it was ever Gurdjieff's method to *encircle* his meaning rather than to bring it to a point. And this is really nothing new or strange. Clever psychotherapists do it all the time—as a way of ensuring that their clients gain understanding and insight at a deeper lever than the merely verbal. Then there are the teaching stories of the Buddha and of the Hasidim, not to mention the parables of Jesus.

. . . . At bottom, I suspect, these indictments are merely the four faces of one huge complaint: namely that Gurdjieff's book is written in a way that compels us, his readers, to do some real work. Confronted with Gurdjieff's flat statement that *Beelzebub* must be read three times before it can be understood, the early reviewers reacted so violently that a reader might suppose they wrote their articles while foaming at the mouth and pawing the air with their left hands. But here, again, Gurdjieff was simply telling the truth. According to his method, there are three forms of attention: (1) mechanical attention, as when we scan the newspaper, "watching the words as they fall"; (2) drawn attention, as when we feverishly turn the pages of the latest Stephen King thriller; and (3) directed attention, as when we labor to follow the subtle and finely nuanced reasoning of Kant or Gauss. What Gurdjieff is saying is that *Beelzebub* requires all three kinds of attention, and not one or two only. In his view, whenever and wherever there is real esoteric teaching, the master is the active force, the students are the passive force, and the teaching itself is the reconciling or combining force. And in this dialectic, *all the initiative must come from the passive side*. That is why Gurdjieff writes as he does—to make sure that his readers have ample opportunity to exercise their initiative.

Everything I have written here applies exclusively to the first edition and its reprints, this being the only edition over which Gurdjieff himself had editorial control. There is currently on the market a second or "revised" edition, which is indeed smoother and easier to read. This I elect to ignore; and I do so upon the sufficing ground that when A writes a text, and B comes along and meddles with it, what you have is no longer A, but at best A plus B or A times B—or, as in this case, A minus B.

¹ **saponaceous:** adj. saponify v. 1 - to turn (fat or oil) into soap by decomposition with an alkali. 2 - to convert (an ester) to acid and alcohol.

² **nugatory:** adj. 1. Trifling, worthless, futile. 2. Inoperative, not valid.