

# Gurdjieff and Blavatsky: Western Esoteric Teachers in Parallel

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## **Introduction**

This article is concerned with the largely unexamined interrelations between the biographies (both factual and mythological), public personas, and teachings of Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891) and George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff (c.1866-1949). Although their lifetimes overlap in the late nineteenth century, Blavatsky and Gurdjieff never met.<sup>1</sup> The years that most obviously link them are between 1912 and 1916, after Blavatsky's death, when Gurdjieff was establishing himself as a spiritual teacher and formulating his teachings in Moscow and St Petersburg. At this time Theosophy was flourishing in Russia, particularly in these cities, which were major centres for the occult revival. It will be posited that Gurdjieff capitalised on the popularity of Theosophy by donning a Blavatsky-like image and using recognisable Theosophical terminology in order to attract followers in Russia.

Blavatsky and Gurdjieff were pioneers in reviving occult traditions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and in introducing Eastern religious and philosophical ideas to the West. Charismatic and controversial, both courted reputations as charlatan gurus,<sup>2</sup> imposters, and spies,<sup>3</sup> and they remain problematic figures, vilified by some while emphatically honoured by others. After allegedly travelling extensively through the East, they formulated their teachings and attracted groups of followers; Blavatsky founded her

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<sup>1</sup> Regardless of this, it is alleged that Gurdjieff delighted in telling an entirely fabricated story of how Blavatsky had fallen in love with him. See James Webb, *The Harmonious Circle: The Lives and Work of G. I. Gurdjieff, P. D. Ouspensky and Their Followers* (UK: Thames and Hudson, 1980), p. 36.

<sup>2</sup> Sophia Wellbeloved, *Gurdjieff, Astrology & Beelzebub's Tales* (New York: Solar Bound Press, 2002), p. xxv.

<sup>3</sup> Edward Sellon, 'Blavatsky, H. P', in *The Encyclopaedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1987), p. 246, and Webb, *Harmonious Circle*, pp. 48-73. Webb, *Harmonious Circle*, p. 255, argues that during the period of the imperialist 'Great Game' over Central Asia between Great Britain and Tsarist Russia, "Gurdjieff was known to have spied for the Tsarist government of Tibet."

Theosophical Society (1875 in New York) and Gurdjieff his 'Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man' (1919 in Tbilisi). Their teachings impacted significantly on the emergence of new religions and spiritualities, particularly the New Age movement,<sup>4</sup> and they left behind their own movements, with Theosophical and 'Fourth Way' groups currently spread internationally.

In line with essential principles in esotericism and Orientalism, respectively, that there exists secret knowledge transmitted through initiates throughout history, and in remote parts of the world, both Blavatsky and Gurdjieff attributed their teachings to the esoteric knowledge that they accumulated on their extensive travels in what were then regarded as remote, exotic and sacred locations of the world. Gurdjieff indicated that his primary source for knowledge was the Brotherhood of the 'Sarmoung Monastery', though he also pays homage to the series of 'remarkable men' who he travelled with and who he met on his travels.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, Blavatsky claimed that her primary source was not physical, affirming that the 'Mahatmas' of the 'Great White Brotherhood', a fraternity of ascended spiritual masters living in Tibet, revealed knowledge to her. For Blavatsky, the knowledge she received represented the ancient 'Wisdom Religion', the basis of all religions, which could unite all religions, and for Gurdjieff this was a 'Legominism', a method of transmitting universal knowledge from initiate to initiate.<sup>6</sup> This has led scholar Andrew Rawlinson to class Blavatsky and Gurdjieff as "Independent Teachers" as they do not rely for their authority on any external or exoteric tradition, but rather on their own appointment in the hierarchy. This is in contrast to spiritual teachers who have derived their authority from an already existing religious tradition. Rawlinson regards them, more specifically, as

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<sup>4</sup> Theodore Roszak characterises Gurdjieff, along with Blavatsky and Steiner, as the three "occult evolutionists" and Paul Heelas believes the Gurdjieff 'Work' to be a "key ancestor" to the New Age movement because of Gurdjieff's mechanistic model of humanity. See David J. Pecotic, 'Body and Correspondence in G.I. Gurdjieff's "Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson": A Case Study in the Construction of Categories in the Study of Esotericism', (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of Sydney, 2004), p. 36. This dissertation will soon be published as David Pecotic, *Higher Bodies: G.I. Gurdjieff and the Place of Materialism in the Academic Study of Esotericism* (London and Oakville: Equinox, 2012) [forthcoming].

<sup>5</sup> G.I. Gurdjieff, *Meetings With Remarkable Men* (New York: Penguin Compass, 2002[1963]), pp. 152-164.

<sup>6</sup> G.I. Gurdjieff, *All and Everything First Series: Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1964 [1950]), pp. 350-351.

precursors to the ‘Independent Teacher phenomenon’, which emerged more noticeably in the 1960s before developing rapidly.<sup>7</sup>

### **An Overview of Their Early Lives**

As Blavatsky and Gurdjieff revelled in telling fantastic stories of their early lives and travels, stories that their followers have since perpetuated, reliable biographical information is scarce prior to their forays into the world as spiritual teachers. What is generally accepted as fact, however, is that Blavatsky and Gurdjieff were born in the Black Sea region, an area of the world that could be considered as located between ‘East’ and ‘West’. This is often explained as symbolic of their attempts to reconcile Eastern and Western spiritual traditions.<sup>8</sup> Blavatsky was born in Ekaterinoslav or present-day Dnepropetrovsk, Ukraine, and Gurdjieff in Alexandropol or present-day Gyumri, Armenia, so both were exposed to the diverse ethnicities and religions of the region. Their early lives were unsettled while moving from place to place with their families. One key difference between their backgrounds is that Gurdjieff came from humble origins, whereas Blavatsky was an aristocrat. Her father was Colonel Peter Alekseevich Gan of the ancient von Hahn family of German nobility, her cousin was Prime Minister in the reign of Tsar Nicholas II, and her maternal grandmother, the scholarly Elena Pavlovna Fadeeva, was a princess. When Blavatsky was eleven her mother died, and she went to live with her grandmother in Saratov and Tbilisi, where she was brought up by governesses, tutored in several languages, had access to an excellent library, and was allowed to travel with her aristocratic cousins.<sup>9</sup> This meant that at times throughout her life the aristocratic Blavatsky had to make an effort to disappear from the public view, while Gurdjieff, due to his humbler origins, had to work harder to force his way to public attention.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Andrew Rawlinson, *The Book of Enlightened Masters: Western Teachers in Eastern Traditions* (Chicago and La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1997), pp. 27-28.

<sup>8</sup> Pupil Fritz Peters quotes Gurdjieff as saying that “unless the ‘wisdom’ of the East and the ‘energy’ of the West could be harnessed and used harmoniously, the world would be destroyed.” Fritz Peters, *Boyhood with Gurdjieff and Gurdjieff Remembered* (London: Wildwood House, 1976), p. 292. See also p. 158.

<sup>9</sup> Maria Carlson, *“No Religion Higher Than Truth”: A History of the Theosophical Movement in Russia, 1875-1922* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 38.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Washington, *Madame Blavatsky’s Baboon: Theosophy and the Emergence of the Western Guru* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1993), p. 175.

### **Their Early Lives and Travels Mythologised**

Maria Carlson, scholar of Russian history, mythology and occult movements, states that Blavatsky post-dated, predated, concealed, created and camouflaged “evidence” and loved to shock and astound.<sup>11</sup> Certainly Blavatsky had a vivid imagination and keen storytelling skills, as is revealed by her sister Vera Petrovna Iakhontova, who states that from a young age,

[i]t was [Blavatsky’s] delight to gather around herself a party of us younger children, at twilight, and after taking us into the large dark museum, to hold us there, spellbound, with her weird stories. Then she narrated to us the most inconceivable tales about herself; the most unheard of adventures of which she was the heroine, every night, as she explained. Each of the stuffed animals had taken her in turn into its confidence, had divulged to her the history of its life in previous incarnations or existences.<sup>12</sup>

Throughout her life Blavatsky continued to exercise her storytelling powers, masterfully fashioning for herself a formidable aura of mystery and intrigue. There are famous accounts that in her early life Blavatsky rode bareback in a circus, toured Serbia as a concert pianist, opened an ink factory in Odessa, traded as an importer of ostrich feathers in Paris, worked as an interior decorator to the Empress Eugenie, fought with Garibaldi’s army in Italy where she was wounded by sabre-blows and bullets, and was shipwrecked off the Greek coast. Her lovers may have included a German Baron, a Polish Prince and the Hungarian opera singer Agardi Metrovitch. Blavatsky claimed that she rescued Metrovitch from assassins when she found him dying in an alley in either Cairo or Constantinople, depending on which version of the story one prefers.<sup>13</sup> It is difficult to know which stories Blavatsky herself promulgated and which were invented by followers, though she certainly made no attempt to dispel them.

Blavatsky apparently travelled for a decade from 1848 to destinations including Egypt, France, South America, Mexico, India and Tibet. She claimed to have lived in Tibet for more than seven years (seven years traditionally being considered the period of apprenticeship for esoteric initiation), where she studied with ‘Himalayan Masters’ in their mountain homes and was chosen to reach the highest level of initiation.<sup>14</sup> It was during her travels that Blavatsky is attributed with cultivating her skills in levitation, clairvoyance, out-of-body projection, telepathy, clairaudience (perceiving the inaudible), and

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<sup>11</sup> Carlson, “*No Religion Higher Than Truth*”, p. 43.

<sup>12</sup> Washington, *Baboon*, p. 30.

<sup>13</sup> Washington, *Baboon*, p. 31.

<sup>14</sup> Washington, *Baboon*, pp. 32-33.

materialisation (producing physical objects from the ether). Carlson argues sceptically that Blavatsky's journey to Tibet would have been extremely difficult, if not impossible, even for a woman of unlimited means in the nineteenth century, of which Blavatsky was not. Moreover, Blavatsky would have experienced immense difficulty with communication in Tibet, as, although she spoke several European languages, she knew no oriental languages. Carlson points out that, although Russian letters and memoirs indicate that Blavatsky did in fact travel, this was strictly within the Russian Empire and Europe.<sup>15</sup>

Gurdjieff's early life is also contentious, and this was clearly intentional. In fact in 1930 he burned personal documents, including passports,<sup>16</sup> possibly to get rid of hard facts about himself. Gurdjieff's very date of birth is unclear, and scholars suggest dates ranging from 1866 to 1877.<sup>17</sup> There is a story of a trip to America when Gurdjieff was questioned about the date of birth printed on his passport, as this date was a time in the future. He replied to the officer, "No mistake... you go arrange."<sup>18</sup> One can know of Gurdjieff's early life only through his own largely unsubstantiated accounts found primarily in his second book, *Meetings With Remarkable Men*, first published in English in 1963 and made into a film by Peter Brook in 1979. It is no surprise that Gurdjieff biographer James Moore terms Gurdjieff's so-called autobiographical accounts "Auto-Mythology" and of "the nature of myth"<sup>19</sup> since Gurdjieff himself once said to a pupil, "Never believe anything you hear me say. Learn to discriminate between what must be taken literally and what metaphorically."<sup>20</sup> Similarly occult researcher James Webb states that Gurdjieff's writings

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<sup>15</sup> Carlson, *No Religion Higher Than Truth*, pp. 39-40.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas de Hartmann and Olga de Hartmann, *Our Life with Mr. Gurdjieff*, eds T. C. Daly and T. A. G. Daly (London: Arkana Penguin Books, 1992), p. 256.

<sup>17</sup> The most convincing date is 1866, as argued by biographer James Moore, researchers Tom C. Daly and Tom A. G. Daly, and Gurdjieff's daughter Dushka Howarth. See James Moore, *Gurdjieff The Anatomy of a Myth: A Biography* (Brisbane: Element, 1993), pp. 339-340, de Hartmann and de Hartmann, *Our Life*, pp. 260-262, and Dushka Howarth and Jessmin Howarth, *It's Up To Ourselves: A Mother, A Daughter, and Gurdjieff* (USA: Gurdjieff Heritage Society, 2009[1998]), p. xv.

<sup>18</sup> Webb, *Harmonious Circle*, p. 25.

<sup>19</sup> Moore, *Gurdjieff Anatomy of a Myth*, pp. 2, 319.

<sup>20</sup> C.S. Nott, *Teachings of Gurdjieff: A Pupil's Journal, An Account of Some Years With G. I. Gurdjieff and A. R. Orage in New York and at Fontainebleau-Avon* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978 [1961]), p. 75.

present great problems when they are treated as biographical material [as they are] laden with symbols and allegorical stories... Most of these characters [in *Meetings With Remarkable Men*] probably had no historical existence... but a rich supply of autobiographical experience from Gurdjieff's undoubtedly adventurous past went into their making.<sup>21</sup>

Webb suggests that one such allegorical story in *Meetings with Remarkable Men* is where Gurdjieff describes as a young man opening up his "Universal Travelling Workshop," making and repairing an extensive range of mechanical items. Webb suggests that this young 'workshop Gurdjieff' is symbolic of his later role in life as a kind of mechanic of the human organism, treating pupils like spoiled machines.<sup>22</sup>

Gurdjieff claims to have travelled over a period of twenty years<sup>23</sup> with a group of companions called 'Seekers of the Truth', whose principle was "never to follow the beaten track."<sup>24</sup> Gurdjieff mentions Turkey, Athos, Crete, Jerusalem, Egypt, Ethiopia, Mecca, Medina, India, China, Siberia, and Central Asia and Tibet, with particular emphasis on Islamic locations like Bokhara, Merv and Samarkand.<sup>25</sup> Unlike Blavatsky, Gurdjieff claims to have looked to the Middle East for knowledge, emphasising Sufi and dervish traditions. Blavatsky was, instead, mostly interested in Advaita Vedanta and Mahayana Buddhism, and Washington suggests that Islam was excluded from the Theosophical synthesis because it looked too similar to Christianity and Judaism to be sufficiently exotic.<sup>26</sup> Gurdjieff's accounts of his extensive journey reads like an adventure story that begins with him stumbling upon a collection of old Armenian books and taking them to the quiet Armenian city

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<sup>21</sup> Webb, *Harmonious Circle*, pp. 27-28. Even pupil P.D. Ouspensky emphasises Gurdjieff's vagueness regarding the details of his travels and questions the truth of some of his stories pertaining to them. See P.D. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous: The Teachings of G. I. Gurdjieff* (San Diego: Harcourt Inc., 1977), p. 36. Gurdjieffian publisher Sophia Wellbeloved makes a similar point; see Wellbeloved, *Astrology*, pp. 9, 12-13.

<sup>22</sup> Webb, *Harmonious Circle*, pp. 31-32.

<sup>23</sup> From available evidence Moore projects a chronological account of Gurdjieff's travels, giving the dates of his travels as between 1887 to 1907. The most intensive period for travelling is given to be between the years 1896 and 1900. Gurdjieff is then believed to have spent time between 1907 and 1911 in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. See Moore, *Gurdjieff Anatomy of a Myth*, pp. 31, 321-323.

<sup>24</sup> Gurdjieff, *Meetings*, p. 166.

<sup>25</sup> Webb, *Harmonious Circle*, pp. 41, 43. Ouspensky gives a similar account of the locations Gurdjieff visited. See Ouspensky, *Miraculous*, p. 36.

<sup>26</sup> Washington, *Baboon*, p. 204.

of Ani to study with his friend Sarkis Pogossian, a graduate of the Theological Seminary of Echmiadzin. In Ani they began excavating ruins, finding a pile of ancient Armenian parchments describing the ‘Sarmoung Brotherhood’, “a famous esoteric school which, according to tradition, was founded in Babylon as far back as 2500BC.”<sup>27</sup> In search of this school Gurdjieff and Pogossian set off for Kurdistan, and a series of largely unbelievable stories follow. He asserts that he could speak eighteen languages,<sup>28</sup> and that during his travels he supported himself by remodelling corsets, retailing pickles, repairing knick-knacks, working as a tour guide in Egypt and Jerusalem, and working successfully as a master hypnotist and magician.<sup>29</sup> Before arriving in Russia Gurdjieff also claims to have settled for four or five years in Tashkent, the Uzbek capital of Russian Turkistan, where he began life as a “professor-instructor” in “pseudo scientific domains” due to a prevailing interest in “occultism, theosophism and spiritualism.”<sup>30</sup> In these areas he refers to himself as a “maestro.”<sup>31</sup>

Like Blavatsky, Gurdjieff emphasised his travels to Tibet, where he claims to have travelled multiple times, underwent initiation,<sup>32</sup> and taken a job as a collector of monastic dues for the Dalai Lama, which gave him access to every monastery in Tibet.<sup>33</sup> Tibet was, and still is, a country steeped in romantic symbolism due to its perceived remoteness. Part of the attraction of Tibet in the period of Gurdjieff’s travels was probably the publication in 1884 of Nicolas Notovitch’s *The Unknown Life of Jesus Christ*, which asserts that in the library of the Tibetan Buddhist Hemis Monastery are copies of texts concerning the activities of Jesus Christ, or “Issa” as he is known in India.<sup>34</sup> Gurdjieff was familiar with Notovitch’s book as in Tbilisi he told Carl Bechhofer Roberts, a writer, journalist and translator connected with the *New Age* magazine, that Jesus had studied in a Tibetan monastery.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Gurdjieff, *Meetings*, pp. 87-90.

<sup>28</sup> Gurdjieff, *Meetings*, p. 116.

<sup>29</sup> Kathleen R. Speeth, *The Gurdjieff Work* (California: And/Or Press, 1976), p. 9.

<sup>30</sup> G.I. Gurdjieff, *The Herald of Coming Good* (USA: Sure Fire Press, 1988[1933]), pp. 20-22.

<sup>31</sup> Gurdjieff, *Herald*, p. 22.

<sup>32</sup> G.I. Gurdjieff, *Transcripts of Gurdjieff’s Meetings 1941-1946* (London: Book Studio, 2008), p. 100.

<sup>33</sup> Paul Beekman Taylor, *Gurdjieff and Orage: Brothers in Elysium* (Maine: Weiser Books, 2001), pp. 30-31.

<sup>34</sup> This provided Theosophists with an effective argument for the theory that all religions derived from the East. See Webb, *Harmonious Circle*, p. 527.

<sup>35</sup> Webb, *Harmonious Circle*, pp. 171, 527.

The claims of Blavatsky and Gurdjieff largely reflect late nineteenth and early twentieth century Western interests in anthropology, the occult, ancient cultures, and ‘the East’. At this time ancient Sanskrit materials like the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad Gita* were being translated, earlier interpretations of *kalpa* theory in the *Mahabharata* gave way to scholarly translations,<sup>36</sup> a Department of Egyptology at the Institute of Oriental Studies had been founded in Russia,<sup>37</sup> and new discoveries of Gnostic texts made available previously unknown spiritual records of other cultures. All this led to new research and a burgeoning interest in comparative religion, myth, oriental studies, and the Eastern arts. Further awareness of Eastern religions came about through the expansionist policies of Britain and Russia, who searched for territory in the East, and through the Russian wish to take India from the British and to annex Tibet.<sup>38</sup> This revelation of things Eastern occurred at a time when Russia’s established social and religious structures were collapsing due to industrialisation, which produced a wealthy capitalist middle class leading to social unrest,<sup>39</sup> and the rise of materialism, which dominated the second half of the nineteenth century with its scientific positivism, analytical nature and denial of supersensory phenomena and spiritual experience.

### **The Attraction of Blavatsky and Gurdjieff: Reconciling Spirituality and Materialism, and Integrating Eastern Spirituality into Western Thought**

Considering the circumstances outlined above, one could argue that the timely Blavatsky and Gurdjieff offered solutions to the century’s search for truth, new values and a sense of order<sup>40</sup> in two ways: first by apparently reconciling the growing juncture between materialism and spiritualism, and second by tapping into the West’s contemporary fascination with the East by working to harmonise Western and Eastern spiritual and philosophical ideas and values. In relation to the former, esotericism scholar Brendan French argues that modern occultists sought to usurp the rhetoric and vocabulary of the scientific rationalist paradigms of their era, and wed them to traditionalist esoteric discourses in an attempt to redeem the world from “the errancy of (Positivist)

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<sup>36</sup> Garry W. Trompf, ‘Macrohistory in Blavatsky, Steiner and Guenon’, in *Western Esotericism and the Science of Religion*, eds Antoine Faivre and Wouter J. Hanegraaff (Belgium: Peeters, 1998), p. 275.

<sup>37</sup> Paul Beekman Taylor, *G. I. Gurdjieff: A New Life* (The Netherlands: Eureka Editions, 2008), p. 28.

<sup>38</sup> Wellbeloved, *Astrology*, pp. 9, 18.

<sup>39</sup> Carlson, *No Religion Higher Than Truth*, p. 7.

<sup>40</sup> Carlson, *No Religion Higher Than Truth*, pp. 34-35.

materialism.”<sup>41</sup> Indeed Blavatsky used the subtitle “The Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy” in *The Secret Doctrine* and Theosophist A. P. Sinnett claimed that esoteric doctrine was “the missing link between materialism and spirituality.”<sup>42</sup> Similarly Gurdjieff pupil Jane Heap characterised Gurdjieff’s system as “neutral scientific observation of one’s self - taking notes on the body in the scientific manner. First the physical; later, notes on the mental and emotional centres.”<sup>43</sup> Blavatsky and Gurdjieff, like other modern occultists, proposed a new perspective on the world that responded to people’s spiritual needs while retaining a scientific, materialist basis to their teachings in line with the scientific thinking of the day. This will become clear in the account of their teachings below.

The second way in which Blavatsky and Gurdjieff answered contemporary society’s pressing needs was by drawing on the prevailing Western notion of the ‘exotic’ East, as they worked to integrate Eastern spirituality into Western thinking at a time when ‘East’ and ‘West’ were traditionally considered binary opposites. Cultural critic and literary theorist Edward W. Said argues in his *Orientalism* (1978), a landmark text in postcolonial studies, that ‘The East’ was almost a European invention which had, since antiquity, been a place associated with romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, and remarkable experiences.<sup>44</sup> From the late eighteenth to the twentieth centuries a vast corpus of scholarly, travel and imaginative writings consumed the East, transforming it into a prefabricated construct that represented a binary opposition to the West. The West began to ‘read’ the East not as it is, but as an idealised object of desire, focus of evil, focus of good, bastion of purity, bastion of decay, or any other myriad of interpretations.<sup>45</sup>

In line with this view, during the unsettling late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Russia, people were looking to the ‘exotic’ East as an alternative source of knowledge and hope. P. D. Ouspensky articulates this in the opening pages of *In Search of the Miraculous* where he describes, as a young man, looking to the East for answers to existential questions. In 1913 he set out on a journey through Egypt, Sri Lanka and India, believing that  
the way to the unknown could be found in the East... In this idea

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<sup>41</sup> Pecotic, *Body and Correspondence*, p. 44.

<sup>42</sup> Carlson, *No Religion Higher Than Truth*, p. 35.

<sup>43</sup> Margaret Anderson, *The Unknowable Gurdjieff* (London: Arkana, 1991), p. 55.

<sup>44</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 1.

<sup>45</sup> Jonathan Bellman, ‘Introduction’ in *The Exotic in Western Music*, ed. Jonathan Bellman (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998), p. xi.

there was, perhaps, something of romance, but it may have been the absolutely real conviction that, in any case, nothing could be found in Europe... India and the East had not... lost their glamour of the miraculous.<sup>46</sup>

One year earlier, in 1912,<sup>47</sup> a timely Gurdjieff made his entrée into Russia to address such a need. Undoubtedly well aware of the lure of the East for Westerners, Gurdjieff made efforts to portray himself, his teachings and his travels as distinctively 'Eastern'. An obvious example of this is the 'Eastern style' activities that Gurdjieff arranged for his pupils at his 'Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man' in Fontainebleau. Pupil J. G. Bennett reports:

The work in the gardens reminded me of Dervish communities in Turkey... the Turkish bath and feasts on Saturday evenings were all reminiscent of the East. But, most of all, the Study House reminded me of the Sema Hanes of the Dervish communities outside the walls of Constantinople.<sup>48</sup>

Gurdjieff also presented himself in an Eastern manner, often sporting an Astrakhan fez. Pupil Olga de Hartmann describes how she was first struck by Gurdjieff's "oriental appearance, such as I had never seen before... his legs crossed in the Eastern manner."<sup>49</sup> Similarly, Carlson attributes Blavatsky's popularity among Western writers, painters, scholars, aristocrats and would-be occultists, particularly in London from 1887, to her Eastern demeanour: "She was inevitably dressed in loose, black, flowing garments of ambiguous construction. She smoked constantly. All of London loved her; she was original."<sup>50</sup>

The first part of this article has highlighted the similarities between the personas, travel stories, fantastical claims and deliberate autobiographical ambiguities perpetuated by Blavatsky and Gurdjieff, as well as the almost identical solutions that their teachings offered contemporary society. One can explain these similarities as merely a common response to the times in which they lived, but there is also the possibility that Gurdjieff modelled himself after

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<sup>46</sup> Ouspensky, *Miraculous*, pp. 3-4.

<sup>47</sup> Gurdjieff, *Herald*, p. 22, and Moore, *Gurdjieff Anatomy of a Myth*, p. 324. However, Taylor argues that Gurdjieff arrived in Moscow in 1913, but suggests that Gurdjieff had been to Russia prior to 1913. See Taylor, *New Life*, pp. 40-47, 225. A.R. Orage also gives the date of Gurdjieff's arrival in Russia as 1913. See Nott, *Teachings of Gurdjieff*, p. 1.

<sup>48</sup> J.G. Bennett, *Gurdjieff: Making a New World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), pp. 132, 157.

<sup>49</sup> de Hartmann and de Hartmann, *Our Life*, p. 11.

<sup>50</sup> Carlson, *No Religion Higher Than Truth*, pp. 42-43.

Blavatsky. Certainly in the early twentieth century, when Gurdjieff was formulating his teaching and cultivating his persona in Russia, the figure of Blavatsky loomed large. People had been mesmerised by her mystique, her colourful life and unique solutions to contemporary predicaments. One could well argue that the opportunistic Gurdjieff saw in Blavatsky a model that worked in attracting followers.

### **Gurdjieff's Repudiation of Theosophy and a Consideration of Theosophy's Influence on his Teachings**

Gurdjieff said that at the age of twenty-one he had read the works of Blavatsky and travelled to every place mentioned in *The Secret Doctrine*, but found that nine of every ten of her references were not based on first hand knowledge. This is a colourful invention as *The Secret Doctrine* was not translated into Russian until the second decade of the twentieth century,<sup>51</sup> and Gurdjieff travelled between the approximate dates of 1887 and 1907. Gurdjieff makes other remarks, all disparaging, about Theosophy throughout his writings, which were no doubt designed to promote his own method over that of Theosophy. In his pamphlet *The Herald of Coming Good* (1933) he claims to have spent six months with "people giving themselves up to various "woeful" ideas in these spheres of quasi-human knowledge, which in different epochs, bore different names, and which today are called "occultism," "theosophism," "spiritualism."<sup>52</sup> He refers to the groups that concerned themselves with these 'spheres' as "workshops-for-the-perfection-of-psychopathism." In relation to members of these groups he claims to have studied the "various manifestations in the waking state of the psyche of these trained and freely moving "Guinea Pigs," allotted to me by Destiny for my experiments."<sup>53</sup> In a similar vein, in *Beelzebub's Tales To His Grandson* (1950) he refers to Theosophy as a "pseudo-teaching" that is only a means for the further obscuring of the already obscured psyche of human beings. Later in the book he defines Theosophists as specialists in "catching fish in muddy waters."<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Taylor, *New Life*, p. 32. However, Taylor, *Gurdjieff and Orage*, p. 236, suggests that Gurdjieff may have read the first Russian excerpts of *The Secret Doctrine* in the 1880s. In *New Life*, p. 32, he further suggests that Gurdjieff may have heard of the book and accounts of Blavatsky's travels in her earlier and highly popular *Isis Unveiled* (1877).

<sup>52</sup> Gurdjieff, *Herald*, p. 22.

<sup>53</sup> Gurdjieff, *Herald*, p. 22.

<sup>54</sup> Gurdjieff, *Beelzebub's Tales*, pp. 249, 1191-1192. See also p. 734.

Despite repudiating the Theosophical movement, as he did other popular contemporary spiritual,<sup>55</sup> literary<sup>56</sup> and artistic movements,<sup>57</sup> it appears that Gurdjieff directly drew from Theosophy, which was essentially the catchment basin for the occult revival in Russia. Theosophy would certainly have been an accessible route by which occult ideas could arrive in Gurdjieff's sphere;<sup>58</sup> Gurdjieff formulated his teachings between 1912 and 1916,<sup>59</sup> and the Russian Theosophical Society was at the pinnacle of its success and influence on the eve of the First World War (1914-1918).<sup>60</sup> Further, Gurdjieff formulated his teachings in Moscow and St Petersburg, which were major centres for the occult revival.

In Gurdjieff's writings and talks one finds distinctive phrases and terms popularised by Theosophy at the time, like "emerald tablet," "alchemy," "ray of creation" and "astral bodies," as well as ideas of applying the musical octave to cosmological structures,<sup>61</sup> and explaining the universe in terms of different densities of matter in a constant process of evolution and involution.<sup>62</sup> According to Webb, Gurdjieff is in fact guilty of a "striking plagiarism" in that, like Blavatsky, he renamed the four elements of fire, air, earth and water as

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<sup>55</sup> Gurdjieff, *Herald*, pp. 20-22.

<sup>56</sup> Gurdjieff, *Meetings*, pp. 8-28.

<sup>57</sup> Gurdjieff, *Beelzebub's Tales*, pp. 450-452 and Gurdjieff, 'Glimpses', p. 36.

<sup>58</sup> Webb, *Harmonious Circle*, p. 533.

<sup>59</sup> An account of a conversation with Gurdjieff written by a Moscow pupil in 1914, known as 'Glimpses of the Truth', shows that at this time Gurdjieff had already articulated a vast body of cosmological ideas. See G.I. Gurdjieff, 'Glimpses of the Truth' in *Views From the Real World* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976).

<sup>60</sup> Carlson, *No Religion Higher Than Truth*, pp. 61, 76.

<sup>61</sup> Joscelyn Godwin, *Harmonies of Heaven and Earth: The Spiritual Dimension of Music From Antiquity to the Avant-Garde* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1987), pp. 134-135, 180-183. The first known theory of the correlation between music and the planets comes from Pythagoras, who conceived of the Harmony of the Spheres or *Musica universalis*. The Harmony of the Spheres is considered inaudible but presents itself to the ear through the mathematical interrelationships of sounds. See Peter M. Hamel, *Through Music To The Self*, trans. Peter Lemesurier (Great Britain: Element Books, 1991 [1978]), p. 93. Pythagoras derived his theory through experiments on the monochord, a single-stringed measuring instrument that demonstrates the derivation of natural notes. Pythagorean music theory was rediscovered and developed in the Middle Ages by Athanasius Kircher, Robert Fludd and Johannes Kepler. Gurdjieff must have been familiar with Pythagorean theory, as the name of Pythagoras appears five times in *Beelzebub's Tales*. See Gurdjieff, *Beelzebub's Tales*, pp. 455, 516, 888, 891.

<sup>62</sup> Trompf, 'Macrohistory', p. 280, and Pecotic, *Body and Correspondence*, p. 100.

carbon, oxygen, nitrogen and hydrogen.<sup>63</sup> These represented for both Blavatsky and Gurdjieff the transformation of energies in the universe and in human beings. Ouspensky attempted to establish the origins of these names, stating, although G. had definitely promised to explain precisely why these names were taken and not others, he never did so... attempts to establish the origin of these names explained to me a great deal concerning the whole of G's system as well as its history.<sup>64</sup>

This could be taken as an implication that Ouspensky acknowledged the Theosophical origins of much of Gurdjieff's teachings.

There is also a clear parallel between approaches of Blavatsky and Gurdjieff to the composition of the human being, which represented for both a microcosm manifesting the threefold and sevenfold structure of the macrocosmic universe. Probably inspired by Advaita Vedanta cosmology and the seven Tantric chakras, Blavatsky argued that man constitutes seven centres: *atman* or universal spirit, *buddhi* or spiritual soul, *higher manas* or mind, *lower manas* or animal soul, *linga sharira* or astral body, *prana* or etheric double and *rupa* or dense body.<sup>65</sup> However the human being was simultaneously threefold in structure, in line with the *Sankhya* philosophy of the three *gunas* or forces that pervade the universe; *rajas* or activity, *tamas* or inertia and *sattva* or harmony. Blavatsky pointed to

three separate schemes of evolution, which in our system are inextricably interwoven and interblended at every point. These are the Monadic (or spiritual), the intellectual, and the physical evolutions... Each is represented in the constitution of man, the Microcosm of the great Macrocosm.<sup>66</sup>

Likewise, Gurdjieff taught that human beings have seven 'centres': the 'moving,' 'instinctive,' 'sex,' 'intellectual,' and 'emotional' centres, and two 'higher centres,' the 'higher emotional,' and 'higher intellectual.'<sup>67</sup> However, they are simultaneously "three-brained beings," in that they are divided into emotional, intellectual and physical components, representing the affirming, denying and reconciling forces of the universe.

More evidence that Gurdjieff drew from the modern Theosophical movement is his description of his system of teaching as "esoteric Christianity," a term associated at the time with Theosophists Anna Kingsford, Annie Besant and Edward Maitland. In 1891 Maitland founded an "Esoteric

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<sup>63</sup> Webb, *Harmonious Circle*, pp. 533-534.

<sup>64</sup> Ouspensky, *Miraculous*, p. 90.

<sup>65</sup> Carlson, *No Religion Higher Than Truth*, p. 120.

<sup>66</sup> Wellbeloved, *Astrology*, p. 62.

<sup>67</sup> Ouspensky, *Miraculous*, pp. 55-56, 115, 142.

Christian Union” and in 1901 Annie Besant published a book under the title *Esoteric Christianity*. In describing his teachings as esoteric Christianity, Webb argues that Gurdjieff may have been bowing to the need to define himself in a way that could be accepted in Holy Russia. Further, Kingsford and Maitland argued that, as a Gnostic magus, Jesus had sojourned with the Essenes before returning to preach an esoteric doctrine in Israel.<sup>68</sup> Gurdjieff also made this point; in *Beelzebub's Tales To His Grandson* the wise Beelzebub states that the teaching of Jesus has secretly been preserved by “the Brotherhood of the Essenes,”<sup>69</sup> and in *Meetings With Remarkable Men* he describes this Brotherhood as having been founded twelve hundred years before Christ, and that in this brotherhood Christ is said to have received his first initiation.<sup>70</sup>

So far a number of parallels have been drawn between the ideas and terminology in the teachings of Gurdjieff and in those of Theosophy. However, an essential difference between the two cannot be overlooked. Gurdjieff emphasised practical work in his teaching, particularly work that utilised the body such as carrying out domestic tasks and practicing vigorous ‘Movements’ or sacred dances. For Gurdjieff, awareness and observation of the body was fundamental in facilitating practitioners in ‘awakening’ from their usual soporific condition:

I tell many times that all work must start with the body; like I tell many times that if wish observe self must start from outside, by observing movements of body. Only much later can learn how observe emotional and mental centres.<sup>71</sup>

This view is poles apart from the Theosophical (and Gnostic) paradigm that holds that spirit is positive and matter is negative or ‘evil’, and must be overcome. Theosophy teaches that human beings have descended, by means of their desires, from spirit into the coils of matter, and that they are working their way out of material existence back to spirit. Blavatsky wrote, “the body is the sepulchre, the prison of the soul.”<sup>72</sup> Gurdjieff brazenly responds to this view in a transcribed talk with a pupil, after the pupil describes an experience of the disappearance of his physical body. Gurdjieff replies,

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<sup>68</sup> Webb, *Harmonious Circle*, p. 525.

<sup>69</sup> Gurdjieff, *Beelzebub's Tales*, pp. 703-704.

<sup>70</sup> Gurdjieff, *Meetings*, p. 58. Gurdjieff went on to claim that he had made contact with the Essenes, who demonstrated how music could affect living organisms; through the playing of ancient Hebraic music they made plants grow in half an hour. Gurdjieff, *Meetings*, p. 133.

<sup>71</sup> Fritz Peters, *My Journey With a Mystic* (California: Tale Weaver Publishing, 1980), p. 110.

<sup>72</sup> Carlson, *No Religion Higher Than Truth*, p. 118.

[t]hat which you explain, now, does not resemble our work. If you continue, you have a fine chance of soon being a candidate for an insane asylum. It is a state which the spiritualists and theosophists know. Stop immediately. You must not forget that you are a body... It is not necessary to leave your body. It is necessary to strengthen it. Many people exist like you; they are psychopaths.<sup>73</sup>

### **Gurdjieff's Utilisation of Theosophical Teachings and Movement**

Although distinct similarities can be found between Theosophical teachings and the teachings of Gurdjieff, one must acknowledge the possibility that both simply drew on common esoteric currents prominent at that time in Russia. Although it is more than likely that some of Gurdjieff's ideas derived from the modern Theosophical movement, it is difficult to argue definitively for a direct relationship between the two forms of teaching. What is clear, however, is that Gurdjieff used the popularity of Theosophy for his own purposes. Indeed he said to a new pupil in 1914,

[y]ou are acquainted with occult literature... and so I will refer to the formula you know from the Emerald Tablets, 'As above, so below.' It is easy to start to build the foundation of our discussion from this... I begin with the occult formula because I am speaking to you.<sup>74</sup>

Certainly it was in Gurdjieff's interest to use Theosophical language and concepts to garnish his teachings, because he could then define himself in a way that was acceptable and attractive in Russia at the time. He admits in *The Herald of Coming Good* that his teachings interested people "preoccupied with every kind of "nonsense," otherwise known under such names as "occultism," "theosophism"... and so on"<sup>75</sup> and that he thrived in this environment:

I directed all my capacities and attention to coming into contact with people belonging to one or other of these vast organizations... my reputation... became that of a great "maestro" in all that comprised supernatural knowledge.<sup>76</sup>

After all, when formulating his teachings in Russia, Gurdjieff probably considered Theosophists, most likely disillusioned Theosophists, as his target audience.

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<sup>73</sup> Gurdjieff, *Transcripts*, p. 133.

<sup>74</sup> Gurdjieff, 'Glimpses', p. 14.

<sup>75</sup> Gurdjieff, *Herald*, p. 26.

<sup>76</sup> Gurdjieff, *Herald*, pp. 21-22.

### Gurdjieff's Pupils with Ties to Theosophy

Indeed some of Gurdjieff's closest pupils had strong ties to Theosophy. In fact this leads to Webb wondering why so much energy has gone into research for the sources of Gurdjieff's system. He concludes that Gurdjieff's cosmology was a creation of the times, probably assembled by Gurdjieff, "although with the help of friends from what are really the obvious sources."<sup>77</sup> Perhaps the most notable example is Pyotr Demianovich Ouspensky (1878-1947), one of Gurdjieff's earliest and most famous pupils, who, for seven years from 1907, researched and wrote about occult and Theosophical ideas. In 1913, two years before he met Gurdjieff, Ouspensky went on a Blavatsky-like search for esoteric knowledge in the East, staying for six weeks in Adyar, the headquarters of the Theosophical Society. There, Ouspensky spoke with Annie Besant and was admitted into the inner circle<sup>78</sup> but ultimately returned to Russia discontented with Theosophy.<sup>79</sup> Upon his return he joined the St Petersburg Theosophical Society<sup>80</sup> but regarded members as "sheep," and the 'inner circle' as even "bigger sheep," believing that it was hopeless for them to develop "higher faculties."<sup>81</sup> It is interesting to consider in this context Ouspensky's *In Search of the Miraculous*, which is the most popular account of Gurdjieff's teachings and thus dominates the way these teachings are

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<sup>77</sup> Webb, *Harmonious Circle*, p. 542.

<sup>78</sup> Webb, *Harmonious Circle*, pp. 109-117, 124-126.

<sup>79</sup> He states in *A New Model of the Universe*, "In theosophical and modern occult literature there are many very picturesque descriptions of the astral sphere. But no proofs of the objective existence of the astral sphere are anywhere given... Theosophical explanations based upon 'clairvoyance' require first of all proof of the existence of 'clairvoyance', which remains unproved in spite of the number of books the authors of which have described what they attained or what they found by means of clairvoyance... Both the spiritualistic and the theosophical theories suffer from one common defect which explains why 'astral' hypotheses remain always the same and receive no proofs. 'Space' and 'time' are taken both in spiritualistic and in theosophical astral theories in exactly the same way as in the old physics, that is, separately from one another... they remain in the same time conditions as physical bodies. And it is precisely this that is impossible. If "fine states of matter" produce bodies of different spatial existence, these bodies must have a different time existence. But this idea does not enter into theosophical or spiritualistic thought." See P.D. Ouspensky, *A New Model of the Universe* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., Ltd., 1931), p. 111.

<sup>80</sup> Webb, *Harmonious Circle*, p. 115.

<sup>81</sup> Anna Butkovsky-Hewitt, *With Gurdjieff in St Petersburg and Paris* (London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), pp. 17-18.

generally understood. The book has a strong Theosophical tone and method throughout, being purely theoretical with no practical component. In this way it could easily be compared with *The Secret Doctrine*. It may well be worth questioning how much Gurdjieff is read through Theosophical glasses, thanks to Ouspensky's *In Search of the Miraculous*.<sup>82</sup>

Another of Gurdjieff's pupils with a strong connection to Theosophy was Alfred Richard Orage (1873-1934), editor of the influential *The New Age* magazine, and chief editor of Gurdjieff's first two books. Before meeting Gurdjieff in 1922, Orage was a spokesman for the Theosophical Society in England for a decade from the mid-1890s<sup>83</sup> and around 1896 became a member of the London Theosophical Society. He then formed the small "Plato Group" in Leeds and in 1903, the Leeds Arts Club, where he lectured in Theosophy and Western philosophy. He also lectured to Theosophists in Manchester and Leeds from 1905, but was criticised by Theosophists for his unorthodox brand of Theosophy with its Nietzschean iconoclasm and irreverence to Blavatsky and Annie Besant. Between 1905 and 1907 Orage wrote a series of articles for the *Theosophical Review* that attacked the Theosophical Society and proposed a kind of Theosophical agnosticism that would prevent people "winding those giddy useless mazes" of *The Secret Doctrine*.<sup>84</sup>

Also with ties to Theosophy were Gurdjieff's pupils Thomas de Hartmann (1885-1956), who was Gurdjieff's musical amanuensis between 1918 and 1927, and de Hartmann's wife Olga (1885-1979), Gurdjieff's personal secretary, translator, financier, and manager of the household at the 'Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man' in Fontainebleau. They both came from the same aristocratic Russo-German background as Blavatsky.<sup>85</sup> Olga states that when they were in Munich, between 1908 and 1912, everyone was reading Blavatsky, and along with friends including artist Wassily Kandinsky, who was interested in Anthroposophy, the de Hartmanns practiced séances.<sup>86</sup> De Hartmann may also have been influenced by the Theosophical leanings of his piano teacher, Esipova-Leschetzky, with whom

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<sup>82</sup> This idea was inspired by a meeting with the generous Joseph Azize in Sydney, 1/07/2010.

<sup>83</sup> Washington, *Baboon*, p. 202.

<sup>84</sup> Webb, *Harmonious Circle*, pp. 199-206.

<sup>85</sup> Washington, *Baboon*, p. 184.

<sup>86</sup> Thomas C. Daly and Thomas A.G. Daly, 'On Olga de Hartmann' in T. De Hartmann and O. de Hartmann, *Our Life with Mr. Gurdjieff*, eds. Thomas C. Daly and Thomas A.G. Daly (London: Arkana Penguin Books, 1992), p. xxix.

he studied in St Petersburg in 1906, and of his acquaintance in Russia, composer Aleksandr Skriabin.<sup>87</sup>

Another Gurdjieff pupil, esteemed American architect, interior designer, writer and educator Frank Lloyd Wright (1869-1959), who first properly met Gurdjieff in 1934,<sup>88</sup> had a connection to Theosophy through close friend Baroness Hilla Rebay von Ehrenwiesen. Rebay was an artist, Theosophist and long-time friend of Solomon Guggenheim, who chose Lloyd Wright to design his museum in New York. According to Friedland and Zellman, it was Rebay who suggested to Lloyd Wright that he design the Guggenheim museum according to Theosophical symbolism; the museum's famous seven-tired spiral structure represented for Rebay a spiritual pathway and a model of the evolution of all 'monads', which energised systems from atoms up to galaxies. Wright's wife Olga Ivanovna (Olgivanna) Hinzenberg (1897-1985), who had followed Gurdjieff from 1919 in Tbilisi, was also interested in Theosophy.<sup>89</sup> Finally, two lesser-known Gurdjieff followers, Maud Hoffman and Trevor Barker, were actually involved in the editing and publication of Blavatsky's *Mahatma Letters*, and part of the editing process occurred during their stay with Gurdjieff at his 'Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man' in Fontainebleau.<sup>90</sup>

## Conclusion

This exploration into the lives, personas, claims and teachings of Blavatsky and Gurdjieff has revealed a number of parallels. This is no surprise considering that Gurdjieff formulated his ideas and established his persona as a spiritual teacher at a time and place where Theosophy was at the height of its popularity, and the bedazzling figure of Blavatsky loomed large. Certainly it was in Gurdjieff's interest to use recognisable Theosophical terminology, and don a Blavatsky-like image, when he began his role as a spiritual teacher in Russia in the early twentieth century. In this way he could define himself in a way that was not just acceptable, but highly attractive, to his target audience; those familiar with, and ultimately disillusioned by, Theosophy.

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<sup>87</sup> Webb, *Harmonious Circle*, p. 151.

<sup>88</sup> Roger Friedland and Harold Zellman, *The Fellowship: The Untold Story of Frank Lloyd Wright and the Taliesin Fellowship* (New York: Regan, 2006), p. 240.

<sup>89</sup> Friedland and Zellman, *The Fellowship*, pp. 48, 376, 378, 389.

<sup>90</sup> Seymour B. Ginsburg, *Gurdjieff Unveiled: An Overview and Introduction to the Teaching* (UK: Lighthouse Workbooks, 2005), pp. 93-94.