

Roger Lipsey. *Gurdjieff Reconsidered: The Life, the Teachings, the Legacy*. Boulder, CO: Shambhala, 2019. 280 pp. ISBN: 978-1611804515. \$24.95

Roger Lipsey's *Gurdjieff Reconsidered: The Life, the Teachings, the Legacy* is a timely and welcome entry in the literature about G. I. Gurdjieff, an important but often overlooked figure of the early twentieth century. Appearing a little over 100 years after Gurdjieff began teaching in the West (though this dividing line is somewhat artificial), it is time for a reappraisal of his importance and, especially, the importance of his ideas and methods. Lipsey presents an erudite and accessible narrative of Gurdjieff's life, with a focus on his teaching career after 1912 until his death in 1949. Attempting to "leave no stone unturned," Lipsey draws on a wealth of historical, biographical, and personal journals, including material from the relatively protected archives of the Gurdjieff Foundation. Lipsey is a careful and discriminating reader of both Gurdjieff's own work and the body of literature left to us by and about Gurdjieff. Especially noteworthy is that Lipsey's prose and approach avoids the errors of other less careful works which have dared to fill in the gaps of Gurdjieff's life with invented scenes and a tendency towards purple prose. The reader also benefits from Lipsey's experience as a writer, his familiarity with a wide range of historical and literary sources, and his own experience as a practitioner of Gurdjieff's ideas for many decades. Though Lipsey exhibits some bias in favor of the Gurdjieff Foundation—even as he admits some hagiographical-leaning descriptions in his portrayal of Jeanne de Salzmann—the reader benefits from the informal gleanings included from his conversations with members of the Foundation, as well as his access to their archives. It is also worth noting that, in comparison to other works, Lipsey is balanced in his presentation of nonetheless influential figures outside the Foundation circles, such as J. G. Bennett, who he describes as a "born seeker of truth" (54). His knowledge of French helps with sources

inaccessible to Anglophone readers. A more recent publication in French by François Grunwald from 2017 provides both insightful vignettes from Gurdjieff's life, as well as inspiration for Lipsey's intermittent comparisons of Gurdjieff to the Renaissance author (and Benedictine) François Rabelais (d. 1553). The result is a detail-rich story of Gurdjieff and his teachings imbued with warmth and insight.

Lipsey begins early on with a reflection: "Gurdjieff and the teaching that bears his name are now all but sealed off from mainstream history and current concern. There are too many things to care about in our immensely troubled world. Why would one care about Gurdjieff?" (1). This entrée provides impetus to his work, and sets the stage for the presentation and justification for a reconsideration of his work and ideas. Lipsey also places Gurdjieff in a longer line of figures, including Diogenes—"master of edgy philosophical theater"—and Pythagoras and his esoteric school, who both made a contribution by standing outside the conventions of their own time, and offering a larger view of life and its possibilities.

Lipsey covers Gurdjieff's early life briefly—a wise choice, given that we largely have only Gurdjieff's own semi-autobiographical work to provide the details. The influence of the culture and context of Gurdjieff's early life is, nonetheless, important—his early years in the Caucasus, and what is now Eastern Turkey were certainly foundational. His early life in Armenia, and Turkey, and his early travels are presented as a sketch—but that is, in fact, all that we have to go on. Lipsey is more careful, providing images of the strengths, and sifts out the elements that drove Gurdjieff's work with others—which justifies the continued study of Gurdjieff's work and legacy.

He addresses some of the major ebbs and flows of his early teaching career, from 1912–1917, much of which has been made popular through P. D. Ouspensky's *In Search of the Miraculous*. Here he provides both a fuller picture of that time, beyond the words transmuted through Ouspensky, and yet highlights some of the important ideas and formulations Gurdjieff presented during this period. Lipsey moves easily from summaries of talks, ideas, and first-hand reports, and positions

them in light of a wider perspective of the man and his approach. He highlights the importance that Gurdjieff placed on one's own disappointment—"in their own power, and . . . in all the old ways"—as a precursor to approaching the "system." Then, he carefully selects representative examples of his ideas and formulations which support the argument for continued consideration of Gurdjieff. For example, the discussion of being vs. knowledge, an example of one of Gurdjieff's ideas formulated in this period, may have continuing interest and relevance.

He next covers in rich detail the period of 1922-1932, an emblematic and transformative time in Gurdjieff's life, which took place at The Prieuré in Fontainebleau, France. This period is explored through several first-hand reports, including Katherine Mansfield, Alfred Orage, and lesser-known entries, such as the recently published journals of Tcheslaw Tchekovitch. It also addresses, and weighs, the impact of the serious auto accident that Gurdjieff had in the summer of 1924, which directly led to both the dissolution of his Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man and the initiation of his life as an author.

The more obscure period of the 1930s is filled out in detail through notes from the collective of women known as The Rope, which included Jane Heap, Kathryn Hulme, and Solita Solano. Though typically considered his more hermetic years, these journals relate a side of Gurdjieff that is more overtly compassionate and even warm. This is a period when Gurdjieff continued to materially support many who were not involved in his work. And for those who were involved in his work, his warmth was displayed in a line captured by Solita Solano, "I hope with all my heart . . . that there will arise in all of you a feeling for humanity" (157).

In the 1940s, many, especially following Ouspensky's death in 1947, returned to find Gurdjieff holding forth at the rue des Colonels Renard in Paris. This chapter details the relationship with Jeanne de Salzman, and synthesizes some of the accounts provided from the last years of his life. The next chapter, "The Great Prayer: 1950-1956," addresses the years immediately after Gurdjieff's death, and the founding of the different lineages, some of which continue uninterrupted.

Following the thoroughgoing presentation of Gurdjieff and his contributions in the chapter “Derision,” Lipsey considers and weighs the views of some of Gurdjieff’s detractors, including Louis Pauwels—who had some negative influence on the reception of Gurdjieff in France—and the psychiatrist Anthony Storr who described Gurdjieff as a dictator. Lipsey also addresses Whitall Perry’s *Gurdjieff in the Light of Tradition* (1978) through the lens of the traditionalist school of René Guénon (while courteously avoiding the controversies surrounding Perry’s own teacher and heir to that tradition, Frithjof Schuon). Lipsey fends off the critics who, without consideration of context, dismiss him for an idiosyncratic act, or critique the way that he worked with a student in a given moment. Lipsey remarks upon a critic who derisively called Gurdjieff just an Armenian carpet seller, admonishing that he would probably have accepted that. Lipsey hears and considers the more serious and critical-minded challenges, while also not letting off lightly those who have misrepresented and distorted Gurdjieff’s words and approach to students. Though the responses he provides may not be satisfactory to his ardent detractors, in the end, Lipsey offers that perhaps it is time for Gurdjieff to be forgiven. In this way, perhaps Gurdjieff’s legacy, including his teachings, the movements (his choreography), and his writings, can speak for themselves.

In the following chapter, he presents a keen though necessarily brief discussion of *Beelzebub’s Tales to his Grandson*, which holds many of Gurdjieff’s key ideas. He concludes this section by remarking that *Beelzebub’s Tales* is an ocean of story and thought. And, to this, I would add that the ocean that Gurdjieff left also includes not just his writings, but—as Lipsey amply demonstrates—the movements, his music, and his ideas. Thus, with this work as a new entry we might review afresh the legacy and potential of Gurdjieff’s ideas for the future of the human condition.

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