

Georges Ivanovitch Gurdjieff
and the Law of Seven

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Abstract

This essay explores an essential aspect of Georges Ivanovitch Gurdjieff's (**G**) teachings, namely the theme associated with the Law of Seven, which is repeatedly referred to in "Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson". Assuming that his literary work may constitute a legomonism structured according to the Law of Seven, it becomes possible to identify the clues intentionally left here and there by the author.

The book "Meetings with Remarkable Men" reveals a unique architecture underlying a text relating part of the author's life. This architecture embeds different phenomena — at least three — which, although unrelated, follow a progression through seven intervals.

It was this book, in particular, that caught my attention. The analysis that follows is by no means academic, which would only appeal to the reader's intellect. Rather, it seeks to awaken in the reader the particular frame of mind that emerges from each chapter of the book.

In Search of the Miraculous

Piotr Demianovich Ouspensky's contribution to the dissemination of **G**'s ideas is fundamental. Of all **G**'s disciples, he is the only one who has attempted to understand the central element of his teaching, the Law of Seven, but how it works remains beyond our comprehension. Overall, the Law of Seven is said to be framed by a cosmological system accompanied by a table of hydrogen elements spanning three octaves.

One passage in Chapter Seven does, however, deserve special attention: the seven-tone scale is a cosmic law applied to music. Light, heat, chemical and magnetic vibrations, and other phenomena are subject to the same law as sound vibrations.

As for the Enneagram, this symbol was, unfortunately, distorted years later into a method designed to classify personalities into various types.

Beelzebub's Tales to his Grandson (BT)

At the end of Chapter 40 of the book, Beelzebub tells his grandson that he would be annoyed if the boy failed to grasp the Law of Seven (Heptaparaparshinokh). Yet even upon rereading this book, this law remains an absolute mystery. However, by bringing together certain passages relating to this law, it is possible to identify some intervals (stopinders) at the very heart of the author's writings. For example, the opening chapters of the book appear to correspond to the statements in Chapter 39:

- The complete process of this law applies to everything that exists and comprises seven stages.
- The third interval serves to absorb the automatic influx of forces from the surrounding environment.
- In the fifth interval, a substance may trigger either one result or its opposite.
- The seventh interval serves to absorb the influx of forces brought by cosmic concentration.
- This seventh interval requires conscious effort and a willingness to endure suffering in order to absorb these forces.

Chapter 3, third interval

- The spacecraft is subjected to an external force which turns out to be a gas that is harmful to the passengers.

Chapter 5, fifth interval

- The spacecraft can either be propelled by the action of a gas or move through a gas-free environment.

Chapter 7, the seventh interval

- The conscious efforts and voluntary sacrifices of our ancestors benefit present-day generations.

If it seems logical to assume that this book is based upon the principles of this law, then the author's second book should be governed by the same rule.

Meetings with Remarkable Men (MRM)

Since **BT** states that every phenomenon has seven intervals, we can assume that the book **MRM** also follows an approach involving seven intervals, and certain clues may guide us in our search for these intervals and related phenomena, like characters and social classes associated to the intervals. These phenomena are not always systematically highlighted in every chapter, but a conscientious researcher may well be able to glimpse a structure hidden beneath the text of this book.

Assuming that nothing is left to chance in the author's writings, it is worth to investigate whether planetary symbolism may also play a role in the construction of the book. Understanding the nature of these planets – without necessarily subscribing to astrology – could therefore prove essential to seizing the spirit that underlies each chapter of the book.

For example, we know that Beelzebub was forced into exile on Mars as a result of his revolutionary activities; in **MRM**, a chapter deals, among other things, with revolutionaries and war. Also, Gornakour Kharkar, born on Saturn in **BT**, is a scholar, just like professor Skridlov in **MRM**.

Thus, just as sound, the white ray and opium bear an exact resemblance in their internal structure (**BT** Chapter 40), it would seem possible to distinguish the various phenomena highlighted in the book; the reading pace unique to each chapter, the planetary type and the social environment linked to the main characters, and finally the areas and themes explored.

In short, the hypothesis on which this essay is based aims to highlight several independent phenomena which, while having nothing in common, evolve in accordance to the Law of Seven as stated by Georges Ivanovitch Gurdjieff. The

analysis that follows therefore focuses primarily on the narrative pace, planets, characters, social classes, events and themes linked to each interval associated with chapters of **MRM**.

(Interval 1) Introduction

♿ *Mercury represents communication, rationality and critical thinking. His curiosity drives him to explore a wide range of subjects. His quick wit sometimes leads him to jump rapidly from one subject to another, to lose focus or to get caught up in long conversations, or even to engage in futile chatter.*

A book of a philosophical or scientific nature usually tackles the subject in a sober manner. But by way of an introduction, the author instead discusses the benefits of Armagnac in a light-hearted tone, before going on to set out a few ideas in a more serious vein, and finally extolling the virtues of Armagnac.

Anyone seeking a profound truth might be puzzled by such airiness. To an academic mind, the effect might give the impression of superficiality. The passage, among others, concerning a subtle philosophical problem might certainly arouse suspicion towards this author of dubious reputation.

The main theme of this chapter is communication. The author himself recounts having faced difficulties in transmitting his ideas by focusing on the quality of the text rather than quantity. This same theme is addressed by a Persian intellectual who compares Eastern and Western cultures. In an eloquent speech, contemporary literature, grammar and journalism are severely criticized. Gradually, the speech deviates into anecdotes before finally turning to journalists, whom he describes as weak and effeminate.

(Interval 2) My Father

♀ *Venus represents love, tenderness, kindness and the arts. Its nature is inclined towards peace, understanding and harmony. Generally speaking, the Venusian takes life as it comes, calmly and without making a fuss. Not particularly confrontational, he does not hesitate to make concessions in order to avoid conflict.*

In this chapter, everything exudes calm, love and harmony. The pre-teen is about seven years old when an epidemic decimates the family's livestock. Poverty ensues, but his memories take us back instead to his father, a true poet who remains serene despite the misfortunes that fall on him. The child flourishes in a world filled with the poetic imagery of the Arabian Nights.

Bards who recite poems, sing songs and tell stories – such is the world of his father, who was a very popular storyteller at the time, with a reputation that extended far beyond his region. He was very often invited to gatherings where he would recount countless legends.

The world of the arts is a place that can put one's moral virtues to the test. But the father has strong family values that ensure love and happiness reign within the family. His integrity and honesty prevent him from taking advantage of others. He instils high ideals in his child through extraordinary stories, and teaches him principles based on love and courtesy.

Despite the events that affect humanity, the father always remains true to himself. He pays little attention to the opinions of others. His meaningless conversations instils in the child this same ability to not care about how others perceive him.

(Interval 3) My First Tutor and Bogachevsky

☉ *The Sun represents individuality and willpower. Solar type is reluctant to share his private life and maintain a certain reserve with those around them. His sense of authority makes him well-suited to leadership roles. His presence commands respect and can sometimes impress, or even intimidate, those around him.*

In the chapter devoted to Father Borsh, everything exudes rigor; he is the region's highest spiritual authority. He is by no means a sociable man, and in his life, as in his ideas, he differs entirely from those around him. Undoubtedly self-taught, he possesses a sharp mind and his knowledge is of uncommon depth. The teenager admits, moreover, to feel intimidated by a man of such stature.

He considers the boy to be particularly gifted, and it seems a waste to let him languish in a state school. He is demanding and makes him work hard in all the subjects he has taken it upon himself to teach. The teenager, having been brought into line, sets to work with enthusiasm.

For Father Borsh, adolescence is a pivotal period in an individual's development. If a teenager gives in to his impulses before reaching adulthood, he loses any chance of becoming a man worthy of respect. To be or not to be – there can be no half-measures: for a man to be a man, and not a good-for-nothing, his education must be rigorously based on certain principles.

☾ *The Moon represents sensitivity and subjectivity. Highly sociable, the lunar type seeks out group life, and emotional bonds are very important to him. The Moon also represents the collective imagination, beliefs and rumors. Being impressionable by nature, the crowd is easily influenced by the ideas circulating around it.*

Unlike Father Borsh, Bogachevsky is sociable and approachable; he quickly wins the clergy's favor. A relationship bordering on camaraderie develops between him and the author. The teenager often listens in on Bogachevsky's conversations; unlike Father Borsh, Bogachevsky is visited by many friends.

Bogachevsky teaches the teenager that there are two kinds of morality in the world: one objective, the other subjective. It is the conventions we are steeped in that constitute subjective morality. One must learn not to conform to what those around us think. There is certainly a parallel to be drawn with the suggestibility referred to by G, which he regards as a central element of human weakness.

Several passages plunge us into the heart of the rumors circulating in the neighborhood. Some recount rumors and beliefs of all kinds that abound in the working-class neighborhoods. Among other things, a séance involving a table that deeply unsettles the teenager. If a Yazidi is forced to cross the line of a circle, they immediately fall into a state known as catalepsy.

And again, a group of women are talking animatedly about the appearance of an evil spirit in the body of a Tartar who had been buried the day before. A few days earlier, he had fallen from a horse and suffered a twisted bowel. A doctor made him drink mercury to put his bowels back in order. To prevent this spirit from causing great misfortune, the Tartar was slaughtered and taken back to the cemetery. This incident left the teenager utterly stunned.

If the third interval serves to absorb the automatic influx of forces from the surrounding environment, the adolescence, the part of life where the world opens up our eyes, would correspond to this interval.

(Interval 4) Captain Pogossian and Abram Yelov

♂ *Mars represents action, energy and enterprise. Impulsive by nature, the Martian tends to react spontaneously rather than thoughtfully. His frankness can sometimes seem a bit harsh. combativeness, rivalry, anger and competitive spirit are characteristics associated with him.*

Pogossian and Yelov share certain characteristics; they speak frankly and directly, expressing themselves without beating around the bush, sometimes in anger. They spend their time provoking one another. As much as Yelov and Pogossian love each other, they are just as rude to one another. Pogossian often teases Yelov about his habit of pulling up his trousers.

Pogossian is quick to react, blaming himself for getting involved in matters that weren't his business. He suddenly loses his patience and starts shouting. He mocks the author and everyone who was thrown together in the same barrel. Yelov can also be really impulsive sometimes, but his outbursts are short-lived. Add to that his straightforward remark about those wacky merchants, those damn idiots, and a dirty Italian who gets rich off the money of those damn idiots.

Both will eventually become successful businessmen. The author himself is keen to emphasize his own talents in this field. He admits to having had questionable sources of income when he worked as a railway employee, without feeling any remorse at all. He also recounts that it also occurred to him to scam an Italian who, faced with such a naive person, no longer kept his secrets to himself.

The chapter on Pogossian has all the makings of an action film: During their journey, they have countless adventures; among other things, the young men are attacked by hostile dogs, and Pogossian is bitten by a phalanga. They meet an Armenian priest and steal the information contained in a parchment from him. The author cannot describe all the twists and turns that forced him to change their route again and again.

Events or decisions often happen spontaneously: A discovery seems so intriguing that they drop everything else and set off for Alexandropol that very day. They find themselves caught in the middle of a fight in a Greek restaurant. They also rush to the office of a shipping company. A sailor comes running towards them, shaking their hands enthusiastically. The door to their room bursts open and three sailors storm in.

There are also numerous references to war; Ani was conquered many times before falling to the Mongols. The Aisors suffered greatly during the last war. Several Englishmen were skinned alive by the Aisors. A strong nationalist movement was developing among the Armenians, and they were fighting for freedom. Other references; young men think that a stay at sea will help them heal their 'war wounds.' Some sailors are gesturing around while other whistles a military march. They board a fairly large warship.

(Interval 5) Prince Yuri Lubovedsky and Ekim Bey

21 *Jupiter represents wisdom and philanthropy. This planet is associated with the idea of material well-being and comfort. A philosopher and idealist, the Jupiterian looks at life from a broader perspective. He is attached to moral or religious principles. His wisdom and kind attitude make him someone who gives good advice.*

The older Prince Lubovedsky, through his kindness and wisdom, perfectly embodies Jupiterian values. Let's also point out that just like the prince, the characters featured in these chapters are also linked to the aristocracy; Soloviev, born to an aristocratic mother, Vitvitskaia, who spent his childhood on a count's estate, and finally Ekim Bey, son of a pasha, who ended his life with the title of Grand Pasha.

This fifth interval offers a glimpse into a world of contradictions and deceptive appearances. The chapters are punctuated by dramatic events that send life from one extreme to the other:

- Following a tragic event, Prince Loubovedsky – a man driven by idealism and kindness, love and patience – completely changes his way of life.
- Soloviev, educated and imbued with good manners by his aristocratic mother, oscillates between intoxication and sobriety, comfort and poverty, integrity and cheating.
- Vitvitskaia, who spent her childhood on a count's estate, was left an orphan. Her brother offered her a respectable job, while planning to sell her into slavery.

Throughout the chapters, events occur that go against what one might expect, with consequences opposite to those anticipated. There are plenty of examples:

Unlike her sister, Vitvitskaia is very frivolous. One of her brothers wants to become a bishop; the other is a real rogue. Her brother gives the impression of being a wealthy man. At times the author feels hatred towards her, and at other times pity.

The dog Philos brings dead birds to the author, thinking he is helping him with his work. The author realizes that the artichokes left in his room were not a gift from the maid, but from Philos.

Ekim Bey inspires either fear or obsequious respect. Despite their differences, the author and he have for each other, a feeling of blood brotherhood, yet, against all expectations, they feel a great affinity. Ekim Bey seeks advice from a dervish in order to resolve the conflict between two opposing tendencies. Deeply distressed on learning that his father is dying, he hurries home, while peacefully stopping to visit some ruins on his way back!

Regarding the passage about the dervish; at first, he receives them coldly, but then becomes more affable. The author is unsure whether he feels pity or shame for the dervish, but he completely changes his opinion of the old man. The author had only seen one side of the story, and now he sees things in a different light. The dervish realizes that the author's attitude towards his words has changed completely.

On a journey through the mountains, sometimes they descend into deep valleys, and sometimes they climb to great heights. On the journey through the Gobi Desert; either these sands are the remains of an ancient seabed, or they have been carried here by the winds. Although not a single one of you likes the ways of European scholars, although the storm had died down by half, although the site of our new camp was not very far from the village.

(Interval 6) Piotr Karpenko and Professor Skridlov

♄ *Saturn represents time, solitude and isolated places. The Saturnian is frugal and content with little. Patient and persevering, he is capable of undertaking long-term projects. Aware of the ephemeral nature of life, he displays a sense of realism. This clarity of vision can, however, make him pessimistic, or even melancholic.*

The older archeologist Skridlov and the mining engineer Karpenko both have a scientific background related to ancient ruins and mines, which are symbolically associated with Saturn in traditional astrology.

Everything seems to take place in isolated and inaccessible locations. Death is a recurring theme, and nowhere else is the passage of time so palpable. The author even seems to want to distort the perception of time flow in certain passages. The laborious descriptions of the accuracy of topographical maps and the meaning of the word 'fakir' disrupt the flow of the narrative and make these passages last forever. The description of a journey along the Amu Darya seems to suspend time.

About time; the author and Professor Skridlov spend three weeks inside a tomb. They spend three months in Abyssinia before travelling on to the ruins of Babylon. Skridlov returns to Thebes to undertake excavations there for two years. They remain for nearly a year in the ruins of Merv. They live for nearly six months in Father Giovanni's community. For a year, in isolated ruins, Skridlov and the author meticulously prepare for a journey. They wander for several days, seeking a way out of these inhospitable places.

He also speaks of Brother Akhel's lectures, which only become fully meaningful after a certain amount of time has passed. As time goes on, the essence of Brother Akhel's message takes on a clearer form with each passing day. For Father Giovanni, understanding can only be gained through lived experience and through knowledge of events that have taken place in the past.

Regarding death; In the episode set at the military firing range, where the tension reaches its peak, the author, then a teenager, says he lived through every moment of this adventure as if it lasted more than a single year. At that moment, death seems certain to him. Reality seems to vanish, leaving only this invincible, primal terror. The trembling that seizes his body gradually grows to a terrifying intensity.

A venerable old man sets out to find a place of retreat, far from other people. Now he awaits death. Karpenko asks that old healer to enlighten him on how to prepare oneself for the existence that is to follow death. Skridlov is in despair at his inability to acquire a soul before he dies.

(Interval 7) Last interval

While the whole **MRM** could be a process comprising seven intervals, the seventh interval is not clearly outlined in the book. The final paragraph of the chapter devoted to Skridlov paves the way for this final phase, leaving just one character yet to be revealed – the reader himself – and inviting him to embark on a personal reflection on his own life journey. Only through work and voluntary suffering can one develop the strength necessary to progress towards a higher state of consciousness.

The Seven Ages of Man

Besides the planets, characters, places and social classes associated to the intervals, could be added a phenomenon relative to the ages of life, where each interval would reflect a stage of human development. Interval 2 naturally evokes childhood, while the interval 3 devoted to his first tutors correspond to adolescence and the formation of the author. In the interval 4, Pogossian and Yelov accompany him into an active and adventurous period of adulthood. Prince Lubovedsky (Interval 5) introduces a broader perception of life, while Skridlov (Interval 6) brings the narrative about old age.

Here is summary based on the ages of the author and the main characters across the intervals:

- Interval 2 (My Father): Gurdjieff as a child (From 7 years old).
- Interval 3 (First Tutor and Bogachevsky): Gurdjieff is an adolescent (From 12 years old).
- Interval 4 (Pogossian and Yelov): Gurdjieff is in adulthood (From his twenties).
- Interval 5 (Prince Lubovedsky): A mature man in the middle and broader perspective of life (Over forties).
- Interval 6 (Professor Skridlov): An older scholar (Over sixties), aware of his ending.

Conclusion

This essay has outlined the Law of Seven as presented in the book Meetings with Remarkable Men without really explaining the true nature of this law. The aim was quite different: highlighting certain passages from the writings of the philosopher Georges Ivanovitch Gurdjieff that shed light on the underlying structure of his enigmatic Law of Seven.

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