

Gurdjieff, the Unknown Man

Kenneth Walker, M. D.

Dr. Walker's vivid account of his meetings with Ouspensky and first visits to Gurdjieff's Paris apartment in the late 1940s, is distinguished by his keenly trained powers of observation.

The Russian philosopher P. D. Ouspensky illustrated the difficulty of recognising a teacher of esoteric knowledge, with two stories. The first told of a German who journeyed to India in search of a guru and returned without having found one. He had not realised that the native servant who looked after him while he was in that country was the man for whom he was seeking. The second story referred to a dealer in parrots living in Bordeaux, who, quite unbeknown to his fellow townsmen, was a teacher of esoteric knowledge.

But what is esoteric, or hidden, knowledge? It is a term which has been badly mishandled and which has been used to describe everything from the irresponsible utterances of so-called occult societies to genuine esoteric knowledge. The term should mean immediate, or direct, knowledge, as opposed to mediate, or indirect, knowledge, or knowledge which has been reached through the mediation of the special senses.

Some people repudiate the idea that direct knowledge of this nature exists and maintain that all knowledge must come indirectly through the special senses.

Bertrand Russell is one of these, and in his *History of Western Philosophy* he goes out of his way to point out that there is no method of attaining knowledge other than that used by the scientist. Having had no personal experience of the contemplative method, it is of course natural that he should make this statement.

~ • ~

It is not my intention to deal with this epistemological question. I shall assume that esoteric knowledge exists and shall discuss Ouspensky's statement that teachers of this knowledge are usually difficult to recognise. I shall do so because the two stories with which he illustrates his thesis are of great interest when they are taken in conjunction with Ouspensky's account of his own search for a teacher.

Even as a schoolboy Ouspensky was interested in the idea of the miraculous, and as he grew to manhood his interest increased. When he was working as a journalist on the staff of a Moscow paper, his desk was stacked with books with such strange titles as *Life After Death*, *Dogma et Rituel de la Haute Magie*, *The Sincere Narrations of a Pilgrim*, and many others of a kindred nature.

A few years later he began experimenting on himself in the hope that by altering his state of consciousness he would be able to gain knowledge of a kind different from that which one acquires in an ordinary state. The difficulty was to discover how this change of consciousness could be brought about.

He knew that drugs such as opium and hashish produced a change and experimented with hashish. But the method was unreliable and he soon became dissatisfied with it, although it allowed him "to look over the garden wall," as he called it. It was clear that something was missing, something that he needed before he could go any further with his experiments in changes of consciousness.

"I know it is not a dream," he stated. "In these experiments and experiences there is a taste of reality which cannot be imitated and about which one cannot make a mistake. I know that all This is there. I have become convinced of it. Unity exists. But how to link what is above with what is below?"

Something, as Ouspensky rightly said, was missing, something had to be known before he could go further. "I feel," he continued, "that a method is necessary.... And more and more often I begin to think that this method can be given by those schools of yogis and Sufis about which one reads and hears." (P. D. Ouspensky, *A New Model of the Universe*.)

He allowed nothing to stand in the way of finding a method by which he could overcome the difficulties he had encountered, and a few years later he

abandoned work on a book he was writing and went East. This was in 1913, an unpropitious date for such a journey as his, for the Kaiser was displaying a bellicose spirit and was building an ominously large navy for Germany.

In 1914 the storm broke over Europe, and without having had time to find what he had been seeking, Ouspensky was compelled to hurry home, comforting himself with the thought that he would return to the East. Two years later and in the most unlikely quarter—the old city of Moscow in his own country—he discovered what he had failed to find in Ceylon and India. He found Gurdjieff. Or did Gurdjieff find him? It is difficult to say. Gurdjieff had a wonderful capacity for giving the appearance of accident to what he had deliberately contrived.

~ • ~

What happened in Moscow in 1916 is narrated in Ouspensky's later book *In Search of the Miraculous*. He recounts how, while he was giving lectures in Moscow on the subject of his prewar Eastern journey, a friend persuaded him to meet a certain Caucasian Greek, the leader of a Moscow group that was engaged in various "occult" studies and experiments.

"Persuaded" is the correct word, for on principle Ouspensky was suspicious of groups engaged in parlour yogi-tricks. He was therefore inclined to be extremely critical of this group and its teacher, but eventually he agreed to meet him at a small café. In his posthumous book he writes:

I remember this meeting very well, I saw a man of oriental type, no longer young, with a black moustache and piercing eyes, who astonished me first of all because he seemed to be disguised and completely out of keeping with the place and its atmosphere.... And this man with the face of an Indian rajah or an Arab sheik, whom I at once seemed to see in a white burnous or a gilded turban, seated here in this little café where small dealers and commission agents met together, in a black overcoat with a velvet collar and bowler hat, produced the strange, unexpected and almost alarming impression of a man poorly disguised, the sight of whom embarrasses you because you see he is not what he pretends to be, yet you have to speak and behave as though you did not see it. He spoke Russian incorrectly with a strong Caucasian accent; and this accent, with which we are accustomed to associate anything apart from philosophical ideas, strengthened still further the strangeness and unexpectedness of the impression....

He sat on a sofa, with one leg tucked beneath him, drinking black coffee from a tumbler, smoking and sometimes glancing at me. I liked his movements, which had a great deal of a kind of feline grace and assurance; even to his silence there was something which distinguished him from others.

I have quoted this account of Ouspensky's first meeting with Gurdjieff at length because I want to compare his first impressions with my own on meeting Gurdjieff, some thirty years later. Not that our situations were similar, for whereas Gurdjieff was a stranger to Ouspensky, I was familiar with both his ideas and his methods and had been studying them for a quarter of a century. Although I had never met him, I had long ago accepted him as a great teacher. But we all have our preconceived notions of what a great teacher should look like and how he should speak and behave, and Gurdjieff did not fit into the pigeonhole I had prepared for him.

~ • ~

When I met him in 1948 Gurdjieff was living in a flat in Rue du Colonel Reynard, near the Arc de Triomphe, Paris. It was a small flat suited to the needs of a small French bourgeois family, and its furnishings were not to my taste.

We—and by “we” I mean those many people who were now studying his ideas—were crowded into a tiny drawing room and were either perched uncomfortably on small wooden stools or else were squatting on the floor, listening to a reading from a manuscript entitled *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*.

The words were difficult to follow, and as sentences sometimes sprawled inelegantly over a quarter of the page of the manuscript from which one of us was reading, my attention often wandered toward the door leading into the lobby.

What kind of man would push open that glass-panelled door before the reading had finished? I had been led to expect that he would eventually join us, and it was as had been foretold. At the end of an hour's reading the door moved forward a foot, stopped there for a full minute, and then was opened wide to admit Gurdjieff.

He stood there, looked around the room, his dark eyes taking everybody in, and then sat down on the chair that had been left vacant for him. Oriental, yes, for even without the tall kalmak that he was wearing nobody could have mistaken him for a Westerner. “Dark piercing eyes” as Ouspensky had described? No, they were dark, but kindly rather than piercing, eyes that noted everything without staring, eyes which were very much alive, but not piercing. What struck me more forcibly

than the eyes was the height of the brow and the fact that although Gurdjieff was said to be over eighty years of age there was not a line on his face.

Gurdjieff believed very strongly in the good effect that eating together has on personal relationships, and the sharing of meals, cooked by himself, was a daily ritual in his flat.

It was in the small dining room into which we crowded an hour later that I was able to examine him more closely, and as I had the good fortune to sit directly opposite him, separated only by the breadth of a narrow table, I was in an excellent position to follow his every movement. And some things unusual in these movements immediately struck me.

Here was an old man, and old men are inclined to hesitate and to fumble; not only were these signs of old age entirely absent, but Gurdjieff possessed an extraordinary control over his body.

He was preparing a salad for us and was cutting slices off a cucumber, fishing for small onions in a bottle, dividing up gourds, and he was doing all this with the assurance of a skilled surgeon engaged in his favourite operation. The whole work of preparing the salad was done without one false or unnecessary movement. It was also done speedily, but without any vestige of hurry.

Nor was this the only evidence of his mastery over his body, for I had already noticed his movements as he entered the drawing room and again when he had preceded us into the dining room at the end of the reading. He was a heavy man with a very protuberant abdomen, yet he had moved with the quietness and smoothness of a cat. A cat, yes; Ouspensky had been right in talking about this "feline grace," and although thirty-odd years had passed, his movements were still pleasing to watch.

The meal proceeded. It resembled an oriental feast rather than a European dinner. The dishes were strange to me and I often had no knowledge of what I was eating. The vodka was fiery and, to one who never took more than an occasional glass of wine, exceedingly difficult to swallow. I had been warned, however, that the toasts were obligatory, and knowing, as I did, that one had to pay for everything one received, I gulped it down bravely.

Gurdjieff spoke in a mixture of English, Russian and French, and even if I had not been obliged to swallow vodka I would have had difficulty in understanding him. But what an astonishing man he was!

Now that the kalmak had been removed, the full splendour of his clean-shaven head was fully revealed to me. It rose to an immense height above the level of

his ears, reaching its zenith halfway between the frontal region and the occiput. His olive-coloured face was as smooth, forceful and serene as that of the Lohan figure which had impressed me so at the recent Chinese exhibition in London. The dark eyes rested on me momentarily from time to time, and in that brief glance he seemed to have absorbed all that there was to be learned about me.

"But why," he suddenly asked of me, "why do you not eat more? Do you not like the food? Here, I give you something very special," and he handed me, between finger and thumb, a small piece of dried sturgeon.

"I like it very much," I answered him, "but you see I have just arrived from England and—"

"Ah, yes, in England everyone is starved. What is it named?" A word was suggested by somebody farther down the table. "Yes, they are rationed. They pick here and pick there," and he enacted so faithfully a sparrow picking up crumbs that I seemed to see it hopping about among the dishes. He was an excellent mimic, and he used the gift frequently in revealing to us our own personalities.

Dish followed dish, toast followed toast, and finally to my immense relief, came coffee and cigarettes. There had been a great deal of laughter and too much to eat and drink, but all the time he had been watching us and teaching us, even while joking. Nothing had happened accidentally; everything had been deliberately contrived by him. With a few words, a gesture, or by the mimicry of some personal peculiarity that someone was trying vainly to hide, he had been showing us to ourselves.

I fully realised at this, my first, meal in his flat the futility of any pretence. It was utterly useless to pretend to be otherwise than one was. "You are turkey cock trying to be peacock," he had said to somebody during the meal, and when I glanced at the person I realised how fitting the remark was. So, apparently had the person to whom it had been made, for his manner immediately changed.

~ • ~

That was the first of many visits to the flat in the Rue du Colonel Reynard, and of many meals in the company of those who had come to Paris to learn wisdom from the man whose silence "was unlike the silence of anyone else."

What varied company it was that squeezed, elbow to elbow, around his table: supporters from America, including the widow of a world-famous tenor; English and French doctors; businessmen and lawyers; a British peer; Americans, British, French and Russians of different classes, education and upbringing, and all of whom were

held together by their mutual respect for this man who seemed to radiate power from his person.

No one can be so different from his fellow men or can flout convention so freely as Gurdjieff flouted it, without arousing hostility. All sorts of things were said about him: that he cast a hypnotic spell over his followers and fleeced them (and in a sense this was true); that he was a black magician and an irreligious and unscrupulous man. It is quite understandable that such reports as these should have been spread, for he was utterly ruthless in carrying out his mission—to attack without pity all that stood in the way of man's spiritual development.

Gurdjieff used to say that a man revealed himself most clearly in his reactions to sexuality and to money. I could add yet another signpost to a man's personality, namely, his reaction to Gurdjieff himself. Many reactions were possible, but it was impossible to be indifferent to him or to forget that he was there. One could be disturbed by him, dislike him, be scandalised by what he did and said, deem him a charlatan or a wise man, be frightened of him or grow fond of him, and one could do all these things in turn; but it was impossible to neglect him. Whatever he was, he was something on a much bigger scale than one had ever seen before, or is ever likely to see again.

Gurdjieff had a very wide range of knowledge, which embraced modern Western scientific theories as well as the special knowledge he had learned in his years of wandering in the East. But it was not so much what he said or what he did that impressed as what he was. Gurdjieff was a living example of the outcome of his own teaching, which he summed up in the words "the harmonious development of man."

Man, he said, was an unfinished product. Nature had evolved him up to a certain stage and had then left him to his own devices, to struggle to a higher level of consciousness, or to remain as he was, an incomplete being. The distinguishing mark of Gurdjieff is the distinguishing mark of all great teachers. They are remarkable for their being, for what they are, rather than what they do. And it is this which makes it difficult to recognise them, for here in the West we grade men by what they do, not by what they have achieved in their own persons.

There is no need to be surprised, therefore, that Ouspensky's German returned from India without having found a teacher, or that his dealer in parrots had no local following in Bordeaux.

~ • ~