

IMPRESSIONS OF GURDJIEFF

There is a large body of literature, penned by many of Gurdjieff's followers and direct students, that attempts to express their perceptions of him as a truly remarkable man and exceptional spiritual teacher. Two recent biographers have commented on the challenge of evaluating the recollections and impressions of Gurdjieff by his students throughout his long teaching mission in the West, dating from his earliest days in Russia until his death in Paris in 1949.

In *Deconstructing Gurdjieff*, Tobias Churton observes that: "Personal reminiscences of followers, often highly subjective, are frequently at variance with one another." (1)

The man his students wanted to meet was the imagined man who had made archetypal journeys in search of absolute truth in mythical lands among truly remarkable beings. They projected this ideal expectation onto the man they met and interpreted all that was strange about him or his demands as a result of this prior, and apparently completed, quest. (2)

Roger Lipsey comments on the contradictory aspects of Gurdjieff's personality and unorthodox teaching methods in his recent biography *Gurdjieff Reconsidered*, noting that: "Memoirs about Gurdjieff almost invariably dwell on two seemingly opposite features: on the one hand his radiant presence, experienced by others as a felt energy but also a stillness, and on the other hand the intense theater he often created by word, facial expression, gesture, improvised scene setting – occasioning every possible emotion and response from shared laughter and delight to fear and trembling, revolt, alarm, and interpretive alertness in front of a puzzling unknown." (3)

Apart from Gurdjieff's own writings, music and choreography, there is an informed, attractive literature written by two generations of his students. There are, as well, several considered biographies. Overall, there is a surprisingly large published literature in which Gurdjieff is central and revered, in addition to archival resources only now in part coming to light. In this mass of material there are countless anecdotes recording what Gurdjieff said or did at one moment or another. And because at this time there are still living, direct students of Gurdjieff, and students of direct students, the informal library of anecdotes continues to grow . . . Many of those who worked with Gurdjieff have said that he was unknowable, an enigma. In case we were to miss the point, a surprising number of book titles start there: René Zuber's *Who Are You, Mr. Gurdjieff?*, Margaret Anderson's *The Unknowable Gurdjieff*, J.G. Bennett's *Gurdjieff: A Very Great Enigma*. The most recently published account from a participant in Gurdjieff's late years says as much: "I agree with many others in admitting that no one truly knows Mr. Gurdjieff. One can describe events, anecdotes lived in his company, but the wholeness of his person remains impossible to grasp." . . . At some level he may remain unknowable, but like a mosaic of small photographs of a distant planet, their composite impressions cannot help but sum to a portrait.

(4)

John G. Bennett studied with Gurdjieff at the Prieuré in the 1920s and again in Paris in the last few years of his life. Bennett conducted original field research investigating Gurdjieff's travels, teachings and legacy, and is uniquely qualified to provide an overall perspective of his life and interactions with students:

Gurdjieff was a very great enigma in more ways than one. First and most obvious is the fact that no two people who knew him would agree as to who and what he was. If you look at the various books that have been written about Gurdjieff and if you look at his own writings, you will find that no two pictures are the same. Everyone who knew him, upon reading what other people have written about him, feels that they have not got it right. Each one of us believes we saw something that other people did not see. This is no doubt true. It went with the peculiar habit he had of hiding himself, of appearing to be something other than he really was. This was very confusing, and it began from the time he was first known in European countries. (5)

Exactly who Gurdjieff was has intrigued and baffled students and observers alike. When once asked "Who are you?" he replied: "Who are *you*?" Today we are no closer to understanding the man or his mission. Wim van Dullemen is a professional musician and long-time practitioner of the Work, who has taught Movements classes throughout the world for many decades. In *The Gurdjieff Movements* he reflects on the enduring mystery at the heart of Gurdjieff's life:

Gurdjieff left a deep impression on the people who met him. Usually positive, although not always. Most people regarded him as an exceptional man who brought about a turning point in their lives. They spoke of him in glowing terms, described him in their intimate diaries and in the books they published. Sometimes, even someone who just saw him for an instant could not help but write a book about him. It is striking, however, that a woman who had known him her entire life gave him the shortest description of all. "Mr. X," and nothing more. For her, Gurdjieff was an unfathomable phenomenon. (6)

Recollections 1915-1932

P.D. Ouspensky was a respected mathematician, philosopher and seeker of the truth when he met Gurdjieff for the first time in St. Petersburg in 1915. Ultimately, Ouspensky was destined to become Gurdjieff's most famous pupil and author of the highly acclaimed book *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching*, which detailed the psychological and cosmological teachings of the Fourth Way. His first meeting with Gurdjieff was memorable:

I remember this meeting very well. We arrived at a small café in a noisy though not central street. I saw a man of an oriental type, no longer young, with a black mustache 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. I was still full of impressions of the East. And this man with the face of an Indian raja or an Arab sheikh seated here in this little café, where small dealers and commission agents met together, in a black overcoat with a velvet collar and a black 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 and 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 the unexpectedness of this impression . . . I gathered that G. had travelled widely and had been in places of which I had only heard and which I very much wished to visit. Not only did my questions not embarrass him but it seemed to me that he put much more into each answer than I had asked for. I liked his manner of speaking, which was careful and precise. (7)

Later the same year, after working intensively with Gurdjieff, Ouspensky provided further, insightful observations of his teacher's impressive qualities:

During that time I was a good deal with G. and began to understand him better. One was struck by a great inner simplicity and naturalness in him which made one completely forget that he was, for us, the representative of the world of the miraculous and the unknown. Furthermore, one felt very strongly in him the entire absence of any kind of affectation or desire to produce an impression. And together with this one felt an absence of personal interest in anything he was doing, a complete indifference to ease and comfort and a capacity for not sparing himself in work whatever that work might be . . . I was particularly attracted by his sense of humor and the complete absence of any pretention to "sanctity" or to the possession of "miraculous" powers, although, as we became convinced later, he possessed then the knowledge and ability of creating unusual phenomena of a psychological character. But he always laughed at people who expected miracles from him. He was an extraordinarily versatile man, he knew everything and could do everything. (8)

Sophie Grigorievna Ouspensky (commonly referred to as Madame Ouspensky) first met Gurdjieff in Russia in 1916. Along with her husband, she was destined to play a significant role in the dissemination of Gurdjieff's teachings in England and America. Her terse description of Gurdjieff captures his enigmatic and unknowable nature:

I do not pretend to understand Georgi Ivanovitch. For me he is X. All that I know is that he is my teacher and it is not right for me to judge him, nor is it necessary for me to understand him. No one knows who is the real Georgi Ivanovitch, for he hides himself from all of us. (9)

Thomas de Hartmann was an acclaimed composer in St. Petersburg when he met Gurdjieff in December 1916. "He recognized at once in Gurdjieff the teacher who could bring him what he had long been searching for, a search shared by his wife. The two of

them gave up their life of comfort and luxury to work with Gurdjieff, and followed him wherever life took them for the next twelve years.” (10) During that period, he collaborated with Gurdjieff in composing more than 250 piano pieces, which came to be known as the Gurdjieff/de Hartmann music. In *Our Life with Mr. Gurdjieff*, he describes his first meeting with Gurdjieff:

I must say that my first reaction was anything but one of rapture or veneration. There was a moment of heavy silence. My eyes could not avoid noticing the detachable cuffs, which were not very clean. Then I thought: You have to speak. I made a great effort and forced myself to say to him that I wished to be admitted to his Work. Mr. Gurdjieff asked the reason for my request. Perhaps I was not happy in life? I answered that I was perfectly happy in my everyday life. But, I added, all this was not enough. ‘Without inner growth,’ I said, ‘there is no life at all for me; both my wife and I are searching for a way to develop.’ By this time I realized that the eyes of Mr. Gurdjieff were of unusual depth and penetration. Until that moment I had never seen such eyes nor felt such a look. Mr. Gurdjieff listened and then said that we would speak later about the question that interested me . . . This ended the conversation, and Zakharov and I left. For a long time I could not speak. Eventually, I told Zakharov about my strong impression and about Mr. Gurdjieff’s eyes. ‘Yes,’ I said, ‘I understand. And certainly you will never see such eyes again.’ (11)

Olga de Hartmann was Gurdjieff’s secretary and personal assistant for many years. Her first meeting with him is also recorded in *Our Life with Mr. Gurdjieff*:

Quite unexpectedly – like a black panther – a man of oriental appearance, such as I had never seen before, came in. He went to the sofa and sat down with his legs crossed in the Eastern manner. He began to speak about love. ‘There are different kinds. When it is self-love, egoistical love, or temporary attraction, it hinders self-development, because it ties a man down and he is not free. But if it is real love, with each one wishing to help the other, then it is different; and I am also glad if husband and wife are both interested in these ideas, because they can help each other.’ I could scarcely look up. Nevertheless, I had a distinct feeling that Mr. Gurdjieff was looking at me. I am certain that he said this especially for me. I was in a very strange state, I was so happy. (12)

Olgivanna Hinzenberg met Gurdjieff in 1919 and worked intensively with him until 1924 when he told her that she had learned all that she could from him and must now live her life based on the spiritual principles he taught her. “When she first saw him, she was instantly drawn to his compassion and depth of human understanding. A strong sensation of certainty, of illumination, of absolute conviction gripped her. She had no doubt that this was meant to be. Without a moment’s hesitation, then and there, she decided to join his group of followers. And there began a most remarkable, fruitful, and sacred relationship between teacher and pupil.” (13) Gurdjieff quickly found her to be a dedicated student: eager to learn and absorb his teachings, never hesitating to meet his strict demands or resisting his unorthodox teaching methods. She emigrated to the United States in 1924 where she met her future husband, the renowned architect Frank Lloyd

Wright. In later years she introduced many of Gurdjieff's ideas and exercises to the students of Wright's Taliesin schools of architecture in Wisconsin and New Mexico. Her first meeting with Gurdjieff is chronicled in *The Life of Olgivanna Lloyd Wright*:

It was a long way to the two-story house. We climbed the wooden stairway up to a rather barren room where a small group of people surrounded a buffet table on which were an unusual variety of foods. In the midst of this group I instantly saw the remarkable man Valya had told me about. Gurdjieff did indeed look remarkable. He had a closely shaven head and classic features, with a fine nose and strong jaws; his eyes were dark and luminous. It was a noble face, with the traditional oriental moustache. His expression was of profound strength and great compassion. After a while, five women separated themselves from the rest and began to do the exercises which could even be called "dance." What impressed me most was that Gurdjieff created an intricate geometric pattern with a calculated mathematical sequence. The movements were so unusual that I could not place them in any category known to me. Throughout the entire event, the presence of Gurdjieff could be sensed, radiating, overpowering. (14)

Jeanne and Alexander de Salzmann were close students of Gurdjieff and played integral roles in the development of his Fourth Way teachings in the West. She met Gurdjieff in 1919 in Tiflis, became committed to his work, and was his closest student for thirty years. After his death in 1949, she assumed leadership of the Work, establishing Gurdjieff centres in Paris, London and New York, arranging for publication of his writings and the preservation of the Movements. Before he died, Gurdjieff famously charged her "to live to be over 100." Mme de Salzmann died in Paris in 1990 at the age of 101. Her first impression of her teacher is vividly described in her seminal book *The Reality of Being*:

When I met George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff I was thirty years old and living in the Caucasus mountain range of what was then southern Russia. At the time I had a deep need to understand the meaning of life but was dissatisfied with explanations that seemed theoretical, not really useful. The first impression of Gurdjieff was very strong, unforgettable. He had an expression I had never seen, and an intelligence, a force, that was different, not the usual intelligence of the thinking mind but a vision that could see everything. He was, at the same time, both kind and very, very demanding. You felt he would see you and show you what you were in a way you would never forget in your whole life. It was impossible really to know Gurdjieff. The impression he gave of himself was never the same. With some people who did not know him, he played the role of a spiritual master, behaving as they expected, and then let them go away. But if he saw they were looking for something higher, he might take them to dinner and speak about interesting subjects, amuse them, make them laugh. This behavior seemed to be more spontaneous, more "free." But was it really freer, or did it only seem so because he intended to appear like that? You might think you knew Gurdjieff very well, but then he would act quite differently and you would see that you did not really know him. He was like an irresistible force, not dependent only on one form but continually giving birth to forms. (15)

John G. Bennett was head of a section of British intelligence in Constantinople when he met Gurdjieff in 1920. He subsequently worked briefly with Gurdjieff at the Prieuré before returning to England where he studied with P.D. Ouspensky in the 1920s and 1930s. In 1948 he reunited with Gurdjieff in Paris and for the remainder of his life led groups in England. In his autobiography *Witness*, he describes his 1920 meeting:

It must have been half-past nine before Gurdjieff appeared. When we were introduced, I met the strangest eyes I have ever seen. The two eyes were so different that I wondered if the light had played some trick on me. But Mrs. Beaumont afterwards made the same remark, and added that the difference was in the expression of the eyes. He was short, but very powerfully built. I guessed that he was about fifty, but Mrs. Beaumont was sure that he was older. His age was as much of an enigma as everything else about him. I felt quite at ease with him, but she told me afterwards that she felt uncomfortable, as if he knew some secret about us that we would prefer to keep hidden. All this was quite beyond me, and it was not until much later that I discovered that Gurdjieff had the peculiar property of appearing to be a different man to everyone who met him. (16)

Margaret Anderson was the American founder, editor and publisher, from 1914 to 1929, of the arts and literary magazine *The Little Review*. She was introduced to Gurdjieff's teachings in a lecture delivered in New York in January 1924. Shortly thereafter, she travelled to France with a group of her friends and met Gurdjieff at the Prieuré. It was a meeting that forever changed her life: "I often try to imagine what life would have been like without Gurdjieff. The first image that comes to me is a simple one: it would be like trying to imagine, from a prison window, what life is like outside." (17). Her first impression of Gurdjieff is recorded in *The Unknowable Gurdjieff*:

I had just time to look carefully at a dark man with an oriental face, whose life seemed to reside in his eyes. He had a presence impossible to describe because I have never encountered another with which to compare it. In other words, as one would immediately recognize Einstein as a 'great man,' we immediately recognized Gurdjieff as the kind of man we had never seen – a seer, a prophet, a messiah? We had been prepared from the first to regard him as a man different from other men, in the sense that he possessed what was called 'higher knowledge.' He was known as a great teacher and the knowledge he had to offer was that which, in occult books and in the schools of the East, is given through allegory, dialogue, parable, oracle, scripture, or direct esoteric knowledge. (18)

In January 1924, Charles Stanley Nott, an employee at the Sunrise Turn bookstore (where A.R. Orage gave talks on Gurdjieff's teachings), attended a performance of sacred dances presented by Gurdjieff. He was immediately struck by the special quality of the dancers' movements and their sense of presence. Nott began attending Orage's classes and later travelled to the Prieuré in France and worked intensively with Gurdjieff. In his later years, he published two important books – *Teachings of Gurdjieff* and *Journey Through This World* – chronicling his experiences with Gurdjieff and P.D. Ouspensky,

with whom he also studied. However, he regarded Gurdjieff as his true teacher: “I get more for inner work from one lunch with Mr. Gurdjieff than from a year of Mr. Ouspensky’s groups.” (19)

A few minutes after Margaret Anderson had gone, Orage and Dr. Stjoernal came in. At once, I sensed that I was a mere youth in the presence of these adult men. Very soon I made another and more striking comparison: Gurdjieff arrived, very impressive in a black coat with an astrakhan collar and wearing an astrakhan cap. With a twinkle in his eyes he began to joke with the others. Then he walked round, and I found him standing beside me. I looked up, and was struck by the expression in his eyes, with the depth of understanding and compassion in them. He radiated tremendous power and ‘being’ such as I had never in all my travels met in any man, and I sensed that, compared with him, both Dr. Stjoernal and Orage were as young men to an elder. (20)

Jean Toomer was an American writer associated with the ‘Harlem Renaissance’ and author of the acclaimed novel *Cane*. He worked with Gurdjieff at the Prieuré from 1924 to 1929, and led study groups, with the permission of A.R. Orage, in Harlem and Chicago. In the 1930s he became increasingly disillusioned with Gurdjieff’s often outrageous behaviour and incessant money demands. Finally, in 1936, he broke with Gurdjieff altogether. Yet he did hold him in high esteem, especially his physical prowess:

I saw this man in motion, a unit in motion. He was completely of one piece. From the crown of his head down the back of the head, down the neck, down the back and down the legs, there was a remarkable line. Shall I call it a gathered line? It suggested coordination, integration, knitness, power. I was fascinated by the way the man walked. As his feet touched the floor there seemed to be no weight on them at all – a glide, a stride, a weightless walk. (21)

In 1927, writer and literary critic Solita Solano, who was close friends with Margaret Anderson and Jane Heap, met Gurdjieff at the Prieuré. Her first impression of him was decidedly negative:

It was in 1927 that I first met Mr. Gurdjieff. Margaret Anderson and Jane Heap had invited me to go with them to the Prieuré in Fontainebleau, saying, ‘There you will see not one man, but a million men in one.’ The magnitude of this integer excited me. I hoped for a demigod, a superman of saintly countenance, not this ‘strange’ *écru* man about whom I could see nothing extraordinary except the size and power of his eyes. The impact everyone expected him to make upon me did not arrive. In the evening I listened to a reading from his vaunted book. It bored me. Thereupon I rejected him intellectually, although with good humour. Later in the study-house (how annoyed I was that women were not allowed to smoke there) I heard the famous music. This, almost from the first measure, I also rejected. A week or so later in Paris I accompanied Margaret and Jane, who had not quite given me up, to a restaurant, which Mr. Gurdjieff was coming to eat with about twenty of his followers. He seated me next to him and for two

hours muttered in broken English. I rejected his language, the suit he was wearing and his table manners; I decided that I rather disliked him. (22)

However, Solano soon began to perceive Gurdjieff in a different light and during the 1930s became an integral member of the all-women group called “The Rope.” He gave her the nickname ‘Kanari,’ said to represent her “inner animal,” It was a testament to his trust in her that, beginning in 1937, she served as Gurdjieff’s personal secretary for many years.

Recollections 1933-1949

Louise Welch was a member of A.R. Orage’s New York study group in the late 1920s; she met Gurdjieff in 1934 and became his student, along with her husband Dr. William Welch. She also worked with P.D. and Madame Ouspensky in the 1940s at Franklin Farms before re-connecting with Gurdjieff again in his final years. Following Gurdjieff’s death, she became a senior leader at the Gurdjieff Foundation of New York and in Toronto. She was also the chief editor of the *Guide and Index to Gurdjieff’s All and Everything*, published in 1971. She recounted her initial impression of Gurdjieff in *Orage with Gurdjieff in America*:

Gurdjieff’s lithe movements had put me in mind of a great cat – a lion or a puma – with coiled strength, which he could unfold at will. Indeed, as I recall what I felt in the Gurdjieff that I saw then, the dominant impression was one of force. To my eager gaze, he was all Being, a natural phenomenon, a mountain stream of energy which could flood in a torrent or bide in time as noiselessly as water in a well . . . Those great dark eyes, gleaming with intentions we could hardly guess, could make us shiver at a glance. The timid were put off by his candor, his perspicacity and, most of all, by what we used to call his ‘look.’ For some it was a loving, impartial statement, but there were others who dreaded it. All of us, whether we loved or feared him, or took turns doing both, recognized Gurdjieff as formidable. (23)

P.L. Travers was the author of the *Mary Poppins* series of books, the famous fictional nanny. She met Gurdjieff in 1938 in Paris and worked with him and Jane Heap for many years. She subsequently became a senior leader of the Work in London until her death in 1996. Travers was also a frequent contributor to the influential journal *Parabola: Myth, Tradition, and the Search for Meaning*. Her sensitive reading of Gurdjieff is revealing:

He was a serene, massive man who looked at one with a long, contemplative, all-knowing glance. I felt myself in a presence. He had a certain quality that one might call mythological. Later, when I came to be his student, I always felt the same way. He was a man whom you recognized but you didn’t know what you were recognizing . . . When we were in Gurdjieff’s presence, we felt his energy infused in us. He could deliver this to anyone in the room. He had something very high and not within our ordinary comprehension. (24)

French journalist and photographer Henri Tracol was a senior pupil of Gurdjieff for ten years. After his death, he worked closely with Jeanne de Salzmann and served for a time as president of the Gurdjieff Institute in Paris. His first encounter with his teacher, in 1938, is recorded in *The Taste For Things That Are True*:

I am tempted to recall his massive presence, the serene power, at once formidable and reassuring. Which emanated from his whole being – his bearing, his gestures, his manner. I can still hear his voice resounding in me, arousing echoes that are ever fresh and new. Above all, I find myself standing before him, his eyes in mine, confronting the exacting benevolence of his gaze. Exacting, yes, and at times fiery and merciless. He seemed to guess the best as well as the worst in us, and being an expert in such matters, he smiled. That smile was ironic and compassionate, but quite without indulgence. Nothing escaped him. We felt him always ready to act without pity toward the oppressors of our own selves which, without knowing it, we were. This can be truly called: love. (25)

Solange Claustres met Gurdjieff in Paris in 1940, an event which profoundly changed the arc of her life. She became one of Gurdjieff's most dedicated students and was skilled at performing the Movements. Following his death, she became a longtime teacher of the Movements at the Gurdjieff Institute in Paris. Her poignant description of Gurdjieff (26) appears in *Becoming Conscious with G.I. Gurdjieff*:

He had absolutely no air of 'Master,' 'saintliness,' 'wisdom,' or 'one who knows.' He did nothing that could give the impression of a 'Master'; on the contrary he willingly confused visitors. One was either sensitive or not to what emanated from him. It was the exchanges on work on oneself that gave the measure of what he really was. I can see now his strong, solid build, his broad shoulders. A great presence and strength emanated from him, with something intangible, of extreme subtlety; his movements were supple and cat-like; he had an open face, calm and serious, with oriental features, and a tanned complexion. He had a very strong physical presence, but his behavior was quite unostentatious. He was simple, quiet, ever watchful, attentive, with a calm stillness that reminded me of a lion, or an elephant, symbolizing for me G. Gurdjieff's qualities of unerring sureness, self-mastery and *immediate presence always ready for action*. (27)

René Zuber worked as a photographer and filmmaker in France during World War II. He met Gurdjieff in 1943 and studied with him as part of his Paris group. In January 1949, Zuber was appointed by Gurdjieff as his representative for France, charged with the continuation of the Work and the publication of his writings. After the death of Gurdjieff, he was instrumental in directing Jeanne de Salzmann's archival films of the Movements. His depiction of Gurdjieff is from *Who Are You, Monsieur Gurdjieff?*

When I knew him in 1943, he was no longer young. He had both the majesty of an old man and the agility of a fencer capable of delivering a lightning

thrust; no matter how unpredictable his changes of mood, however surprising his manifestations, his impressive calm never deserted him. “He looks like Bodhidharma,” Philippe Lavastine had told me before taking me to see him, “because he has the sternness of an awakener of conscience, and because of his large moustaches.” (28)

Paul Beekman Taylor was the son of Edith Taylor, whose daughter Eve was fathered by Gurdjieff. He was born in London and lived at the Prieuré as a youth and, as an adult, studied with Gurdjieff from 1948 to 1949. Academically, he was a Fulbright Scholar and professor of Medieval English Languages and Literature at the University of Geneva. He has also conducted extensive research into Gurdjieff’s life and teachings, and has written a number of important books related to Gurdjieff. In this excerpt from his *Shadows of Heaven: Gurdjieff and Toomer*, Taylor adopts a dispassionate, and somewhat baffled, perspective in assessing Gurdjieff and his unorthodox teaching methods:

By his speech, dress, and postures, Gurdjieff seemed to do his utmost to maintain distance, as if he would encourage others to hear the teaching instead of seeing and sensing the man, and yet, when the performance grated, stung, or even soothed, one was attracted towards the spectacle of the man more often than to the sense of his message . . . Consequently, life with Gurdjieff was like being in the midst of a three-ring circus, with too many things going on at once to know where one stood or what one was to see. No wonder so many people seemed unaware of the presence of anyone else in the group except themselves and Gurdjieff, who played clown and trickster. Everything he said could be taken as a joke, an absurdity, or a profound observation in disguise; and yet all the serious pupils were stone-faced and tense in his presence. They were either afraid or unsure of themselves, whether even to laugh at Gurdjieff’s jokes; and, above all, Gurdjieff had an enormous sense of humor, an appreciation of the absurd he found and even incited all about him. As for myself, I little understood his method and faintly heard his message, but I was intrigued by both his performance and the different reactions of others to it. (29)

In November 1921, Kenneth Walker, a respected London surgeon, attended a lecture by P.D. Ouspensky, and for the next two decades studied under him. In 1922 he visited the Prieuré and met Gurdjieff. After a short stay, he returned to England to continue his studies with Ouspensky. However, over the years he became disillusioned with the ‘System’ taught by Ouspensky. After his teacher’s death, he and his wife travelled to Paris and worked with Gurdjieff. Walker was regenerated both physically and spiritually, and he and his wife were strongly affected by Gurdjieff. (30) In *Venture with Ideas*, he conveys the essence of Gurdjieff’s presence:

All that is possible to do is to give the impressions which Gurdjieff created in me and these can be summed up in the generalization that for me he represented the outcome of the work. By this I mean that he had achieved greater consciousness, control and unity than those possessed by other men. It is true that the consciousness of another person cannot be measured objectively but the greater a man’s consciousness, the more control he is able

to exercise over his various functions. Everything that Gurdjieff did seemed to originate from within. When he became angry, which he sometimes did, his anger had the appearance of being deliberate and it was laid on one side as soon as it had served its purpose. The dark eyes would then regain their twinkle, the stern face would relax and the conversation would be resumed at the point at which it had been suddenly broken off. He never fumbled in his thoughts or his movements. The latter were always purposeful and made with the strictest economy of effort, like those of a cat, and his immense capacity for work was due to this ability of his never to waste energy. (31)

Dorothy Phillpotts was introduced to Gurdjieff's teachings in 1941, when she and her husband attended a series of lectures in London given by John G. Bennett. In 1948, as part of a large group of Bennett's students, she travelled to Paris and met Gurdjieff for the first time. Her reading of Gurdjieff was very perceptive as she quickly understood his subtle ways of working with students. (32). In *Discovering Gurdjieff*, she recounts her initial impression of him:

The first time I saw him he was coming slowly into the room, an old man, not tall, and of ponderous nature. He smiled in greeting to a friend and an extraordinary warmth radiated from him. One could see that although physical energy might be low, there was at the same time a tremendous inner strength and control over the bodily mechanism. His head, on which he usually wore a fez, attracted and held one's attention, as it was very finely proportioned, with a high domed forehead, and was clean-shaven. His dark eyes probed accurately, and at once, to the depth of any matter, while his long white moustache, worn Turkish fashion, adorned a face unusual in a man of his age, with its honey-coloured complexion surprisingly free of wrinkles. (33)

In 1942, Dorothy Caruso, widow of the famed tenor Enrico Caruso, met Margaret Anderson and began a long-lasting friendship with her. She was introduced to Gurdjieff in 1948. Although initially unimpressed with Gurdjieff and somewhat confused about his unconventional teaching methods, she soon developed a close relationship with him: "I felt a glow as if there had been established between us a new and special bond – a kind of unspoken sympathetic understanding." Her impressions of Gurdjieff are captured in Anderson's *The Unknown Gurdjieff*:

When I saw Gurdjieff all my preconceived ideas vanished. For I saw an old man, grey with weariness and illness, yet whose strength of spirit emanated with such force from his weakened body that, save for a sense of fierce protection, I felt no deep emotion at all. I could not understand his English. His low voice and Asiatic accent formed syllables that had no meaning to me, and at the same time, I realized that at this moment ordinary speech was unimportant. It was as if we had already spoken and were continuing to speak, but in a language without sound. He sat relaxed with one foot folded under him, on a divan opposite us, slowly eating morsels of lamb and hard bits of goat cheese and fresh tarragon leaves with his fingers. His eyebrows rose

above his lowered lids when a murmur reached him, but he did not turn his head to look – he seemed to see without looking. At the end of the meal he began to talk. I scarcely understood a word, but I was galvanized to a zenith of attention: every expression of his face and each small movement of his body I found heartbreaking. I thought, ‘The kind of force he is using is wearing him out. Why must he go on doing it? Why do they let him?’ (34)

After John G. Bennett left the Prieuré in 1923 he studied with Ouspensky in London, eventually forming his own study groups. By the end of the Second World War, his groups had greatly expanded in numbers, and in 1948 he returned to Gurdjieff in Paris, bringing with him many of his followers. At this time, he recorded his impression of Gurdjieff after a span of twenty-five years:

Madame de Salzman and my wife returned in a few moments with Gurdjieff. I turned to see him standing on the threadbare carpet, changed even more than his surroundings. The dark, sweeping moustaches had turned white and the brilliant, mocking face had lost its firm outline. He was old and sad; but his skin was smooth and he held himself as erect as ever. I felt a sudden warmth towards him, very different from the youthful awe and the timidity with which I had approached him at the Prieuré. He wore a red fez. His open shirt and untidy trousers were more in keeping with his whole appearance than the smart French suits he wore in 1923. He moved, as always, with a grace and an economy of gesture that were in themselves enough to induce in those near him a sense of relaxation and well-being. Madame de Salzman introduced me, saying that he would remember me from the Prieuré. He said, “No, I not remember.” He looked at me for a few moments in silence and added: “You are Number Eighteen. Not big Number Eighteen but small Number Eighteen.” I had no idea what he meant, but his manner made me feel happy and at home. He might not remember me, but I was satisfied that he had accepted me. It was twenty-five years to a month since I had left the Prieuré, but seeing him, time disappeared and it was as if I had never left him. (35)

William Welch was an American medical doctor who was introduced into the Work by his future wife Louise. He first met Gurdjieff in New York in 1934, and for many years he was his personal physician when he visited America. He became president of the Gurdjieff Foundation of New York following the death of John Pentland in 1984, while continuing to lead groups in New York City and Canada. His memoir, *What Happened in Between*, includes an account of his experience as a pupil of Gurdjieff:

I recall Gurdjieff sitting, one leg tucked under him, on a small sofa at the head of his table. He was an old man, hardly a year from his death, benevolent and patriarchal, magnetic as ever but no longer the fierce and challenging dancing master of his earlier years. His white, long-horn moustaches curled up at the ends, his swarthy skin, his chin on his chest as he watched the crowded table from large, upturned dark eyes that appeared to be looking inward as well as outward – these details remain indelibly fixed in my memory . . . He was a master cook in the preparation of his native dishes and an exacting autocrat over his kitchen. The smaller the kitchen, the more he reveled in it, and the

more elaborate the meals he planned. Yet he never lived grandly, indeed, he seemed almost perversely intent on surroundings of the simplest character. (36)

Even in death, Gurdjieff radiated a strange power and presence. In *Idiots in Paris*, Elizabeth Bennett, wife of John G. Bennett, paints a compelling portrait of Gurdjieff resting in state:

I was overwhelmed by the force that came from him. One could not be near his body without feeling unmistakably his power. He looked magnificent; composed, content, *intentional*, for want of a better word. Not simply a body placed by someone else. He was undisguised, nothing was concealed from us. Everything belonging to him, his inner and outer life and all the circumstances and results of it, were there to be seen, if one could see. What force there was in him then! I have never seen anything in any way like it. This, I think, was what I had dreaded: I could not bear to see him with the force gone from him. Yet in fact I saw his power for the first time unobscured. (37)

Dr. Welch was at Gurdjieff's bedside at his death in 1949. Following his passing, he remarked that "he died peacefully, all the stresses and lines of a sick man were gone from his face, and he was as composed as he was in life. I have seen many men die. He died like a king." (38)

Commentary

The above recollections and impressions of Gurdjieff by his students cover a span of forty-five years, from the early Russian years to the Institute at the Prieuré in France, to his apartments in Paris during and after the War. Clearly, each observer's perspective was subjective, seen through their own eyes and coloured by their personal history and level of inner development. Henri Tracol concurs:

The image of the same man is inevitably different from everyone who comes into contact with him, and since the image is necessarily created by the beholder it is subject to change and fluctuates according to the beholder's idiosyncrasies. It would be fruitless, therefore, from various personal reminiscences, subjective and fragmentary as they are, to attempt to reconstruct what could only be the robot-portrait of a ghost. (39)

However, there is a certain degree of consistency across time and place in their accounts, which supports biographer Roger Lipsey's contention of an emerging "mosaic" of Gurdjieff, reflecting two complementary poles ("presence and stillness" vs. "intense theatre") guiding his motivations and behaviours. This echoes his famous adage "Every stick has two ends."

John G. Bennett has suggested that a further factor may be at play explaining Gurdjieff's actions and subsequent effects on his students – his mission to introduce the ancient Fourth Way path of spiritual development to the West:

Scores of personal accounts of the impression made by Gurdjieff on those who worked with him for many years, or even met him only casually, have appeared in books and periodicals. Each is necessarily subjective, for Gurdjieff was an enigma presenting a different face to every person and to every occasion. The principal reason why personal impressions have so little value is that Gurdjieff was from start to finish a seeker experimenting with different ways of living and behaving and with different means for accomplishing his life's work . . . He had devoted the first half of his life to this greatest of undertakings, and in the second he set himself to share with others the conclusions he had reached. In this way he was not wholly successful because nearly all who met him were obsessed with their personal problems and needs and insisted upon looking at him as 'their' teacher. He had immense compassion and gave himself freely . . . The impression he made upon people was usually needlessly distorted by the way of life he had deliberately set himself, of arousing hostility by 'treading heavily on the most sensitive corn of everyone he met.' (40)

Gurdjieff clearly radiated a force which the Sufis call '*baraka*,' or spiritual power. This inner power was the propelling source of the outer behaviour and actions which were patently visible to his students. Only the most highly developed of his pupils (such as Jeanne de Salzmann) were able to perceive this true spiritual core. (41)

René Zuber also seems to have sensed the great depth of Gurdjieff's being: "He seemed to be filled with an experience – almost incommunicable – which would set him at an unbearable distance from the common run of mortals." (42)

It is impossible to place Gurdjieff in any conventional psychological typology – he defies categories, and even poetic strokes of the pen. Some have spoken of an "other-worldly" sense to his being, which transcends the earthly existence of ordinary mortals. One of his French students from the 1940s, Francois Grunwald, perhaps speaks for many of Gurdjieff's direct students as he eloquently captures this quality in a recollection of his teacher:

My ineradicable impression is that Mr. Gurdjieff was made of another clay than the rest of us. I felt him as come from another planet to convey something that our earth-bound intelligence cannot easily encompass. And above all to share the immense force which emanated from him until he left us – a force, yes, which people whom he met received in very different ways, as they could. Certain people saw in him a luminous angel, others the devil in person, an accomplished rogue, an altruistic saint. I, Francois Grunwald, constantly felt a goodness, a generous source of inner energy free of all sentimentality. (43)

Ultimately, each student's impression of Gurdjieff is secondary in comparison to the crucial effect he had on their spiritual development. William Welch writes: "Somehow Gurdjieff managed to touch each one in a deeply personal way, while remaining himself

impersonal yet concerned, remote and curiously just. It seemed to correspond with each one's sense of aspiration and at the same time with the recognition of one's own nothingness on the scale of eternity." (44) Dorothy Caruso shares her own experience of confronting her 'automatism' and awakening to her essential nature under Gurdjieff's wise guidance:

I began to see myself as I really was – a mass of old habits, of silly gestures and foolish words; merely a repetition of everything I had seen or heard. I learned about justice, compassion, mercy. I learned about 'objective love.' I learned that the more you hold in of yourself, the more powerfully you give out. Gurdjieff was an idea in the form of a man. The inner part of him, the idea, he allowed no one to see. He never, by word, gesture or expression gave any of his essential being away. That was his secret, his spiritual mystery. But it was a mystery only because he did not choose to let us know. Otherwise he would not have been a conscious man. (45)

NOTES

- (1) Tobias Churton *Deconstructing Gurdjieff* (Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions, 2017), p. xiii.
- (2) Tobias Churton *Deconstructing Gurdjieff* (Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions, 2017), p. xx.
- (3) Roger Lipsey *Gurdjieff Reconsidered: The Life, the Teachings, the Legacy* (Boulder: Shambhala, 2019), p. 24.
- (4) Roger Lipsey *Gurdjieff Reconsidered: The Life, the Teachings, the Legacy* (Boulder: Shambhala, 2019), pp. 2-4.
- (5) J.G. Bennett *Gurdjieff: A Very Great Enigma* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1973), p. 1.
- (6) Wim van Dullemen *The Gurdjieff Movements* (Chino Valley, Arizona: Hohm Press, 2018), p. 3.
- (7) P.D. Ouspensky *In Search of the Miraculous* (New York: Harcourt, 2001), pp. 7-8.
- (8) P.D. Ouspensky *In Search of the Miraculous* (New York: Harcourt, 2001), pp. 33-34.
- (9) John G. Bennett *Witness: The Autobiography of John G. Bennett* (Tucson: Omen Press, 1974), p. 158.
- (10) Thomas and Olga de Hartmann *Our Life with Mr. Gurdjieff* (London: Arkana, 1992), p. xxiv.

- (11) Thomas and Olga de Hartmann *Our Life with Mr. Gurdjieff* (London: Arkana, 1992), pp. 7-8.
- (12) Thomas and Olga de Hartmann *Our Life with Mr. Gurdjieff* (London: Arkana, 1992), pp. 11-12.
- (13) Maxine Fawcett-Yeske and Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer *The Life of Olgivanna Lloyd Wright* (United States: ORO Editions, 2017), p. 11.
- (14) Maxine Fawcett-Yeske and Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer *The Life of Olgivanna Lloyd Wright* (United States: ORO Editions, 2017), p. 34.
- (15) Jeanne de Salzmann *The Reality of Being* (Boston: Shambhala, 2010), p. 1.
- (16) John G. Bennett *Witness: The Autobiography of John G. Bennett* (Tucson: Omen Press, 1974), p. 55.
- (17) Margaret Anderson *The Unknowable Gurdjieff* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 2.
- (18) Margaret Anderson *The Unknowable Gurdjieff* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), pp. 77-78.
- (19) C.S. Nott *Journey Through This World* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1974), p. 110.
- (20) C.S. Nott *Teachings of Gurdjieff* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1962), p. 20.
- (21) William Patrick Patterson *Ladies of the Rope* (Fairfax, California: Arete Communications, 1999), p. 43.
- (22) Margaret Anderson *The Unknowable Gurdjieff* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), pp. 28-29.
- (23) Louise Welch *Orage with Gurdjieff in America* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), p. 83.
- (24) Roger Lipsey "Gurdjieff Observed" in Jacob Needleman and George Baker (eds.) *Gurdjieff: Essays and Reflections on the Man and His Teaching* (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1996), p. 329.
- (25) Henri Tracol *The Taste For Things That Are True* (Rockport, Massachusetts: Element Books, 1994), p. 108.
- (26) Solange Claustres pays homage to her teacher, whom she perceived was gifted with

special qualities and abilities of a spiritual nature: “One would have to have been in George Gurdjieff’s presence to be able to fully understand his great knowledge, his deep understanding, his benevolence, his love of others, his simplicity. His strictness as a teacher enabled us to think, wake up and become fully developed. His behavior in any situation was in the present moment without weakness, without error, and above all without judgment.” In *Becoming Conscious with G.I. Gurdjieff* (Utrecht, Netherlands, 2009), pp. 17-18) she writes:

He alone gave me a deep feeling of security and trust, which no one else gave me. Through his quality of listening, I could be myself, and express myself. He summoned up and aroused my abilities, put them to the test, making me conscious of them, and enabling me to trust them; which is what I most needed. He both confirmed and guided my searching, my feelings and my intuition. My life took on a more precise meaning in a path that I was already following but only groping around in the fog, reading everything, questioning, wanting to know and understand everything. This relationship did not involve any sentimentality or mysticism. I never felt him to be in any way manipulative, dogmatic, paternalistic or egotistic. He was a good, strict teacher, never unjust, whose ever wakeful attention never missed anything that was happening.

(27) Solange Claustres *Becoming Conscious with G.I. Gurdjieff* (Utrecht, Netherlands, 2009), pp. 23-24.

(28) René Zuber *Who Are You, Monsieur Gurdjieff?* (London: Arkana, 1990), p. 3.

(29) Paul Beekman Taylor *Shadows of Heaven: Gurdjieff and Toomer* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1998), p. 182.

(30) In Kenneth Walker’s *The Making of Man* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963, pp. 122-123) he recounts an interesting conversation with his wife in which they compare their impressions of Gurdjieff:

“What did you think of Mr. Gurdjieff?” There was a long pause. “He’s the most astonishing man I’ve ever met. The chief impression he gave me was an impression of immense vigour and of concentrated strength. I had the feeling that he was not really a man but a magician.” I agree,” I answered, “But behind all that strength and apparent ruthlessness, I saw something else. If need be, he could probably be brutal and ruthless, but only in the way that a surgeon is ruthless when he has the job of removing a tumor. I caught a glimpse of a man with an immense compassion for all mankind. There is a gentleness, patience and compassion there, as well as a great strength. There is also plenty of mirth and laughter. But the word that came to my mind first, was the word ‘compassion.’ He made me think of the Buddha as he sat cross-legged on the divan.” “I think you are probably right,” my wife answered, “but he is a man who has to be treated with great care. Sitting near him is like sitting near to a Power House. He radiates strength and I think he could do almost anything with one that he wanted to do.”

- (31) Kenneth Walker *Venture With Ideas* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1972), p. 153.
- (32) G.J. Blom *Gurdjieff: Harmonic Development* (Netherlands: Basta AudioVisuals, 2005), p. 60.
- Later I discovered that Gurdjieff's presence could be stern as well as mild. In the face of human suffering, whether physical or mental, his compassion and pity were bottomless, and he would overtire himself to help those who needed him – but with pretense and charlatanism he would deal ruthlessly and uncompromisingly. Occasionally he would use violent expressions to shake people out of their egoism, and this, coupled with his prodigious sense of humour, sometimes led those who met him on few occasions only to form a completely inaccurate picture of his character. Such people might take the wildest jokes and descriptions quite literally, forgetting the value of parables, and misunderstanding practically everything said, they would then go away and misinterpret the whole teaching. To this Gurdjieff was quite indifferent – he even said that the people who helped him most were his best enemies.
- (33) Dorothy Phillpotts *Discovering Gurdjieff* (United Kingdom: AuthorHouse, 2008), p. xv.
- (34) Margaret Anderson *The Unknowable Gurdjieff* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), pp. 177-178.
- (35) John G. Bennett *Witness: The Autobiography of John G. Bennett* (Tucson: Omen Press, 1974), pp. 237-238.
- (36) William Welch *What Happened in Between* (New York: George Braziller, 1972), pp. 121-122.
- (37) John G. Bennett and Elizabeth Bennett *Idiots in Paris* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1991), p. 134.
- (38) John G. Bennett and Elizabeth Bennett *Idiots in Paris* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1991), p. 134.
- (39) Henri Tracol *The Taste For Things That Are True* (Rockport, Massachusetts: Element Books, 1994), p. 108.
- (40) J.G. Bennett *Gurdjieff: Making a New World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), pp. 2-3.
- (41) Several decades after Gurdjieff's passing, Jeanne de Salzman gave testament to her

deep level of spiritual awakening when she expressed these profound sentiments in a letter to senior Gurdjieff teachers and pupils in New York:

I wish to tell you this: Once more I recognize the truth I experienced in front of Mr. Gurdjieff's body, and which has become a certitude. There is no death. Life cannot die. The coating uses us, the form disintegrates, but life is – is always there – even if for us it is the unknown.

Ravi Ravindra, a student of de Salzmann, also records an intriguing statement she made near the end of her life regarding Gurdjieff's death in *Heart Without Measure* (Halifax: Shaila Press, 1999), p. 145:

Madame de Salzmann was in the New York Foundation on the occasion of the January 13th celebration [Gurdjieff's birthday]. Somewhat unexpectedly, she spoke about Gurdjieff's death. She said, "He called me and said, 'You stay here and watch me go out.' Then his second body left his first body. It was something wonderful; the force was very great. We can develop the second body by working."

- (42) René Zuber *Who Are You, Monsieur Gurdjieff?* (London: Arkana, 1990), p. 3.
- (43) Roger Lipsey *Gurdjieff Reconsidered: The Life, the Teachings, the Legacy* (Boulder: Shambhala, 2019), pp. 196-197.
- (44) William Welch *What Happened in Between* (New York: George Braziller, 1972), p. 124.
- (45) Margaret Anderson *The Unknowable Gurdjieff* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 199.