

INTRODUCTION

THE SEEKER AND THE SLY MAN

IN 1915 A MAN of uncertain origin appeared in Moscow and gathered a core of devoted followers, students of his strange and unsettling system of esoteric doctrine and psychological development. In his mid-forties, with his shaved head, Mongol-like mustache, piercing eyes, and unnerving composure, he exuded an atmosphere of mystery, power, and knowledge, and those who had accepted him as their teacher followed his instructions without question. Eager to expand his operations, he placed an advertisement in a Moscow newspaper announcing an unusual ballet entitled "The Struggle of the Magicians." The advertisement attracted the attention of a brilliant writer, who was himself a student of the occult, as well as a theoretician of the higher dimensions of consciousness. Recently the writer had returned from an extended journey to the East, where he had unsuccessfully sought out traces of forgotten knowledge and lost wisdom, and his lectures on his travels attracted thousands, eager for a taste of worlds beyond. Approached by a student of the mysterious teacher, after much solicitation, the writer agreed to meet with the master. Yet the earnest seeker of wisdom was dismayed to find that the place of his encounter was not one he might have expected. For it was not in an incense-filled ashram of a holy guru, but in a cheap back-street café, frequented by prostitutes and petty thieves, that the writer P. D. Ouspensky first met the remarkable man G. I. Gurdjieff. Thus was set in motion the long,

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complex, and fascinating history of the esoteric teaching known as the Fourth Way.

Along with Madame Blavatsky, Rudolf Steiner, and Aleister Crowley, Georges Ivanovich Gurdjieff and Peter Demian Ouspensky were leading figures in the revival of occult and esoteric ideas in the early part of the twentieth century. Yet though steeped in occult wisdom, Gurdjieff brought to the study of esotericism a new and brutally austere doctrine. Human beings, he told his followers, are asleep, mere machines manipulated by the forces around them. Although they believe they are conscious and have free will, these are only illusions. Humanity's only chance of freeing itself from this bondage is to awaken, a difficult and dangerous task requiring much work and tremendous efforts.

To students familiar with talk of astral bodies, third eyes, and reincarnation, Gurdjieff's message was cold, sobering, and provocative. Yet it had a ring of precision and practicality missing from the usual occult fare. Gurdjieff told his students that for people of the modern age, the original three "ways," those of the fakir, the monk, and the yogi, were obsolete. What was needed was a new approach to raising consciousness, what Gurdjieff called the Fourth Way, and which its practitioners soon referred to as the Work.¹ From 1915 until his death in 1949, Gurdjieff devoted himself to the often unrewarding task of waking up his fellow human beings, attracting as students some of the most brilliant men and women of the time. His methods involved various exercises designed to awaken the physical, emotional, and mental life of his followers, which he claimed he had learned in secret monasteries in Central Asia. Physical labor, psychological drama, demanding dance movements, and radically new techniques of focusing the mind were employed to help Gurdjieff's pupils arrive at the grim realization that *they did not exist*—at least not in any real sense. It was only after reaching this troubling insight, he told them, that

they could begin to grasp what it meant to be conscious. Often the most persuasive means of arriving at this conclusion was Gurdjieff himself, whose powerful presence and extraordinary powers acted as both stimuli and goal.

Yet the student of Gurdjieff's work, or even the interested reader, soon discovers that the path to consciousness is not straight. Along with the many strange ideas he or she encounters, like "self-remembering," "the Ray of Creation," "the law of octaves," and "super efforts," a reader interested in the Fourth Way soon becomes entangled in a web of Byzantine politics and esoteric psychodrama, centered around the turbulent relationship between Gurdjieff and his most famous pupil, Ouspensky. Most books on Gurdjieff paint him as an infallible superman, whose every action was planned and conscious, and depict Ouspensky as a weak intellectual, unable to grasp the true meaning of the master's teaching. But there is another way to look at the complex relationship between these two men. Ouspensky was no stranger to the realms of higher consciousness, and to the readers of his early books, it's clear he already knew a great deal before his fateful meeting with Gurdjieff. His introduction to Gurdjieff was without doubt the central experience of Ouspensky's life. Yet some, like myself, may wonder if his meeting with his master wasn't perhaps the worst thing that ever happened to him.

After only a brief encounter with it, a question comes to most students of the Fourth Way: why did Ouspensky, the seeker of knowledge, break with Gurdjieff, the man who knew? Did he, as many have inferred, steal Gurdjieff's ideas in order to set himself up as a teacher? Or did he try to save them from ruin at the hands of a once formidable master who had to all appearances gone mad? John Pentland, to whom, just before his death, Gurdjieff had given the responsibility of overseeing the work in America, summed up the situation in a concise and exhaustive remark: "The break between the two men, teacher

and pupil, each of whom had received much from the other, has never been satisfactorily explained.” Nevertheless, there has been considerable speculation. To some, the split between the two formed the central act in a modern mystery play, and initiated a spiritual current the fulfillment of which would coincide with the inauguration of a new age. To others Ouspensky was an opportunist and renegade, a mere philosopher who appropriated Gurdjieff’s teaching and established himself as his rival. “All that Ouspensky had of value he got from Gurdjieff, and that only with his mind,” one student remarked.² “Ouspensky is a professional philosopher who studied with Gurdjieff and has now set up a sort of rival school,” said another.³ Gurdjieff’s own assessment is none the less damning. “Ouspensky very nice man to talk to and drink vodka with, but he is weak man.”⁴

Far from being the final mystery in the history of the Fourth Way, the split between Ouspensky and Gurdjieff is rather the tip of the iceberg, the first of many troubling reflections to emerge from a fascinating Pandora’s box. Why, for instance, did a successful writer like Ouspensky abandon his career to devote himself to teaching the ideas of a man he had repudiated? Why did Gurdjieff draw Ouspensky into his circle in the first place? Was it simply to use him to advance his own designs? What had happened to turn the brilliant philosopher against his enigmatic teacher? Gurdjieff’s past was mysterious. Did he really spend the years before his arrival in Moscow traveling through Central Asia as a member of an esoteric brotherhood called the Seekers of Truth, as he had claimed? Or was he, as some have suggested, really a spy, working for the Tsar during the years of the Great Game? Why did Gurdjieff antagonize and alienate his best pupils, Ouspensky included? Was it a tactic in the difficult business of waking up? Or were there other reasons? Was Gurdjieff the superman many of his followers believed he was? Or did he have a dark side? In this book

I address some of these questions and attempt to throw some light on what remains a fascinating and perplexing riddle.

For me, it's a riddle I've been occupied with for many years. I've been fascinated with the story of Gurdjieff and Ouspensky ever since I first read Ouspensky's account of his time with Gurdjieff, *In Search of the Miraculous*, in the late 1970s. My first impression was that I had come into contact with a system of ideas unlike any I had encountered before; some years later this belief led to my becoming involved in the Gurdjieff work itself. Along with other students, for several years I followed the teaching set out in Ouspensky's writings, as well as in Gurdjieff's own books. I count that time well spent; yet, eventually I found myself moving away from the work to explore other ideas. But as the years went by I returned to Ouspensky's books—not his writing on Gurdjieff but his early works: *Tertium Organum*, *Strange Life of Ivan Osokin*, *A New Model of the Universe*. Here I found a stimulating and exhilarating mind that is oddly lacking in books like *The Fourth Way*, a collection of questions and answers gleaned from the hundreds of meetings Ouspensky held during his years in London as a teacher of Gurdjieff's ideas. I wondered what had happened between 1912, when his first book, *Tertium Organum*, was published in Russia, and his later years as a teacher of the work to make the difference? What had turned the young poetic Ouspensky into an often stern and demanding taskmaster?

Although several books have been written on Gurdjieff, few have focused on Ouspensky, and most of those that have are no longer in print. One exception is William Patrick Patterson's *Struggle of the Magicians*. Patterson's fascinating book focuses on why Ouspensky left Gurdjieff, and when I discovered it I was excited to see that someone had finally decided to tackle this mystery. Yet in reading Patterson's book, I found myself questioning his premises. For Patterson, Ouspensky failed to grasp the import of Gurdjieff's mission

and, when it came to it, couldn't abandon his own independence, self-will, and egoism in order to devote himself entirely to Gurdjieff's work. Ouspensky was not alone in this; according to Patterson, A. R. Orage and J. G. Bennett—Gurdjieff's other two right-hand men—also failed the test. But as I read on, I found myself cheering for the wrong team. It's true that Gurdjieff's treatment of these three men, as well as that of his other followers, could be seen as a form of spiritual "tough love," presenting a kind of esoteric version of the need to "be cruel to be kind." Yet I came away from Patterson's book wondering if the many instances of Gurdjieff's harsh treatment, bullying, incessant demands, and domineering presence, as well as his often seemingly irrational behavior, were at all times necessary steps in fulfilling his aim. Like Ouspensky, I found myself separating the man from the teaching and asking questions like: How much of this behavior is a real teaching strategy, and how much is it simply Gurdjieff's personality? How much did his followers read into his actions? And how much did he need to control, dominate, and master other people?

In this book I try to complement Patterson's approach and have attempted to tell the story of Gurdjieff and Ouspensky from Ouspensky's perspective. Many books have been written about Gurdjieff's ideas, and I have explicated his teaching where it seemed helpful, but for the most part I've tried to stick to the story. An interested reader could do no better than to go to Ouspensky's own account, *In Search of the Miraculous*, for a lucid presentation of Gurdjieff's system, unrivaled for clarity, eloquence, and rigor. He or she may also find, as I have, that beneath the crystalline surface there lies another, more elusive account and that the book is indeed a work of Ouspensky's and not, as many have claimed, merely a parroting of Gurdjieff. Ouspensky was a scrupulous writer, almost to his detriment; he was never happy with his account of his years

with Gurdjieff and refused to let the book be published. It did not see printer's ink until after his death. Yet for all Ouspensky's efforts at objectivity, the book remains a highly personal work. Between the lines one can detect a forceful personality, as original and powerful as that of the character he so painstakingly portrays. It is also, like all of his work, a testament to Ouspensky's sheer skill as a writer; few who have written on esoteric ideas are as persuasive and captivating as he.

Gurdjieff's ideas, radical and unsettling as they are, are not as unique as many of his followers have claimed. To explore how they tally up next to the work of Rudolf Steiner or C. G. Jung would be fascinating but would take me too far away from my aim. (In a note further on I do, however, offer some comparisons between some of Gurdjieff's key ideas and some of Jung's.) But what strikes me is how some of Ouspensky's own ideas, arrived at independently before he met Gurdjieff, are similar to those he would receive from his master. Little has been written about the work Ouspensky did in the years prior to hitching his star to Gurdjieff's wagon, and in the opening chapters I go into some detail about his ideas on time, dreams, higher space, and mystical experience. That Ouspensky's ideas were instrumental in providing a theoretical framework for early Russian modernism is still too little known. The thousands of new readers who come to his books each year know little about Ouspensky's influence on the avant-garde movements of the early twentieth century, or about his importance for writers like Aldous Huxley, J. B. Priestley, and Malcolm Lowry.

But for the most part, this is a story of two men. It's a commonplace that opposites attract, and in Gurdjieff and Ouspensky's case, this seems obvious. But they often also repel, and at some point in their association, the magnetic energies of these two men began to push them apart. From Moscow to New York, via Central Asia and the dervishes of

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Constantinople, here is the story of the intense and highly symbolic struggle acted out between Ouspensky and the man from whom he was never able to completely separate himself. Gurdjieff and Ouspensky's story is, I believe, one of the great mystical adventure tales of our time, on a par with encounters like that between Don Juan and Carlos Casteneda, or, perhaps more appropriate, Mephistopheles and Faust.