

The Magus and the Maiden: Searching for Katherine Mansfield and George Gurdjieff in Fontainebleau

Contributed by Linda Lappin
Wednesday, 28 March 2007
Last Updated Wednesday, 28 March 2007

Whenever I am in Paris, I make a private pilgrimage to Katherine Mansfield's grave in the cemetery of Avon, near Fontainebleau. Recently in town for a reading at Shakespeare & Company, I take a day out of a hectic schedule to make a trip to Fontainebleau. It's a fitting moment of the year for such a pilgrimage, the Day of the Dead is upon us. It was at this moment of the autumn that Katherine first went to Fontainebleau to stay for awhile at Gurdjieff's Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man, where she died. Today the air is crisp and cold, with a sharp edge of chill from the forest where the trees have taken on a hint of red and ochre.

A row of driverless taxis waits outside the Fontainebleau-Avon station. It's lunchtime and the drivers are probably all at table. Each taxi displays a sign with a mobile number to call should the driver be absent, but I am informed by an American couple ahead of me in line that only one has answered their calls, promising to come "toute de suite," nearly an hour ago. Chatting with them I learn that they are from California and that they too are on a pilgrimage to the cemetery of Avon, to visit Gurdjieff's grave there. We decide to share a taxi, should one arrive, and within moments, voilà, an unlicensed taxi pulls into the stand and we strike a deal with the driver for a tour. The cemetery of Avon, located at the end of "Rue de Souvenir" is beautifully kept.

The black marble tombs are polished to a mirror's perfection and decorated with bright bursts of yellow and rust-orange chrysanthemums and flares of purple heather. Wandering back to an older part of the cemetery, I find Katherine's grave – simple, stern, unadorned except for a small vase of ivy set at the head. The name "Katherine Mansfield" is etched in large letters. This is the name by which the world knew her, but not the one printed on her passport, "Kathleen Mansfield Murry." Beneath appears the title by which she longed to be known, "wife of John Middleton Murry." Barely legible today is the epitaph: "Out of this nettle danger, we pluck the flower, safety," summing up the contradictions and tug of opposites within Mansfield's life, character, and writing. Not far off, just "next door," as it were, is the Gurdjieff family plot, a large rectangle of green turf edged in yellow pansies, surmounted by two rough hewn menhirs, and shaded by a gnarled cedar.

The graves are unmarked but the tourist board has added an unobtrusive sign briefly explaining who Gurdjieff was and his connection to Avon. My fellow pilgrims film the grave from every angle. We stand a while in silent reflection and then return to our taxi. Although our driver has lived in Fontainebleau for all his forty-some years and is fiercely proud of this fact, he is perplexed as to our request to visit the Prieuré des Basses Loges. He is unsure where it is exactly. The Californians have a map, which indicates a building at the end of Rue de Katherine Mansfield, but it turns out to be a modern nursing home. I have been to the Prieuré once before, while doing research which would later develop into my novel, *Katherine's Wish*, based on the last five years of Mansfield's life, and I know that it is not easy to find the Prieuré.

The modernization of this area of the town, the division of the old estate, taller walls, and a certain reticence concerning Gurdjieff and his school make the place hard to spot, but at last we find it, secluded behind a tall stone wall. We follow the wall to a front gate and peer in. Since my last visit, the place has been transformed into an elegant residential complex. No plaque on the gate denotes the presence of Gurdjieff's school in the 1920s, or Katherine's death here in 1923, or even the name by which the building was known. Continuing along the wall, we come to a side entrance leading to a parking area. The gate is locked, but a young woman in a track suit, noticing us on her way to her car, comes to enquire if we are looking for someone. Quite simply we tell her we are looking for the place where Katherine Mansfield once lived, and where Gurdjieff had his school.

She seems puzzled and tells us that she thinks Mansfield lived elsewhere, down the street perhaps, and has never heard of Gurdjieff. However, she lets us in, shows us how to open the gate to let ourselves out again and apologizes for not

being able to help us on our search. "I have only been living here for a couple of months," she says, before driving out the gate. We go in and walk around the grounds, to what is now the rear of the building on the southern side, where the great lawns and flower beds once extended, now parceled off today with fences. There are few trees save a large plane tree shedding its yellow leaves on the shaggy lawn. It must be nearly a century old and was surely standing here in Katherine's time. I picture her in the elegant room she occupied on the upper floor of the Chateau, known as The Ritz to pupils who stayed in more Spartan quarters.

I imagine her standing at the window, looking out at the lawns, at this tree, feeling the autumn sun on her chest and eyelids, desiring to become "A Child of the Sun." A large dog comes bounding out of the bushes toward us. Luckily he is friendly, but we take this as a sign that we should not prolong our visit. Slowly we circle the house, pause to examine the fountain with blue tiles out front, now drained, then discreetly slip back out to the street. There are many accounts of the intense, whirling life that went on within these walls –from C.S: Knott's Journal of a Pupil, Fritz Peters' delightful memoir, Boyhood with Gurdjieff – but none are more moving than Katherine's own letters written in the last weeks from the her little writing table upstairs.

It seems strange to me that the drama of this writer's last days, which has touched so many readers for four generations, should remain completely unknown to the people who now eat, sleep, and carry on their daily lives in the place where Mansfield died. But that is Paris and its environs – rife with ghosts, layer upon layer, who unseen breathe upon us.