

A Visit to Gourdyev

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Professor Saurat visited the Prieuré for a weekend in February 1923. He describes contradictory impressions of Gurdjieff who appears alternately contemptuous, provocative, irritable then finally serious and "extraordinarily courteous." This skeptical article stimulated discussion about Gurdjieff among French intellectuals and journalists. Saurat eventually revised his opinion of Gurdjieff and came to recognize *Beelzebub's Tales* as a major work. The English spelling of Gurdjieff's name was not yet fixed and is here given as 'Gourdyev' in keeping with the Russian pronunciation.

Saturday morning, February 17th 1923. The Fontainebleau station.

Orage comes to meet me when I arrive by train from Paris. Orage is a big Yorkshireman of vague French descent: hence his name is taken from the French word for storm. For fifteen years he has been a power in English literary circles. He owned a half-literary, half-political weekly review, the *New Age*, which was the most lively intellectual organ in England between 1910 and 1914.

Orage might have been the greatest critic in English literature, which has produced few critics, and which is dying of that lack, though it revives every time a writer of genius emerges and joins a great tradition. But Orage sold the *New Age* and went to Fontainebleau: literature interested him no more.

I am surprised at his appearance. When I knew him he was almost fat, carrying a weight of some two hundred pounds on a large, bony frame. But the Orage who meets me is thin, almost haggard, with an anxious face. He seems even bigger, and his movements are rapid and stronger. He is in better health but looks unhappy.

Orage is the disciple of Gourdyev, who has established in the Priory a kind of phalanstery, 'something in the nature of the Pythagorean societies,' as Orage vaguely announces, 'but much more severe.'

Severe is the right word. In answer to my questions about his health and transformation, Orage replies by describing his life. Going to bed at midnight or one o'clock, he rises at four and goes to work. It is a hard piece of excavation in the Priory park, where there is digging and building going on. Quick meals occur, lasting but a short time. Occasionally, everyone assembles in front of the Master for group gymnastic exercises, then back to the trenches again, digging or heaping up earth. 'Often Gourdyev makes us spend a whole day digging an enormous ditch in the park, and then he has us spend the next day filling it up again and putting back into the ditch the earth that had been dug up the day before.' Vainly I ask why. Orage does not know. What is Gourdyev? Orage does not know that either.

Two years previously, people in London began talking about a certain Ouspenski. This Russian was working on a *Tertium Organum*; in other words, he recognised only two predecessors, Francis Bacon and Aristotle.

Human nature was about to move in a new direction. Ouspenski had formed a group of pupils over whom he ruled in an absolute fashion. Gradually, Ouspenski let it be known that he was merely the forerunner of some great man. From Russia or from further East, Gourdyev was destined to come. Meanwhile, Ouspenski taught, preparing the way for him. He had even invented a new method of instruction. The doctrine was too high to be taught: the disciples would have understood but little of a direct explanation. Therefore the disciple did all the talking. He asked a question and explained it. For instance. 'Is the soul immortal?' Then, depending on the quality of explanation, the Master would reply, giving as much truth as the disciple could absorb.

This had been going on for several months when Gourdyev arrived in London. Now Gourdyev did not know English, French or German. He gave his orders, for his only words were orders, in Russian, and some members of his *entourage* translated them. Gourdyev was said to be fabulously rich. He seemed to have access to some inexhaustible supply of the world's gold. He wanted to found a great university of occultism and to reveal, not to the world, which he despised, but to chosen disciples, the Sole Doctrine. Here politics intervened. Lloyd George was coquetting with the Soviets. Gourdyev and his supporters, though not white Russians, were opposed to the Soviets. Furthermore, the English authorities, supposedly at the request of Moscow, had refused Gourdyev permission to remain in the country. But since Lloyd George had refused, Poincaré acceded. And Poincaré, hoping to encompass the ruin of the Soviets, gave the necessary permission to Gourdyev, who then bought a place known as the Priory in Fontainebleau, including a castle and park, and went there to establish the school of ultimate wisdom.

But who would be admitted to the ranks of Gourdyev's disciples? Several hundred Londoners had been taken over from Ouspenski's groups, and one day

Gourdyev sat down at the end of a room and had the men and women who aspired to immortality walk slowly past him, for it was said that only the elect could possess an immortal soul. The elect included Orage and Katherine Mansfield. Gourdyev did not speak: he did not know English. But his eyes discerned the possibilities of immortal souls, and at his orders those that were to go to Fontainebleau were selected from the procession. Almost all these people had money but Gourdyev would sometimes choose a poor man.

Orage told me these things as he led me to the Priory. Katherine Mansfield had died a few weeks ago. I came to see what Orage was doing because his letters made me anxious. It was he who had decided Katherine Mansfield to come here, and he had been almost promised that she would be cured. He was going to show me where Katherine Mansfield had spent her last days. It was an extraordinary place.

He was positive that Gourdyev possessed supernatural powers. At Moscow or Petrograd or somewhere in Russia he had appeared before a group of disciples at a time when his body was hundreds of kilometers away: Ouspenski had seen it. But since Orage had come to Fontainebleau, Gourdyev had not said a word to him. The group gymnastic exercises were considered the necessary work of preparation. Gourdyev gave orders in Russian. The Russians in the house told me with an excited, triumphant air, that Gourdyev frequently flew into a rage and used language that would make Lenin himself blush. There were about seventy Russians and twenty Englishmen, but not one Frenchman.

II

A Stable. Five or six dirty cows. There are no servants in a Pythagorean institution, and men of the world, even literary critics, are not very skilful in caring for cows. These cows produce the milk for the hundred disciples. Katherine Mansfield was tubercular. She lived in this stable. Cows are often tubercular, and their milk transmits the microbe. The ceiling is high: the place could not have been a stable before the Master arrived.

At least six feet below the ceiling, a Russian skilled at carpentry had built a platform to which one had access by a ladder. A mattress and some cushions had been put on the platform. It was here that Katherine Mansfield lived. It seems that the Master had said that cows gave forth exhalations that would cure the sick woman. It was not merely the odour of the cows in the stable, but certain spiritual exhalations. Katherine Mansfield died, and no one dared ask the Master why. Moreover, he does not know English, and it would have been necessary to ask one of the Russians who speak English, and the Russians are much more terrified and docile in the face of the Master than the English are.

There are several doctors among the disciples who said that their medicine in any case would have done nothing for Katherine. Orage said that she at least died in tranquility, even in a kind of happiness.

Another Russian with a certain talent for painting decided to add to Katherine Mansfield's final happiness. He painted on the plaster, just above the platform where she lay, a great many crescents, shining suns, and stars in very bright red and blue. He did not have as much gold paint as he wanted, but the red and the blue replaced the gold. Katherine went there every day to look at these crescents and stars. At least the cows kept the place warm, for that February was a very cold one and the château had hardly any heat.

We have lunch at the big dining room of the château. The furniture is tattered, the meal is prepared by the disciples. Theoretically each one feeds himself. In practice, they take turns at cooking, and certain women are responsible for the work. It is altogether acceptable. There are other guests, White Russians, a former Minister of the Tsar. They discuss occultism.

It appears—nobody is sure—that Gourdyev has revealed that only a few human beings possess an immortal soul. But a certain number possess a kind of embryo of an immortal soul. If this embryo is cultivated according to the laws, it can develop itself and achieve immortality; otherwise it dies. Gourdyev alone knows the indispensable methods. All those whom he has brought here possess at least the embryo. While people filed past him in London the supernatural vision of the Master detected the possible candidates. It is a great comfort that everybody here has a real chance of becoming immortal, at least among the disciples. The guests exchange glances with some anxiety. There are a dozen people at table. Most of Gourdyev's subjects have no fixed hours for their meals.

A door opens noiselessly. A big, powerful-looking man dressed in a heavy fur coat, but without a hat, enters violently. His head is completely shaved. His face has an expression of habitual ferocity mingled at this instant with a look of tenderness that is evidently temporary. The man is carrying in his arms a lamb that is already fairly large: his tenderness is for the lamb. The man walks across the room with long strides, not even looking at us, and goes out another door. It is Gourdyev. We all knew it. The disciples, in great excitement tell us 'He is always like this. He didn't look at you, but he saw you. He knows you all completely.'

Orage wants to show me the park. After lunch we walk down several lanes. Gourdyev has bought an aviation hangar from the military authorities. His disciples have dismantled it, carried it to the park, and put it up again. The enormous, dirty, black construction swears with the château and what is left of the gardens, for ditches run across the park.

'Gourdyev always keeps us busy. The soul can develop itself only if the body is in perfect equilibrium. We are taught the mastery of our muscles. We know how to perform the hardest work, and we know how to move the left arm with a different rhythm than the right arm. We can beat four-four time with the right arm and three-four time with the left arm simultaneously.'

In a big hole at the end of a path is an enormous kind of Negro hut made of brick and cement. Orage explains that inside are Turkish baths. Men and women go there separately. Complete chastity reigns, but there are also married couples who live normally. Gourdyev neither preaches nor practices asceticism, but his disciples are exhausted by the digging and the terror.

Suddenly we see Gourdyev. He is standing a few yards away from the bath house. Beside him somebody is mixing mortar. Gourdyev picks some up in his bare hands, rolls it into a ball and throws it inside the bath house. With great rapidity he bombards the inside of the house with balls of mortar. We approach. The entrance to the baths, built by inexperienced disciples, has collapsed. Through a big hole we can see flames leaping, fanned by a violent blast of air. Nobody knew what to do until Gourdyev came. The heat prevents anyone from approaching the furnace. Gourdyev is trying to block the hole with balls of mortar. He throws well. He began at the top of the hole, and the balls make a curious noise as they flatten out against the hot wall. His unbuttoned greatcoat flies from right to left and bothers him so much that he takes it off. He doesn't look at us. Some of the disciples regard him from afar with a kind of horror. The man who is mixing the mortar has the attitude of a slave. We are embarrassed. I have the impression of witnessing something obscene. We go away.

I am invited to spend two nights. In the evening after dinner Gourdyev has a big bottle of vodka sent to Orage's room where I am sitting with a few Englishmen. I am told that this is a special honor. All these people are on edge and suffer from a mixture of shame, fear, and unavowable hope. I propose that we throw half the bottle of vodka out the window to make Gourdyev believe we have drunk it. The point is that nobody wants to drink more than a few drops, and we feel incapable of honouring this bottle with the dignity it deserves. But my proposal is not adopted. They are afraid of Gourdyev. We talk late into the night. Some of these men were well known in London. There is a distinguished Harley Street doctor, a lawyer, and several writers. I am told that Gourdyev will receive me tomorrow afternoon and will have an interpreter. Great excitement. Gourdyev has never received anyone that way. The Englishmen charge me to ask several questions. Although they have been here several months Gourdyev has never spoken to them. They don't know what they are doing here. The Russians give them vague indications. All of them are brutalized and demoralised by physical work that is too much for them. Later in the evening, we are told that Gourdyev has ordered

a mystical night service between Sunday and Monday in the aviation hangar, which has been transformed into a temple. They hear that he has authorised a representative of the *Daily Mail* to be present. Stupefaction. The English do not understand. And is the mystic secret that has not been revealed to them to be delivered to the *Daily Mail*?

III

Sunday, February 18th. From half-past two to half-past four a Russian, Madame de Hartmann, who speaks English, serves as interpreter. Here is our long conversation, summed up and arranged.

Myself: 'What results are you trying to obtain here?'

Gourdyev: 'To give physical health, to increase the intelligence, to lift people out of their routine.'

'Have you obtained for anyone else what you are seeking?'

'Yes, in four or five years some disciples have arrived at the goal.'

'Do you know that many of these people here are close to despair?'

'Yes, there is something sinister in this house, but that is necessary.'

'Have they the ambition to become immortal?'

'Everyone has ambitions. Few satisfy them.' He speaks sardonically. 'Everybody possesses an ego, an essence. Many people would like to transfer their ego into their essence and thus become immortal.'

'What is the purpose of all this physical labour, and is it going to last a long time?' The English had begged me at great length to ask this question.

'To make them masters of the exterior world. It is only a temporary phase.'

'Are you trying to give them occult power?'

'Yes, I am trying to give them every power. There is no difference between occult powers and others. All occultists of today are mistaken.'

'You do not belong to any school?'

'No, we are a group of friends. About thirty years ago a dozen of us spent several years in Central Asia, and we reconstructed the doctrine from the remains of oral traditions, from the study of ancient customs, folk songs and even from certain books. The doctrine has always existed, but the tradition has often been interrupted. In ancient times certain groups and castes knew it, but it was incomplete. The ancients went in too much for metaphysics. The doctrine was too abstract.'

'Why have you come to Europe?'

'Because I want to combine the mystical, Oriental spirit with the scientific, Occidental spirit. The Oriental spirit dwells in the truth, but only in its tendencies and

general ideas; the Occidental spirit dwells in the truth in so far as its methods and technique are concerned. Only Occidental methods are good in history and observation. I want to create a type of sage who unites the spirit of the Orient and the technique of the Occident.'

'Are there already sages of this kind?'

'Yes, I know some European scholars who have attained this end.'

'Do you teach any positive doctrine over and above questions of method?'

'Yes. Few human beings have a soul. Nobody has a soul at birth. One must acquire a soul. Those who do not succeed in this die. The atoms disperse and nothing remains. Some make a partial soul and are then subject to a kind of reincarnation that permits them to progress. Finally, a very small number of men succeed in possessing immortal souls. But this number is extremely small. There are only a few of them. Most of those who accomplish anything have only partial souls.'

'Do you believe in free will?' Neither the interpreter nor Gourdyev appear to understand what free will is. My explanations bring this reply from Gourdyev.

'Everybody does what he wants: nothing can stop him. But men do not know how to desire.'

Gourdyev has extraordinarily courteous manners. During this conversation he does not in any way give the impression of being a charlatan. He seems to be trying to explain himself in the most rational possible manner and does not refuse to answer any questions. His ferocity seems to be transformed into force.

I ask him if he is still in touch with friends who have reconstituted the doctrine. He replies that he sees three or four of them still.

'What are they doing?'

'They are practising different ordinary professions.'

'Are they teaching?'

'No. I am the only one who teaches: that is my profession.'

The disciples add that he has defined himself as a disseminator of solar energy, which they pretend not to understand.

Is there a God? I ask.

'Yes and Gourdyev is in communication with Him. Almost like an independent, obstinate minister with his king.' Women, they say, have no real possibility of acquiring a soul except by contact and sexual union with men.

On the evening before the great service, I report the results of my questions to my English friends. They are extremely disappointed. What irritates them most is that

Gourdyev said that the doctrine could be found in books. 'Then,' said one of them, the Harley Street doctor, 'if the tradition is in books, what are we doing here?' 'No,' says another. 'There is no secret tradition.' And they decide that this is impossible, that I misunderstood, or that the interpreter translated badly. The only thing that gives them real consolation is the assurance that their labour of digging will not last forever.

They are struck by Gourdyev's own free admission that there is something sinister in this house. They are inclined to ask themselves if they are duped, but they would prefer to remain victims. However, they are afraid of being exploited by Gourdyev in his occult intentions. They have confidence in his power, but are not sure of his intentions toward them.

Ten o'clock in the hangar. A fairy-like spot. Precious carpets cover the floor and walls. The man from the *Daily Mirror*, who is seated beside me, says that he is a connoisseur of carpets and that those here must be worth over a million francs. The partitions and floor are completely covered with them, sometimes to a thickness of several layers. A large couch half as high as a man runs all around the walls and is covered with cushions. Dozens of men and women are stretched out there. They await spiritual priapic exercises. In the centre is a jet of water with multicoloured lights playing on it. Perfume. Music that is said to be from Central Asia and that is extraordinary in any case.

The dances begin under the direction of Gourdyev. They are slow dances and the performers are placed at considerable distances from each other. At certain commands, they all halt in the position they happen to occupy at the moment and must remain that way until ordered to continue. Those who are off balance when the cry to stop is uttered must not finish the movement they have started, and fall with their whole weight. When they have fallen they must not move.

The man from the *Daily Mail* is beside himself, and justly. The perfume, the atmosphere, the coloured lights, the rich carpets, the strange movements—it is the romanticism of Victor Hugo's *Orientales* at last come to earth. To reassure the journalist I tell him that I am a professor at the University of Bordeaux and that all these people are crazy. He reflects for a minute and then seems very much comforted. His conviction that he is sane returns to him. But the next day he villainously repeated my consoling words to Orage, who is vexed and did not begin to pardon me until ten years later.

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