

## DECEPTION AND ROLE-PLAYING

George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff was an enigma, impossible to define or fully understand. No two people who met Gurdjieff came away with the same impression of the man or his teaching. Robert de Ropp, a student of P.D. Ouspensky, met Gurdjieff in 1948 and was immediately struck by Gurdjieff's otherworldly nature: "He was, without doubt, the most extraordinary human being I have ever met . . . Gurdjieff, like his own creation Mr. Beelzebub, seemed not only a being from a different planet but also from a different solar system." (1)

Biographer James Webb observed that Gurdjieff seemed to play a variety of roles at any given moment including "the big role of the Teacher, the small immediate role which is designed to produce a particular effect on a particular pupil, and a generalized role to ensure a relationship of *meaning* with the whole milieu in which he chances to be operating." (2) Never sure if he was behaving genuinely or playing a role, Gurdjieff's students noticed that Gurdjieff often seemed to be "acting" when he was working with them:

Our feeling of this 'acting' in G. was exceptionally strong. Among ourselves we often said we never saw him and never would. In any other man so much 'acting' would have produced an impression of falsity. In him 'acting' produced an impression of strength, although, not always; sometimes there was too much of it. (3)

The various roles that he played allowed Gurdjieff a certain advantageous fluidity of movement and even invisibility. While most people act or play roles with little awareness that they are doing so, Gurdjieff role-played with the conscious intent to fulfill his mission to transmit esoteric teachings to the West. Unfortunately, Gurdjieff's method frequently involved deceptive or deliberately manipulative behaviour. This made it difficult for his students to assess his true intentions and his critics to evaluate the value of his work and effectiveness of his teachings.

### Secrecy and Deception

Much of Gurdjieff's life was shrouded in mystery and secrecy. Gurdjieff rarely revealed details of his early life and background, which has led biographers to debate the date of his birth and details concerning his upbringing, education, friends, fellow seekers and the chronology of his travels. In fact, there is no independent corroboration of any of the events of his life before 1912 when he began teaching publicly in Moscow. Gurdjieff's extensive search for esoteric knowledge preceding that date remains largely a mystery. When students questioned Gurdjieff about his travels and the sources of his esoteric knowledge, Gurdjieff's answers were always vague and superficial.

In the early 1930s, Gurdjieff mysteriously burned almost all of his official documents and passports, which created an aura of suspicion, not to mention a huge evidentiary void for Gurdjieff scholars and biographers. Gurdjieff's writing, especially *Meetings with Remarkable Men*, provides the only details of his early life. *Meetings* is clearly semi-autobiographical, though much of its narrative could be considered allegorical rather than entirely factual. (4) Biographer James Webb believes that most of the characters in the book did not actually exist historically and were merely composite portraits created by Gurdjieff to serve as illustrations of various human types and seekers of wisdom.

Beyond concealing the facts of his life, Gurdjieff promulgated misinformation about himself. Gurdjieff, who some critics even considered to be a megalomaniac, was notorious for spinning wild, unbelievable stories and making patently absurd statements. Gurdjieff mixed truth and invention to such a degree that it was impossible to tell what was fact and what was fiction: "He invented and reinvented himself so many times, left so many false trails, and encouraged so many myths and mistakes about exactly who he was that uncovering the truth about his past would take a lifetime." (5)

Gurdjieff was an expert at devising schemes to deceive others to extract money from them. In his portrait of Gurdjieff, psychiatrist Anthony Storr exposes Gurdjieff's penchant for playing the confidence trickster:

His own account of how he survived his early wanderings reveals how expert he was at deception . . . When people brought him sewing machines and other mechanical objects for repair, he was often able to see that the mere shift of a lever would cure the problem. However, he was careful to pretend that such repairs were time-consuming and difficult, and charged accordingly. He also wrote that he found out in advance which villages and towns the new railway would pass through, and then informed the local authorities that he had the power to arrange the course of the railway. He boasted that he obtained large sums for his pretended services, and said that he had no pangs of conscience about doing so. (6)

James Webb rationalizes Gurdjieff's slippery dealings by claiming that he never took money from the poor but deceived only those who engaged in dishonest practices themselves. Student Fritz Peters argues that on many occasions Gurdjieff was merely being mischievous, toying with people for his own diversion and amusement. Perhaps the most likely explanation is that Gurdjieff's deceptive behaviour was calculated to test potential seekers:

Gurdjieff himself wore a very evident 'disguise' which, as it seems, automatically excluded those people who could not see through it. It was just the disguise of the 'charlatan' which kept the largest numbers away . . . Such a faint aura of distrust (around the one man in all the world who could perhaps, when it came down to it, be most surely trusted!) served its purpose. Only the real searchers could see through it. (7)

In a personality as complex as Gurdjieff, it is almost impossible to separate actions which are deliberately deceptive from those based on higher motives. It is clear that in many situations playing a role facilitated the transmission of his teachings. To teach others effectively he often felt it necessary to mask his real intentions and disguise his methods. This enabled him to test the resolve of his students to discover the essential knowledge of human spiritual transformation that he possessed.

### **Manipulating Atmosphere and Environment**

There is an ancient tradition in many Eastern spiritual teachings of modifying atmosphere or environment to produce particular effects on human consciousness and perception. This science employs design, colour and texture in specific patterns or combinations to communicate knowledge of spiritual importance.

Gurdjieff was well aware of the impact of environment on human consciousness, and altered his surroundings accordingly. In *Views From the Real World* there is a vivid description of Gurdjieff's living quarters in a country house outside of Moscow:

There was no area not covered, either by carpets or hangings of some sort. A single enormous rug covered the floor of this spacious room. Even its walls were hung with carpets which also draped the doors and windows; the ceiling was covered with ancient silk shawls of resplendent colours, astonishingly beautiful in their combination. These were drawn together in a strange pattern toward the center of the ceiling. The light was concealed behind a dull glass shade of peculiar form resembling a huge lotus flower, which produced a white diffused glow. (8)

Ouspensky described the effect that the special atmosphere of Gurdjieff's Moscow apartment had on the students who visited:

First of all the people who came there -- who were all G.'s pupils -- *were not afraid to keep silent*. This alone was something unusual. They came, sat down, smoked, they often did not speak a single word for hours. And there was nothing oppressive or unpleasant in this silence; on the contrary, there was a feeling of assurance and freedom from the necessity of playing a forced and invented role. (9)

Gurdjieff continued to create and use environmental effects for teaching purposes throughout his long stay in the West. At the Château du Prieuré in France he supervised the construction of a Study House from the materials of a used aircraft hangar and decorated it with great effect. The windows were stained in a harmony of colours and the floors and walls were covered with carpets from Eastern countries whose designs were believed to contain ancient wisdom. (10) Stanley Nott, a student at the Prieuré, describes the impact of the Study House on visitors:

The atmosphere was that of a holy place, partly due to the effect of the combination of colours on the senses and feelings (for Gurdjieff understood how to produce definite effects by means of colours, as well as by sound and movements) and partly due to the vibrations of the pupils who practiced the sacred dances and movements there. (11)

In the 1930s and 1940s, Gurdjieff resided in a Paris flat where he used drawn curtains and other decoration to shut out the external world. Here, day and night no longer existed. James Webb believes that Gurdjieff deliberately established this atmosphere to isolate his students from the outside world and create a sanctum where all ordinary norms and rules of behavior were suspended.

Each phase of Gurdjieff's teaching was associated with a particular environmental atmosphere. The Eastern patterns and motif of the Russian period, the majesty of the Study House at the Prieuré and the otherworldly ambience of his Paris apartment were all consciously designed to create a particular spiritual impact by influencing the perceptions and feelings of his students.

### **Playing Roles**

Gurdjieff's whole life seemed to consist of a series of roles in a great drama: seeker of esoteric knowledge, hypnotist, healer, professional occultist, rare carpet dealer, explorer, traveller, businessman, teacher. He was able to play a different role with everyone he met, and was very adept at concealing his genuine self under many guises. A 1952 article in *Time* magazine described Gurdjieff as "a remarkable blend of P.T. Barnum, Rasputin, Freud, Groucho Marx and everybody's grandfather." (12) To some he was the archetypal Fool or Trickster.

Ouspensky formed his first impression of Gurdjieff when they met at a small café in Moscow in 1915. Ouspensky was astonished by the strange and unexpected character of Gurdjieff who appeared to be in disguise and utterly at odds with his surroundings. In time, Ouspensky and his friends noticed that Gurdjieff often seemed to be acting, whether selling carpets or entertaining over large dinners. This acting created perplexity and confusion among his students, who found his image and behavior so unpredictable that they didn't know what conclusions to draw.

The role Gurdjieff played varied with the circumstances. With people who might donate money or help him in his work he would be friendly and solicitous. But with those who were arrogant or pretentious he could be insulting and rude, not caring what impression he made. Gurdjieff enjoyed deceiving visitors to the Château du Prieuré, especially public officials, by playing the role of a simpleton. His role-playing gave him the ability to become almost invisible:

When visitors were being shown round the grounds they would sometimes pass him with only a glance, like an American who was talking to me about what a wonderful man Mr. Gurdjieff must be, and that he would

like to meet him . . . Just then Gurdjieff passed by and went into the house. 'That is Mr. Gurdjieff,' I said. 'Well,' he replied, 'isn't that queer! I spoke to him in the grounds and thought he was the gardener.' (13)

John Bennett recounts a story of Gurdjieff's arrest by the French police following World War II for keeping foreign currency in his flat. When he appeared before the magistrate he "played to perfection the part of a poor old man who understood nothing about foreign money and could scarcely speak French." (14)

With his students Gurdjieff often adopted a very disagreeable and unpleasant role, as if testing their resolve to work with him under any conditions. With prospective and new students Gurdjieff's behaviour bordered on the bizarre. One new student was prevented from approaching Gurdjieff during his first day as each time the student came near Gurdjieff the teacher would shout at him.

Fritz Peters, when just a young boy, witnessed an unforgettable scene involving Gurdjieff and A.R. Orage, the English literary critic and a student at the Prieuré:

Gurdjieff was standing by his bed in a state of what seemed to me to be completely uncontrolled fury. He was raging at Orage, who stood impassively, and very pale, framed in one of the windows . . . Suddenly, in the space of an instant, Gurdjieff's voice stopped, his whole personality changed, he gave me a broad smile -- looking incredibly peaceful and inwardly quiet -- motioned me to leave, and then resumed his tirade with undiminished force. This happened so quickly that I do not believe that Mr. Orage even noticed the break in the rhythm. (15)

What struck Peters was the realization that Gurdjieff's "rage" was in fact firmly controlled and consciously projected.

Gurdjieff's unpredictable and sometimes irrational behaviour bothered many of his pupils. Ouspensky concluded that Gurdjieff had two sides to his personality, one genuine and the other false. Ouspensky felt that Gurdjieff's acting was not always practical and was often counterproductive, driving away many potentially valuable people.

It seems likely that Gurdjieff employed role-playing and acting as a means of teaching his students by manifesting behaviour that did not appear at all "spiritual." However, Gurdjieff's erratic behaviour caused suspicion and doubt in pupils like Ouspensky, who sensed a secret intent behind the constant role-playing:

The most unexpected was his eternal and continual playing. He was never simple and natural; one always felt in him some secret, hidden intent. Some people were attracted to him by this playing as one would be attracted by anything incomprehensible, strange and dangerous . . . In connection with this play we saw perfectly clearly in him two men, and those who the one attracted did not doubt that the other was surely a mask or part adapted for some definite aim. (16)

James Webb argues that Gurdjieff's acting can only be understood in the context of his whole life. Webb likens the various events of Gurdjieff's life to a series of disconnected snapshots which represent roles through which occasionally the man behind the roles can be glimpsed. He points out that outside observers are incapable of judging Gurdjieff's actions because they do not understand that role-playing was merely a technique to help him maintain his detachment and to expand his emotional range.

Gurdjieff revealed that in 1911 he vowed to lead what some would consider an artificial life in order to fulfill his task as a teacher. In his unpublished *A Letter to a Dervish*, Gurdjieff explains that playing a role or part can lead to inner freedom: "The mark of the perfected man is his ability to play to perfection any desired role in his external life while inwardly remaining free and not allowing himself to 'blend' with anything proceeding outside of him." (17)

John Bennett believes that around 1935 Gurdjieff largely ceased his habitual role-playing as he began a new stage of work preparing a select group of students to carry on his legacy after his death.

### **The 'Path of Blame'**

Much of Gurdjieff's outrageous behaviour and acting might seem strange to Westerners conditioned to believe that a spiritual teacher must always act in a truthful and pious manner. However, there is a long history in many Eastern esoteric traditions of teachers deliberately behaving in unexpected or bewildering ways in order to facilitate the learning and growth of their students:

The behaviour of the teacher may appear at times bizarre, unpredictable or meaningless; he may act in ways that are flippant, domineering, cold, manic or tyrannical, he may scream as though gripped by fury, sit in disapproving silence or set the disciple a flurry of apparently inconsequential tasks. Any outsider might well conclude from his behaviour that he is mad; even the novice himself may realize only long afterwards what the teacher's true intentions were. (18)

The teacher hides his or her real self behind a mask of behaviour to deliberately shock or challenge students. John Bennett believes that to advance his teaching mission Gurdjieff consciously used this technique, sometimes called the 'Way of the Trickster' or the 'Path of Crazy Wisdom.' (19) In the Sufi tradition it is known as the 'Path of Blame' or 'Malamati' behavior:

The Path of Blame is known in Persian as the *Rahimalamat*. Although called a 'Path' it is in fact a phase of activity, and has many applications. The teacher incurs 'blame.' He may, for instance, attribute a bad action to himself, in order to teach a disciple without directly criticizing him . . . Many people follow Malamati (blameworthy) behaviour, even making themselves out to be wrongdoers, in order to highlight these

characteristics in others. The reason for this is that when a person sees someone saying or doing something, he will tend to judge him by himself. This is what Rumi and others call 'Holding up a mirror to oneself and calling the image the other person' . . . Malamati behavior can only be used with great care. (20)

One of the ways that Gurdjieff seemed to be using Path of Blame behavior was with his appearance and personal habits, including his table manners and eating habits, use of alcohol, foul language and hygiene. Gurdjieff began gaining weight in the late 1920s and by the end of 1932 he was obese and, according to some students, looked "terrible." Rather than being concerned about his looks and image, Gurdjieff drew attention to his appearance in his later years by passing out unflattering photographs of himself in profile. Although at times Gurdjieff could dress with great taste and elegance, on many occasions he appeared seedy and unkempt, dressed in cheap, food-stained suits, or dressed inappropriately in public, such as the time he attended a posh restaurant in pyjamas, dressing gown and slippers. His table manners were atrocious by Western standards and his personal hygienic habits were considered disgusting by some of his personal assistants. (21)

It appears likely that these personal habits, together with Gurdjieff's difficult and provocative behavior, were part of his role as a teacher following the Path of Blame. Gurdjieff recognized that his powerful, magnetic personality, if allowed its full force of expression, could be an impediment to his students' spiritual potential and independent development. To prevent his students from forming too close an attachment to him or developing a dependency on him, he would repel or shock them with these unusual habits and behavior. Even when newcomers approached him, rather than trying to create a good first impression, Gurdjieff often did everything possible to rebuff or frighten them. The evidence suggests that Gurdjieff used the Path of Blame throughout much of his teaching career in the West.

### **Commentary**

Many students were baffled or discouraged by Gurdjieff's role-playing and deceptive methods. Gurdjieff did not make it easy to study with him or assimilate his ideas; on the contrary, he presented a series of obstacles which the serious seeker had to overcome. Gurdjieff believed that one does not value anything, including knowledge, which can be acquired too easily.

By observing their own reactions to his behaviour, Gurdjieff's pupils were forced to see aspects of themselves that they did not wish to see, which helped them develop their essence and diminish their conditioned mechanical personality.

Gurdjieff's role-playing and acting suggest a teacher consciously masking a higher, more genuine self. Some of Gurdjieff's closest students recalled rare occasions during which he abandoned his role-playing and revealed his authentic self. John Bennett

recounts that following a serious automobile accident in 1948, he and his wife observed that Gurdjieff was no longer hiding behind a mask:

My wife and I both observed an extraordinary change. Before the accident, he had been the enigmatic Gurdjieff that we had known, and of whom so many stories are told. For four or five days after the accident, it seemed that he either could not or did not feel the need to play a role, to hide himself behind a mask. We then felt his extraordinary goodness and love for humanity . . . I believe that, for a few days, we caught a glimpse of the real Gurdjieff, and that all his strange and often repellent behaviour was a screen to hide from people who would otherwise have idolized his person instead of working for themselves. (22)

Georgette Leblanc, a member of the French study group 'The Rope,' records a profound meeting with Gurdjieff shortly before her death where she witnessed the true man revealed:

When I arrived at his apartment, he opened the door himself . . . The light coming from the little salon shone on him brightly. Instead of concealing himself, he abruptly stepped back and leaned against the wall. For the first time, he allowed me to see what he really was . . . as if he had suddenly stripped away the masks behind which it is his duty to hide. His face was imprinted with a charity that embraced the entire world. Standing rigidly before him, I saw him with all my strength and I experienced a gratitude so deep, so painful, that he felt the need to quiet me. With an unforgettable look, he uttered: 'God helps me.' (23)

## NOTES

- (1) Robert de Ropp *Warrior's Way* (Nevada City, California: Gateways, 2002), p. 174.
- (2) James Webb *The Harmonious Circle: The Lives and Works of G.I. Gurdjieff, P.D. Ouspensky, and Their Followers* (Boston: Shambala, 1987), p. 190.
- (3) P.D. Ouspensky *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1949), p. 33.
- (4) Gary Lachman argues in *In Search of P.D. Ouspensky* (Wheaton, Illinois: Quest Books, 2004, p. 88) that what Gurdjieff reveals about himself in his writing is open to multiple interpretations: "Gurdjieff's account of his formative years can be read on a variety of levels: metaphor, allegory, pure tall tale, metaphysical fiction, autobiography, or simply invention."
- (5) Gary Lachman *In Search of P.D. Ouspensky* (Wheaton, Illinois: Quest Books, 2004), p. 82.



- (6) Anthony Storr *Feet of Clay* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), pp. 33-34.
- (7) Henry Leroy Finch “The Sacred Cosmos: Teachings of G.I. Gurdjieff” in Jacob Needleman and George Baker, eds. *Gurdjieff: Essays and Reflections on the Man and His Teaching* (New York: Continuum, 1996), p. 23.
- (8) G. I. Gurdjieff *Views From the Real World: Early Talks of Gurdjieff* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1973), p. 11.
- (9) P.D. Ouspensky *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1949), p. 271.
- (10) Paul Beekman Taylor writes in *Gurdjieff's America* (Lighthouse Editions, 2004, p. 206) that Gurdjieff regarded the art of carpet design as a means of transmitting traditional wisdom:
- Few have said much about Gurdjieff's rugs as a form of encoded texts, but more than once in my hearing he indicated that the rugs on his floors and walls were to be read. They were scripts containing a definite piece of knowledge. When someone asked him why he identified himself as a rug merchant he laughed: “Why dealer in rugs? Answer simple. I sell knowledge. All is in rugs around you. Read! All life is hidden in design.” I learned to appreciate that rug or carpet design, like folk stories, transmit traditional cultural lore from one generation to another.
- (11) C.S. Nott *Teachings of Gurdjieff: The Journal of a Pupil* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1962), p. 46.
- (12) James Webb *The Harmonious Circle: The Lives and Works of G.I. Gurdjieff, P.D. Ouspensky, and Their Followers* (Boston: Shambala, 1987), p. 328.
- (13) C.S. Nott *Teachings of Gurdjieff: The Journal of a Pupil* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1962), p. 111.
- (14) John Bennett *Witness: The Autobiography of John G. Bennett* (Tucson: Omen Press, 1974), p. 249.
- (15) Fritz Peters *Boyhood with Gurdjieff* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1964), p. 31.
- (16) William Patterson *Struggle of the Magicians* (Fairfax, California: Arete Communications, 1996), p. 31.
- (17) John Bennett *Gurdjieff: Making a New World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 113.

(18) Peter Brent "Learning and Teaching" in Idries Shah, ed. *The World of the Sufi* (London: Octagon Press, 1979), p. 216.

(19) Ernest Scott summarizes the qualities of teachers following the Path of Crazy Wisdom in *The People of the Secret* (London: Octagon, 1983, pp. 229-230). They bear an uncanny resemblance to many of Gurdjieff's characteristics, including:

- Supernatural powers.
- Ability to heal others.
- Physical indulgences.
- Takes money from others.
- Redistributes money and gifts.
- Never refrains from action because of lack of money.
- Rejects the norms of the society in which he lives and works.
- Is misunderstood because his "excesses" are considered as quirks and not as an essential part of his operations to illustrate the weaknesses of others.
- Is opposed by the orthodox authorities, civil and religious.
- Attracts many people who follow only the lure of the strange, creating an incorrect impression of his activities and associates.
- Has dance, music, or other physical movements.
- Has spent a great deal of time in mortification and also in indulgence, creating through this polarity a strange power.
- Usually only a small ("acceptable") part of what he says and does is reported, and this becomes respectable and admired by his followers. He may even come to be considered, after his death, as a saint by the orthodox authorities.

(20) Idries Shah *The Commanding Self* (London: Octagon Press, 1994), p. 323.

(21) Fritz Peters, who was assigned as a youth to clean Gurdjieff's quarters at the Château du Prieuré, described the shocking state in which he found the rooms in *Boyhood with Gurdjieff* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1964, pp. 29-30):

What he could do to his dressing-room and bathroom is something that cannot be described without invading his privacy. I will only say that physically, Mr. Gurdjieff, at least so I gathered, lived like an animal . . . the disorder was frequently so great that I had visions of great, hygienic dramas transpiring nightly in the dressing room and bathroom.

(22) John Bennett *Witness: The Autobiography of John G. Bennett* (Tucson: Omen Press, 1974), p. 243.

(23) Margaret Anderson *The Unknowable Gurdjieff* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 149.