

Gurdjieff and Mansfield

The Initiation of the Priestess

James Moore

THEY SAT TOGETHER, and each kilometre to Fontainebleau brought nearer Katherine's hope and LM's devastation. On the long, alienating railway platform James Young greeted them – vigorous, handsome, cheerfully blasphemous. The horse's breath hung white in the October air as the fiacre jogged down past the bridge into Avon and out onto the Valvins road. At the verge of the wood of Gautier the cab drew to a halt before the Prieuré. Set in the steep slate mansard were seven little dormer windows, and a man looking down would have seen James Young pay the cabby his seven francs, tip him, and ring imperiously at the bell-handle with its legend '*Sonnez fort*'. Now the great wrought-iron gates eased open and shut again; Katherine Mansfield had arrived at her destination. Never afterwards in LM's long anticlimactic life, could she quite forget the low-rising contour of the Prieuré, the fountain climbing in the courtyard, and the maple leaves, suddenly, irretrievably sundered from the branch, and blown down into the crimson flower-beds.

Only brief days before, Gurdjieff himself had come here with all his self-imposed difficulties. 'When I walked through the gates of the Château du Prieuré,' he tells us, 'it was as though, right behind the old porter, I was greeted by Mrs. Serious Problem.' Somehow he must build, lecture, choreograph, rehearse, administer, counsel, and foot virtually the entire bill. Costs were prohibitive, and Gurdjieff's 100,000 francs were scattered to the last *sou*. 'Sometimes I had to work literally twenty-four hours a day: all night long in Fontainebleau and the whole day in Paris.' He was a foreigner; every communication, every botched translation, was costly in nervous energy. 'I felt more than ever the need to know European languages, while at the same time I did not have a minute in which to apply myself to learning them.' He was further preoccupied with trying to extricate his family from Armenia. And suddenly, on top of all this there was Katherine Mansfield.

She glimpsed him first from the window of the *pied-à-terre* assigned to her. 'He looks exactly like a desert chief. I kept thinking of Doughty's *Arabia*.' But the time had passed for distant sightings, for romantic and simplistic iconography. Even the longest lines of convergence must cross at last, and at lunch on that far-off Tuesday in 1922 Katherine Mansfield sat at Gurdjieff's table. How facilely, how vainly, imagination peoples the 'English' dining-room. Katherine in a black or purple dress with one small felicitous touch of colour. LM gauche and ill at ease. Orage is there for social amenity's sake and Pinder for translation. Here are the Russian Old Guard: Madame Ostrowska, Dr Stjoernval, Madame Ouspensky, the de Salzmans, the de Hartmanns. Now Gurdjieff enters in his dark, shabby clothes, his brimless Caucasian hat of black fur, and sits in the centre chair facing the window; behind him on the mantelpiece stands a photo of his father, bearded and benign. It would be interesting to record Gurdjieff and Katherine's conversation; interesting but impossible. We know the occasion was informal, the cuisine audacious; we know her desperate eagerness to stay; we know the exacting benevolence of his gaze. At the point where the lines converge the heroine passes through the surface of the mirror. 'Mr Gurdjieff is not in the least like what I expected,' wrote Katherine immediately afterwards. 'He's what one wants to find him really. But I do feel *absolutely confident* he can put me on the right track in every way.' And now he had seen her, how much did it weigh with Gurdjieff – Dr Young's prognosis? And the problems of intensive care? And his Institute put in jeopardy by a celebrity's death? Evidently he foresaw the difficulties, set them in the balance against Katherine's need – and laid them to one side. LM's humble diary records the ending of that day. 'Last evening spent in the salon before an enormous fire of great logs. "Fire is condensed sunlight". Music and tambourines – atmosphere intensely alive.'

Katherine was like 'The Man Who Came to Dinner'. She arrived on Tuesday with just a comb and toothbrush. By Wednesday afternoon she had won an invitation to remain a fortnight, and, one week later, permission to stay indefinitely. With LM the case was different. She left on Thursday morning. Whatever it was which had begun in Queen's College in the little room overlooking the mews, it ended at the Prieuré. Twenty years it had lasted, through love and hate; always intense, always staggering under the load of Ida's implacable service. 'Came away for the last time absolutely dazed,' she recorded. 'Decided in train to go on the land or to Russia.' She wandered desolate in Paris and London; she bombarded Katherine with letters; she parcelled her off every conceivable necessary. Then in mid-November, feeling she might be 'happy with animals and simple people low down on the scale of intelligence,' she retreated to a farm on the estate of Madame von Schlumberger, a feminist. She was not happy. Anxious, lonely, baited for her tongue-tied French, castigated for the nervous way in which she churned butter, LM heard a thousand owls screeching in the leafless woods

and dreamt of death. Katherine's death? Or was it conceivably her own? Over the years their very identities seemed to have coalesced, 'She *was* me,' wrote Katherine, the day after they parted.

Mrs Murry had not been twenty-four hours at the Prieuré, before Gurdjieff moved her to 'The Ritz'. Always ultra-sensitive to her surroundings, she now enjoyed a sumptuous room, with panelled walls, antique furniture, French engravings, ornate Empire mirrors and, from the second-floor windows, a wide view over the Versailles-style garden with its formal beds of geranium, calceolarias, lobelias and pink mesembryanthemum. He also gave her a job: 'eat, walk in the garden, pick the flowers and rest *much*.' It seemed a simple proposition but, as she protested, 'it's the eat much which is the job when it's Gurdjieff who serves the dish.' Perhaps only that dwindling circle who sat at his table can grasp her difficulty in all its plenitude, but graphic accounts remain:

In all my travels I think I have never eaten food so delicious as at these dinners – food from every quarter of the world. There was soup, meat with spices, poultry, fish; vegetables of all kinds, most wonderful salads whose juice we drank in glasses; puddings and pies, fruit of all sorts, dishes of oriental tit-bits, fragrant herbs, raw onions, and celery. Calvados and slivovitz for the elders to drink, and wine for the young and the children. A speciality was sheep's head after the meat course, done in Caucasian style, delicious and very rich. Gurdjieff would tell a guest that in the East the sheep's eyes were considered the tastiest part, and would honour him by offering him one.

It all seemed to Katherine like *Gulliver's Travels*. 'She stood in the doorway of our main dining-room' recalls Olgivanna, 'and looked at all and each with sharp, intense, dark eyes. They burned with the desire and hunger for impressions.' So struck was the young Montenegrin that she flew straight to Gurdjieff. 'I told him what a lovely face she had and how much I liked her. "You take care of her," he said, "Help her all you can." ' When Olgivanna's first knock came at the door, Katherine was sitting in the firelight. Her face, her hair, her mouth, were striking enough. 'But the eyes!' More logs were needed and Olgivanna moved quickly to get them. 'When I left her room I leaned against the wall for a few seconds. Why had she to die? . . . Something became outlined in my mind. I understood her need.' The two women sat together, watching the shapes and faces and riddles, growing and decaying in the red core. Katherine spoke hesitantly about her writing: Olgivanna of her years with Gurdjieff – in Tiflis, Constantinople, Berlin, Dresden and Paris. 'I wish', said Katherine, 'I could have been with you then.' The moment came for Olgivanna to go. 'I put another log on the fire, and as I did so Katherine leaned forward and slightly touched my head.'

Even younger than Olgivanna, and away from home for the first time, was Adèle Kafian. She too responded cheerfully when asked to help Katherine. It was not exactly this Adèle had had in mind, on her long journey south from Lithuania to the Prieuré, but she grasped immediately what she could to offer – ‘I had an abundance of untried strength.’ Perhaps Gurdjieff selected these helpers as much for help they could receive; perhaps Katherine even became a kind of mother to Adèle, at the very moment she missed one. Quite simply we know Katherine was fortified by feeling she could repay. ‘Dr Young, a real friend of mine comes up and makes me a good fire. In “return”,’ she adds proudly, ‘I am patching the knee of his trousers today.’ Her dignity is maintained.

Gurdjieff himself quickly integrated Katherine in the life of the Prieuré. Its heart was the kitchen, where she watched, absorbed:

Nina, a big girl in a black apron—lovely, too—pounds things in mortars. The second cook chops at the table, bangs the saucepans, sings; another runs in and out with plates and pots, a man in the scullery cleans pots—the dog barks and lies on the floor, worrying a hearth-brush. A little girl comes in with a bouquet of leaves for Olga Ivanovna. Mr. Gurdjieff strides in, takes up a handful of shredded cabbage and eats it . . . there are at least 20 pots on the stove. And it’s so full of life and humour and ease that one wouldn’t be anywhere else.

But not everyone would have chosen the word ‘ease’. Whatever a pupil learned about himself at the Prieuré was not learned from an armchair. It has been wickedly said that, ‘When Orage arrived at the Prieuré with *Alice in Wonderland* in his pocket, he found that far from disappearing down magical rabbit-holes he was expected to dig them.’ Intellectually no one was better equipped than A. R. Orage to grasp the notion of duliotherapy: ‘Be slave freely, not slave will be.’ Practice was another matter. Orage had courage but he also had fifty years on his back:

I was told to dig, and has I had no real exercise for years I suffered so much physically that I would go back to my room, a sort of cell, and literally cry with fatigue. No one, not even Gurdjieff, came near me. I asked myself, ‘Is this what I have given up my whole life for? At least I had something then. Now what have I?’

No such doubts cloud Katherine’s letters: the Institute pupils were absolutely unlike people as she had known people; the advanced men and women were truly wonderful; she received such beautiful sympathy as she had never known in the outside world; her whole day was *lived* from moment to moment; at thirty-four she was beginning her education; she had learned more at the Prieuré in a week than in years *là-bas*; there was no other spot on the whole earth where one could be taught as much as one was here; ‘This *is* the place, and here at least one is understood entirely, mentally and physically.’

The panegyric is a treacherous form; it invites scepticism, even ridicule. But at least, at absolute least, the Prieuré drew the invalid from her hotel cul-de-sac, the writer from her study, out into the light of day where real people collided in real events. And what a rich Aubreyesque stratum lay juxtaposed to the spiritual one. Here is the lugubrious lawyer Rachmievitch; here is bountiful Lady Rothermere, dubiously chewing the herring which Gurdjieff has passed off on her as grilled rainbow trout fresh from the Prieuré pond. Here is Gurdjieff's admirable fox-terrier Philos, and the no less admirable Miss Merston who invariably, as she bends over to serve tea, breaks wind with a 'small sharp report, like that of a toy gun,' a phenomenon which, as Gurdjieff puts it, is 'so delicate, so refined, that it is necessary to be alert, and highly perceptive, even to be aware of this.' Here are some industrious ladies trying to grub up the roots of trees with tablespoons, while memorizing Tibetan verbs. Here is Gurdjieff teaching himself to drive, like a Cossack breaking a colt, with a disgraceful crash and rupture of gears. Here is his meal of sour cream and powdered cinnamon, prepared by Captain John Godolphin Bennett, formerly of British Military Intelligence. Here are the Institute's new pigs with long golden hair, Katherine's 'very mystical pigs', and here is the man who found them in the tomato patch and went to give warning, walking 'very slowly to avoid identifying and muscle tension', and here is Gurdjieff who 'roared at him and leapt, so to speak, about a hundred yards to those pigs.'

Into this strange world moved a Katherine *engagée*: now in charge of the indoor carnations; now on kitchen duty, proudly occupying an entire morning disposing of three carrots. 'My hands', she complains in high triumph, 'are ruined for the present with scraping carrots.' If for a fugitive moment her dark eyes clouded with tears, it was from peeling onions, and when those eyes cleared, they saw sermons in stone and good in everything: 'Mr Gurdjieff hardly speaks a word to me. He must know me pretty well.'

But Gurdjieff's psychological acumen was not the only term in this particular equation; he had other powerful claims on his attention, not least his inescapable need to go hunting for money. Backwards and forwards he ran to Paris. There he treated intractable cases of alcoholism and drug addiction; bought and sold oil shares on margin; opened two restaurants, worked them up pell-mell and sold them at a profit. It was certainly not a regimen Gurdjieff enjoyed:

It is worth mentioning that my external life at this period, when I was spending every night in Montmartre, provided many of those who knew me, or who had seen or heard about me, with rich material for gossip. Some envied my opportunities for gay revels, others condemned me. As for me, I would not have wished such revels even for my bitterest enemy.

But wished or not wished, their effect on his programme was inevitable. See the Prieuré audience waiting for his lecture. Time passes: ten o'clock, eleven o'clock, midnight. In the small hours Gurdjieff arrives from Paris. For a long time he stands silent, confronting his students. 'Patience is the Mother of Will,' he says. 'If you have not a mother how can you be born?' The lecture is over. Put the pressure of work together with the language difficulty, and small wonder if Gurdjieff spoke less than expected to Katherine Mansfield.

Whatever else, time was always reserved for the Movements or sacred dances, and new exercises at the Prieuré were occasions of special drama. Gurdjieff himself, standing over Thomas de Hartmann almost forbiddingly, almost like a riding master, would drum out the rhythm on the piano top. Now, as if listening inside himself, he would add the sinuous melody—whistling, touching the keys lightly, humming or even singing very softly in a language of the rocky wastes and inaccessible hills. Professor Hartmann, his balding head glistening and nodding sagaciously above the battered old upright, would consolidate the theme. ('It is not "my music",' he would say years afterwards, 'It is his. I have only picked up the master's handkerchief.') The least deviation and Gurdjieff would burst out furiously at Hartmann in Russian, and Hartmann would shout vexedly back. By now the Teacher of Dancing was showing the series; if his movements were somehow feline, they had also an uncompromising precision. From place to place he went, establishing his pupils in their assigned positions. As each struggled to unriddle and practice his sequence, noisy and passionate disputes would agitate the ranks. Gurdjieff himself would quash these unlicensed debates, and 'his language on those occasions would have made even Lenin blush.' Abruptly he would shout. An eloquent silence supervened as Gurdjieff stood there before he class with his function, his obligation, his demand. Now Hartmann played the introductory bars, building in rare harmonies. In the front rank Madame de Salzmann, Madame Galumian and Olgivanna searched. And suddenly the whole class was working: each limb conforming to different contrapuntal rhythms; each posture, each gesture, each displacement with its own appointed duration and weight; each evolution manifesting in a universal language the laws that rule the secret movements of men and of the stars.

Night after night, Katherine Mansfield is there to watch. Hieratic, inexplicable, she sits in the high-backed chair nearest to the salon fire. Her dress is simple and

elegant. Her intent face has just enough rouge and lipstick to mock its pallor; her wide intelligent eyes do not miss a single inflection. It is midnight. '*Kto hochet spat,*' shouts Gurdjieff, '*mojet itti spat.*' Who want sleep, go sleep. But Katherine does not move. She will be there at one, at two, a woman who can scarcely walk, absorbed in dances with lie at the very frontier of physical possibility. Did she feel their religious content, follow the inner exercises, attempt the complex multiplications? We know she did. 'She watched so eagerly,' remembers Olgivanna, 'she seemed mentally to do the movements together with the rest.' It was a strange translation: from room 52 in the Select Hôtel to Fontainebleau; and thence to Kashgaria, Tibet, the Chitral: to the monasteries of Kisil-Djan and Souxari, to the medical temple of Sari and the Sanctuary of Houdankr. An unlikely metamorphosis from cribbage to the Thirty Gestures and the Big Seven. Katherine sensed both its strangeness and its value. She writes of 'a tremendous ancient Assyrian group Dance. I have no words with which to describe it. To see it seems to change one's whole being for the time.' But the movement which had for Katherine a special message was 'The Initiation of the Priestess, a Fragment of a Mystery'. It came from a cave temple in the Hindu Kush, and Gurdjieff's wife, Madame Ostrowska danced the high priestess. This is the piece which Katherine reports as follows:

There is one which takes about 7 minutes and it contains the whole life of women – but everything! Nothing is left out. It taught me, it gave me more of women's life than any book or poem. There was even room for Flaubert's *Cour Simple* in it, for Princess Marya. . . . Mysterious.

She began to re-assess her writing.

In this she was not alone. Before her – footsore and bemused, with aching back and blistered hands, forbidden by Gurdjieff even to pluck a cigarette from the pocket of his faded corduroy jacket – stood the once trenchant editor of the *New Age*. Almost every day Orage and Katherine stole time for long exchanges and iconoclastic fancies. 'Do send *Lit. Sups.*,' Katherine urged Murry. 'They're so good for lighting fires.' But essentially their criticisms began where all good criticisms begin – at home. In 'a world of Peeping Toms with fewer and fewer Lady Godivas to ride by,' Katherine felt she had been merely a camera: subjective, unconscious and *ipso facto* evil. She had a new vision: she would let the laugh be with the heroes, making the commonplace virtues as attractive as ordinarily the vices were:

The reader's sympathy would be maintained by the continuity and variety of the efforts of one or both of the characters, by their indomitable renewal of the struggle with ever fresh invention.

What is to be made of this? Many who offer a theory of literature cannot write: many who write have no critique. Katherine who certainly could write had arrived at a bold—and a very Gurdjieffian—conception. But for a proof of the matter, time was necessary, and it was not towards the publishers that fate was hurrying Katherine Mansfield.

Deep down she knew it. Immortality, not stylistic innovation, was her real priority. Precious immortality, neither within easy reach not yet impossibly impossible: 'more than ever I feel that I can build up a life within me which death will not destroy.' It is a big affirmation, saluted in Olgivanna's response, 'There is no death for one like you who perceives the possibility of sweeping death aside when the time comes.' Meanwhile life buzzed, pulsed, throbbed exasperatedly around her as the Study House, quickening stage by stage, calibrated her remaining days.

What was this Study House? It had begun its existence as a hanger (some say a Zeppelin hanger) and was acquired by Gurdjieff from the French army for the inconvenience of dismantling and carting it away. Miss Merston, who sprang forward heroically to assist the men unload, received a violent kick on the shin from Gurdjieff and hopped aside just in time to escape a large iron girder falling on top of her. The daunting ferrous jigsaw made a strange contrast with the weathered stone blocks of the old priory, lying in the tall grass with their inscription '*Ad maiorem gloriam Dei*'. Like a big meccano set the hanger must be assembled; bodied out with lathes, walled with mud and straw, glazed with Miss Merston's geranium frames. ('Anyone grow flower with frame,' Gurdjieff assured her. 'You grow flower without frame.') The floor must be levelled, the roof must be achieved; gallery, stage, boxes, lighting, fountains must be installed. All must be accomplished by the Russian New Year on 13 January. 'Throw everyone into the work,' Gurdjieff commanded. Now began a disciplined frenzy of shovelling, barrowing, pounding, rolling, sawing, tarring, nailing, painting. Winter was closing in; it was cold. But work on the Study House went on by lamplight till two or three in the mornings, or even through the night. 'We had no proper tools,' recalls de Hartmann the concert pianist, 'and worked practically with our bare hands.' Katherine's friend Dr James Carruthers Young diagnosed in himself 'the phenomenon which is known surgically as "snap-finger"'. Finally there arrived the moment of truth: the centre stanchion supporting the entire fabric, 40 ft wide and 100 ft long, must be knocked away. 'When the pole is removed,' said Gurdjieff darkly, 'the House will either stand or collapse.'

In the middle of this all this furore, Piotr Ouspensky arrived at the Prieuré. Whether he experienced a moment of *déjà vu* as he passed through the gates, we are not told, but the faces around him seemed mysteriously familiar. Why, here was his wife Sophie; here was Lady Rothermere, his former patron; here digging like moles, were his senior pupils, Orage, Kenney and doctors Young, Nicoll and Bell. And here was

Katherine Mansfield. Ouspensky sat with her one evening in the salon and she spoke to him in a voice which, though not unpleasant, seemed to come from the void:

I know that this is true and that there is no other truth. You know that I have long since looked upon all of us without exception as people who have suffered shipwreck and have been cast upon an uninhabited island, but who do not yet know of it. But these people here know it. The others, there, in life, still think that a steamer will come for them tomorrow and that everything will go on in the old way. These already know that there will be no more of the old way. I am so glad that I can be here.

It was more than a value judgement or a striking metaphor; it was a graceful expression of thanks to Ouspensky. Katherine was never exactly carried away by *Tertium Organum* but she had no doubts about its author. 'He is a very fine man,' she wrote.

Orage, like Katherine, was beginning to sweep his difficulties aside; perhaps she helped him. He started to loosen up, and his mordant humour returned. The work-shy Rachmielevitch no longer exasperated him. 'Poor fellow. I suppose we must forgive him. After all, he has had his centres balanced.' Faced with a future which seemed to consist exclusively of spades and holes, Orage refused to be defeated.

I vowed to make extra effort, and just then something changed in me. Soon, I began to enjoy the hard labour, and a week later Gurdjieff came to me and said, 'Now, Orage, I think you dig enough. Let us go to café and drink coffee.'

Gurdjieff never allowed anyone to get stuck. In the second week of November he instituted a sort of grand musical-chairs with the sleeping accommodation. Katherine Mansfield stoutly resisted the privileged exemption urged on her; she wanted nothing better than to be treated like her friends. ¹ So it was she found herself in the kind of bedroom her maid Gurtie Small might have had at Portland Villas. 'When Olga Ivanova and I had arranged it and she hung up her yellow dance stockings to dry before the fire we sat together on the bed and felt like two quite poor young girls.' But the basic pre-Revolutionary amenities remained at least, for Katherine's account is 'written on the arm of a chair, on a cushion, on my bed, as I try to escape from the heat of my fire.'

Katherine was enthusiastic about cows, in a nice Daisy Ashford way. 'I must tell you . . . my love of cows persists. We now have . . . real beauties – immense – with short curly hair? fur? wool? Between their horns.' So at the end of November, Gurdjieff made a resting place for her in the cowshed. An elaborate polemic assures it a place in history which perhaps no other cowshed has enjoyed for 2,000 years. Here is Katherine's version:

I'll tell you . . . about that couch Mr. Gurdjieff has had built in the cowhouse. It's simply too lovely. There is a small steep staircase to a little railed-off gallery above the cows. On the little gallery are divans covered with Persian carpets (only two divans). But the white-washed walls and ceiling have been decorated most exquisitely in what looks like a

Persian pattern of yellow, red and blue by Mr. Salzmänn. Flowers, little birds, butterflies and a spreading tree with animals on the branches, even a hippopotamus. But . . . all done with the most *real art* – a little masterpiece. And all so gay, so simple, reminding one of summer grasses and the kind of flowers that smell like milk. There I go every day to lie and later I am going to sleep there. It's very warm. One has the most happy feelings listening to the beasts and looking. I know that one day I shall write a long long story about it.'

But there was more to that cowshed than cows, more even than Alexandre de Salzmänn's inspired decorations; there was a link with Gurdjieff himself. It had been Gurdjieff's own place before it was hers; it was Gurdjieff who transformed it; Gurdjieff who leant over the gilded balustrade watching the cows Equivoquetecka, Bridget, Mitasha and Baldaofim; Gurdjieff who had snatched there his fugitive hours of rest. Here painted on the ceiling was Gurdjieff's sacred symbol, the enneagram; beside it that strange bestiary of his pupils – Orage as an elephant, de Hartmann as a toucan and Dr James Carruthers Young as an ape. If science did not positively forbid the idea that a place can be magnetised to transmit a special influence, we might perhaps scry something of that sort.

So here in her last days she lay, the cows chewing rhythmically below; the smell of hay sweet and soothing. Gurdjieff still came occasionally to rest or talk or milk the goats for her. 'Now,' he told Katherine, 'you have two doctors you must obey. Doctor Stable and Doctor New Milk. Not to think, not to write. . . . Rest. Rest. Live in your body again.' And Madame Ostrowska came to milk 'Mrs Murry's Cows'.

She was tall, beautifully proportioned. She wore a black dress of an old German style, tight at the waist and around the breast, with the skirt flowing down in rich folds. Her beautiful head was tied with a black scarf. A gently smile, sad and lovely, was always on her lips.

Separated by language, the two women 'conversed' by smiles and gestures; and by glances that passed between the brown and the grey-blue eyes. 'I think she is splendid,' Katherine told Olgivanna. 'I am certain that the cows are in a state of exaltation while she is milking them! They must experience a super-cow-sensation, of they are at all decent cows!'

The therapy of 1922 – strict regimen, absolute rest and pneumothorax – Katherine had explicitly rejected. X-rays did not enter general use as a diagnostic tool until the thirties. Chemotherapy and pulmonary surgery were not in use until the forties. Streptomycin was not discovered until 1944. Add to all this the fact that Katherine arrived at the Priuré irreparably damaged, and the case against Gurdjieff begins to evaporate. Could he conceivably check a disease which had run its unchallenged course for twelve years? ² If the winter was cold, could he do more than provide her with a warm room? If the cowshed sounds incongruous, would Katherine

Mansfield herself have preferred a hotel or a ward for the terminally ill? If she drew a sort of inner strength from the friendship and the sacred dancing at the Institute, was Gurdjieff to show her the door? If at moments she nourished herself with an impossible hope, was it his role to undeceive her? If he said that fresh milk, sunshine and the breath of cows would do her good, well at least they did her no harm. Can the same be said of Manoukhin's X-rays, or Dr Bouchage's iodine injections, or Dr Poached Eyes's strychnine prescriptions, or indeed the entire paraphernalia of contemporary medicine?

And if Gurdjieff's regime is under judgement it should be weighed *in toto*; but Katherine did not stick to it *in toto*. 'Not to write,' he insisted, yet her correspondence was incessant. It stirred emotions, it wasted her energies, it brought vexatious replies. Murry suggested his wife was hypnotised, or self-hypnotised, and pictured herself as an angel with a sword. He wondered if he would see her 'on the other side'. She, with mock seriousness, invited him to Fontainebleau. 'You could learn the banjo here and if the worst came to the worst always make enough to keep you with playing it.' (Murry demurred: but whether literature's gain outweighed ragtime's loss is one of those questions we must refer to Professor Meyers.) 'It is very difficult', said Gurdjieff, 'to sacrifice one's suffering. A man will renounce any pleasure you like but he will not give up his suffering.' Surely Katherine's unrelinquishable correspondence – as much in its marshmallow endearments as in its acidities – ravaged her. We know she was unable to sleep. 'I tried', confesses Olgivanna, 'to go to bed at the same hour as the others did, but just as the sweet state of falling into sleep would begin to overcome me, I would see Katherine sitting up by the coal of the fire, sleepless. How could I leave her like that?'

The remorseless advance of winter, Katherine faced with aplomb.

This life proves how terribly wrong and stupid all doctors are. I would have been dead 50 times in the opinion of all the medical men whom I have known. And when I remember last year and that bed in the corner week after week and those *trays*.

Her move to the small room in early November and her restoration to the grand one on 17 December seemed psychologically apt and timed to perfection. 'But how did Mr Gurdjieff know how much I needed that experience? . . . he always acts at precisely the moment one needs it.' Nor was life all austerity; Christmas was coming. On 22 December, seated at a table heaped with flowers, paper chains, bon-bon cases, gold wire and gilded fir-cones, Katherine wrote to L. M:

We are going to *Fêter le Noel* in tremendous style here. Every sort of lavish generous hospitable thing has been done by Mr Gurdjieff. He wants a real old-fashioned *English* Xmas – an extraordinary idea here! And we shall sit down to a table 60 persons to turkeys, geese, a whole sheep, a pig, puddings, heavens knows what in the way of dessert and wines by the barrel. There's to be a tree, too and Father Xmas.

And she added this: 'If you'd like me for a friend as from this Xmas I'd like to be your friend. But not too awfully serious *ma chère*'. It was the last letter LM ever received from Katherine Mansfield.

It is Christmas 1922. In the Prieuré drawing-room Katherine watches avidly as the children receive their presents from the shining Christmas tree; then on an impulse she gives an impromptu recitation, in dialect. Frail, thin-shouldered, in a dark purple taffeta dress embroidered with tiny flowers, she mobilises her small reserves of breath to speak 'with sharp changes in her voice, suggesting peasants quarrelling among themselves.' Wide-eyed, the five-and six-year-olds watch her. Major Pinder's little girl Yvonne is baffled by the accent; Madame Ospensky's grandson Lonya, and Boussique de Salzmann, Tolik Merkouroff and Nikolai Stjoernval, cannot even understand English. But all smile shyly at Katherine's animation and characterisation, at this final, gala performance of a born actress.

When she returns to her room she finds the fire burning sweetly, and a little Christmas tree of her own brought from the wood, and three candles burning. 'Adèle, why three?' she cries. One each, she is told: for Katherine, Adèle – and Murry. Katherine smiles sadly at the notion and subsides into the armchair; Adèle covers her shoulders with a fluffy blue and white scarf. Now one of the candles flickers obdurately and begins to go out. 'That's me,' whispers Katherine. 'No! protests young Adèle, jumping up and snuffing out the other candles first, in a gesture at once magical, impassioned and ineffectual.

Though Katherine's vital candle was flickering, she still hoped it might illumine her true nature: 'the question is always: "*Who am I?*" 'she wrote on Boxing Day. 'You see . . . if I were allowed one single cry to God, that cry would be: *I want to be REAL.*' Against all experience, all intuition, she longed to share her search with Murry, and on New Year's Eve she sent him a decisive letter. 'Would you care to come here on January 8 or 9 and stay until 14–15? Mr Gurdjieff approves my plan and says will you come as his guest? On the 13th our new theatre is to be opened. It will be a wonderful experience.' She wrote a second letter that day: to her favourite cousin Elizabeth. It is significant both for its final judgement on the Institute and her unmistakable presentiment of death:

But I cannot tell you what a joy it is to be in contact with living people who are strange and quick and not ashamed to be themselves. . . . Goodbye, my dearest cousin. I shall never know anyone like you; I shall remember every little thing about you for ever.

She made her peace with Sir Harold Beauchamp: 'The New Year is already here. I must leave the fire and go to bed. God bless you darling Father. May we meet again.' Now one last time Katherine Mansfield put pen to paper; the unposted letter was found

in her blotter after she had gone. 'My thoughts are full of carpets and Persia and Samarkand and the little rugs of Beluchistan. . . . I am looking for signs of Spring already. . . . Write and tell me how you are will you? Dear Ida?' At last it was over. One after one the extraordinary caravan of letters had vanished across the rim; the galled and refractory specimens of Ospedaletti and the pure white racers of Isola Bella; conveying from the biographical hinterland their imponderable literary cargo of gold, frankincense, vinegar and marzipan. As the year 1923 came in, an unusual silence descended.

The formal cause of Katherine's death was human mortality; the material cause the tuberculosis bacillus; and the final cause has not transpired. Surely we possess a clue to the efficient cause: she died when Murry came. The brief winter day was already dwindling down as he entered the Prieuré gates on 9 January. Immediately he set eyes on Katherine he felt that something decisive had happened: 'she seemed a being transformed by love, absolutely secure in love.' From her room she led him, via the cowshed, to the crowded Study House, now a scene of intense concentration and activity: costumes were being sewn; fountains installed; aphorisms painted in special script; carpets, cushions, goat-skins arranged; and Asiatic musical instruments hung. Above the deep stage stood the sign of the enneagram. Awkwardly Katherine, Murry and Olgivanna took tea together; he was introduced to Adèle, the de Hartmanns, the de Salzmans and someone destined to play an enormous role in his own life – Dr James Young. He met Orage again 'a changed man, much gentler and sweeter than I remembered him.' For a moment Murry's ingrained scepticism and hostility wavered: 'there was a blend of simplicity and seriousness in most of the people I met there, and in the company as a whole, which impressed me deeply.' After tea, maladroit and preoccupied, he even took a hand in painting coloured designs on the Study House windows, struck through by the last rays of the dying sun. Just before the supper bell it began to rain down on the tarred felt roof, but Katherine refused the umbrella offered by Olgivanna. 'Oh, no, I love the rain tonight. I want the feeling of it on my face.' After a meal served to Murry and Katherine in her room they came to the salon to watch the sacred dancing. Katherine arrived, chalk-faced, alien, strange, to sit in her accustomed niche by the fire. 'I want music. Why don't they begin? It is quite late.' She wanted above all *The Initiation of the Priestess*, and for Katherine it was indeed quite late.

For the last time the dance began, which she had longed to enter. 'If only I could have just a little place in that group. . . . How grateful I could be for it.' As Gurdjieff's music rose and vibrated, her eyes, seemingly directed beyond and through the dancers, registered her final impressions. At ten o'clock the class went back to the Study House to begin the night's work; and Katherine to her room. Climbing the stairs with Murry,

she suffered a haemorrhage and, having received the benefit of prompt and assiduous attention from three doctors, passed rapidly from this world.

Even now the Gurdjieff-Mansfield contact remains a mystery, which as our clumsy fingers reach out to grasp, passes like smoke between them. Time, said Gurdjieff, is the Arch-Subjective. 'Did you know,' Olgivanna asked Katherine in mid-December, 'that you have been here more than two months already?'

'Two months?' said Katherine. 'Two thousand years you mean.' From the isolated, embittered authoress of *In a German Pension* to a being transformed by love, absolutely secure in love, is a metamorphosis worth reflection. Katherine had not come to the Priuré by accident; her quality, her aim, her question, bore with them a predisposition to understanding. It was not in a formal sense that Gurdjieff became Katherine's teacher; but how telling if at the last she found in him a 'man without quotation marks'; from a distance and at the very last.

Orage came running, and Olgivanna; Adèle, who was with her to the end, wept inconsolably in her room; telegrams went out to LM and Brett and Katherine's sisters. The following day Murry settled his negotiations with the *entrepreneurs de pompes funèbres*: sadly, since he forgot to pay the bill, Katherine Mansfield would soon be removed to a *fosse commune*, a plot reserved for those unable to pay for an individual tomb. Meanwhile she lay in the starved Protestant *temple*; on her cold finger the wedding-ring of Frieda Lawrence. First to reach Fontainebleau was LM, who, in a movement both protective and proprietary, covered Katherine in her 'brilliantly embroidered black silk Spanish shawl'. On the day before the funeral, various literary entities and nonentities from London convened in Fontainebleau at the long dinner-table of the hotel Chalet de la Forêt. When pity and *vin ordinaire* had elasticated their tongues they began to criticise Katherine. 'Why had she come here? What had led to Ouspensky? How? When?' Suddenly the awkward, inarticulate LM found herself on her feet squarely confronting them. Why were they speaking like this, she demanded fiercely, when Katherine was not here to defend herself. The party broke up.

Katherine Mansfield was buried on 12 January 1923, and Murry provided the pastor with notes for his uneasy eulogy in the chapel. Then came the cortège: first the big hearse drawn by black horses sagely nodding their black plumes; then the attenuated crocodile of carriages and cars, twisting in and out of the narrow streets, winding by the longest route and the most grudging pace to the municipal cemetery. 'I began in the car,' recalls LM, 'then could not bear it and got out and walked, miles and miles very slowly.' From their windows the French looked out at the '*groupe de théosophes absurdes et agités*'. Strangely, the embankment bounding Avon cemetery carried the trains which ran between Paris and the Côte; again and again in her brief life

Katherine had transited her final resting place. Now Murry and LM painfully, tensely juxtaposed like siblings, watched her coffin lowered. ('It is not my coffin which is the shell, it is my body which is the shell,' Katherine had written.) LM stepped forward and dropped a bunch of marigolds, her final gauge of allegiance, into the quiet earth; and Gurdjieff handed to the mourners little screws of paper containing *kootia* – that mixture of raisins and corn and honey which is a symbol of decay, germination and re-growth.

On 13 January, the day after Katherine's burial, Gurdjieff brought his Study House to life.

¹ This was the clear and unequivocal recollection of Mrs C. S. Nott who at this time was herself a friend and helper to 'Mrs Murry'.

² Those asserting that Gurdjieff was responsible for Katherine's death in 1923 neglect this extended pathological history. It is outlined in 'Katherine Mansfield's Illness', *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Medicine* vol. 48, April 1955, pp. 1029-32, where the author, Dr Brice Clark MD, concludes *inter alia* that pulmonary tuberculosis, then virtually incurable, was already present in 1911.

3. The Initiation of the Priestess is a fragment of a mystery called The Truth Seekers. Is it extant? The question is a natural one, if only because of the dance's place in Katherine Mansfield's estimation and final hours.

Certainly it has not been included in the extensive film archive of Gurdjieff's sacred dances created by Mme de Salzmänn since 1950. However on 16–19 April 1958, when a festival of music and dance was held in the pavilion at Taliesin West, Phoenix, Arizona, the programme included an item entitled 'Initiation of the Priestess'. The music was credited to Olgivanna, and – even more inexplicably – the creation of the dance was credited to her second daughter Iovanna, who was not in fact born when Gurdjieff first gave the Movement in Constantinople in the summer of 1920. (See *Our House* by Olgivanna Lloyd Wright – Horizon Press, New York 1959, page 100.

A somewhat nondescript photo of the dance appears opposite p. 51 of C. S. Nott's *Teachings of Gurdjieff* (Routledge & Kegan Paul 1961). Interviewed by the author in 1978, Mrs C. S. Nott (*née* Rose Mary Lillard) indicated that, although the Gurdjieff/de Hartmann musical score was extant, -she and Jesmin Howarth had struggled unsuccessfully to reconstruct the authentic choreography. It would be rash, without directly consulting Mme de Salzmänn, to pronounce any of Gurdjieff's sacred dances as irretrievably lost, but the auguries are not good.