

Comment Piece

Gatsby and Stavrogin: The Need for a Modern Saviour

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The modern era opens, metaphysically speaking, with *Hamlet* and *Don Quixote*. At the literary frontier, Jesus had already faded from consciousness by the year 1600, and replacements began to appear. Indeed, it is this tectonic shift in focus—in the search for the ideal human being—that best characterises the modern spirit.

Hamlet's first significant encounter is with death, in the form of the ghost of his murdered father. His most powerful love scene takes place in the graveyard reminiscing tenderly to the skull of Yorick, the Court Jester who had played with him as a boy. His one 'felicity', as he calls it, is to die. Hamlet confronts us with the big modern question: 'To be or not to be?' However, his monologue on the subject, the most famous speech in the English language, has nothing to do with the nature of being—of self, or of identity. It is a long meditation on suicide, on whether Hamlet should kill himself.

Hamlet's encounter with death, which has paralysed him, has also emptied him of any capacity for saving illusions. It is apposite that still images of him have tended to portray him pale of face, dressed in black, and holding a human skull. Hamlet illustrates Tolstoy's later dictum that if death becomes meaningless, then so does life.

Don Quixote, who first appeared in public in 1604, two years after *Hamlet*, imagines himself as a knight-errant riding around the world saving damsels in distress, righting wrong, and punishing criminals, and his imagination is so powerful that it drives his life. *I believe, therefore I am!* That his beliefs are delusional does not seem to matter. He takes thirty windmills to be thirty monstrous giants, and attacks them, only to be caught up in one of their sails. His quixotic exploits do not help anybody, and leave him battered and without reward, but undaunted.

Actually, he does help some, and here is the rub of the story. He helps the leisured aristocracy, who stand as proxy for all who dwell in the modern world. They become fascinated by his adventures—and for the very quality in him that they lack, his capacity for life. Don Quixote is the first secular saviour, the first to replace Christ crucified. As Hamlet's shadow self, he is the only man who moves on the threshold of modernity, while the rest of the world looks on, lounging indolently by, lacking passion, cast in the role of decadent tourist. To use the terms of Don Quixote's leading twentieth-century disciple, the great Gatsby, his redeeming quality is an enormous capacity for dreaming.

Don Quixote had posed, at the start of the seventeenth century, the question of whether a modern saviour is possible—the alternative was the chronically depressed Hamlet, in love with death. He posed the further question of how the modern individual may tell the difference between what is true and what illusory. The Don staked his entire way of life on the answer.

Let us consider *Don Quixote* in his modern guise. The scene is set in the summer of 1922 on Long Island, just east of New York City. F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote the story and titled it *The Great Gatsby* (1926). I am most interested in the story's narrator, Nick. What will follow is an exercise in what might be called metaphysical sociology. Nick is a modern type. He strives, suffers, and fails in a singularly modern way.

Nick, like Hamlet, is thirty. The story opens in early summer with him cheerful and optimistic; by the end he is lamenting, ‘Thirty—the promise of a decade of loneliness.’ He had returned from the Great War without aim, drifting east, and drifting through his life. He takes a job selling bonds, for want of anything better to do. Nick can never throw himself whole-heartedly into anything, always finding himself half-engaged, half-detached; half-in, half-out. He plays the role of tourist travelling tepidly through his own life, reflecting whimsically and ruefully as he goes. He admits that he likes to walk up Fifth Avenue and imagine entering the lives of women he passes, for a moment, with them smiling in welcome to him as they enter in through their doors, but he does not follow. He lapses into a half-hearted affair with a female golf champion—he knows she cheats, the one deadly sin in that sport. She dubs him a bad driver.

Everything changes when Nick meets Gatsby, his neighbour on Long Island. Gatsby lives in a magnificent mansion set amidst forty acres of immaculately cut lawn and gardens. He throws extravagant parties to which hundreds flock from all over New York, and further afield, the invited and the uninvited—to be entertained by live musicians through the night, as they feast and carouse as at an ancient Roman saturnalia. There is some parallel with the thousands who flocked to Galilee to hear Jesus teach, and observe his miracles.

Nick is fascinated and infatuated—charmed. Nick, perpetually on edge, within and without, has finally encountered someone who moves. Gatsby, this shadowy Caesar, who attracts rumours like a light-globe attracts moths, is bathed in a magical aura. At one of these parties, Nick finally meets the host, by accident. He does not recognize him. The mysterious stranger has suddenly appeared, as from nowhere, the one who is about to change the world—another Jesus allusion, and they are the same age.

Nick is enchanted by Gatsby’s smile: ‘one of those rare smiles with a quality of eternal reassurance in it’, as if in generous and intimate engagement, making the one he addresses feel singular and important. Mind, Nick quickly adds that Gatsby was just ‘an elegant young rough-neck, a year or two over thirty’, one who chose his words and enunciated them with a formality that verged on the absurd.

Through the course of the story Nick learns the truth about Gatsby. At the age of seventeen, he had changed his name from James Gatz. He invented himself, as if from nothing, filling out the extravagant fantasies of a teenage boy. He had had a Platonic conception of himself—as a perfect form, which he then proceeded to build. Nick is awed by the colossal vitality of the dream, and what he rhapsodizes as Gatsby’s extraordinary gift for hope.

In reality, during the war, Gatsby, as a penniless mid-Westerner in uniform, had met wealthy Daisy and fallen in love with her. She would never marry him, he knew, given his lack of money and background. So, once the war was over, he set about making the money, and fabricating the background. He bought the mansion on the other side of a bay from Daisy’s Long Island house—she was now married to Tom Buchanan. The grand façade (copy of a French *Hôtel de Ville*) hides criminal connections, lies about his past (that he was an Oxford man), and the shady way he made his fortune, bootlegging. There are real books in Gatsby’s imitation Oxford library, but their pages are uncut—the books unread, just there for show.

Gatsby bought the mansion to impress Daisy and threw parties on the off chance she might turn up one night. He himself hardly ever appeared at these parties. When he does finally manage to get Daisy there, with the aid of Nick, he says to her: ‘You always have a green light that burns at the end of your dock.’ This green light is the enchanted symbol that he gazes at across the water, as he stands every evening on the balcony. In this, Gatsby represents everyone, with their all-too-human experience of living in hope rather than fear or despondency.

Nick is enthralled by Gatsby’s capacity to dream—by implication he, Nick, is just a nonentity with little imagination. He surmises that the teenage Gatsby’s teeming reveries provided ‘a promise that the rock of the world was founded securely on a fairy’s wing.’ It is unclear whether this image comes from Nick or Gatsby. The fairy turns into Daisy, whose maiden name was Fay—a derivative from fairy. The fairy may also be Gatsby’s charm, his capacity to create himself out of nothing, extravagantly, magically, until he hits the rock.

Nick learns the depths of fraudulence hidden behind the gorgeous Gatsby mask, but forgives it, for the strength and purity of the dream. Gatsby confesses to Nick that he fears that he is some *nobody*. Tom Buchanan taunts him: ‘Mr Nobody from Nowhere.’ To continue the dynamic ambivalences, in reality Gatsby the Romantic dreamer took Daisy ‘unscrupulously and ravenously’. But Mr Nobody from Nowhere needed to win and possess his dream totally, and forever.

Gatsby lacks any sense of a reality principle. The moment the chill breath of truth hits, the fairy fades away. The most shocking reality in the story is that Daisy is shallow, insipid, and self-centred, more insect than fairy. The emblem of Daisy’s vacuity is that the one time she weeps is at the sight of Gatsby’s shirts, which she finds so beautiful. Later, she carelessly, ruthlessly, and without shedding a tear, lets him take the blame for her bad driving, which has caused an accident that kills her husband’s mistress. Soon after, the mistress’s own unhinged husband, in a fit of mistaken revenge, kills Gatsby.

Nick, who soaks himself in illusion, is clear-sighted about Daisy. It is her voice, he suspects, that is captivating. He refers to her ‘deathless song’—the association with the Sirens, eternally enchanting but deadly for those who are seduced. Gatsby describes the voice as ‘full of money’, with Daisy as the king’s daughter, the princess lounging

inaccessibly high in her castle. Nick speculates: 'I think that voice held him most, with its fluctuating, feverish warmth, because it couldn't be over-dreamed.' At the hub of this story is the desperate need for a dream that is real, or at least not so overblown as to be obviously improbable. Mind, Daisy's 'feverish warmth' weeps over a wardrobe full of shirts.

There are hints that Gatsby is more in love with the fantasy of Daisy than with Daisy herself. Once he shows her the green light on the other side of the bay, that light loses its lustre for him. He wants to fix everything as it used to be, when he first met her, when they spent an intoxicated month together. The scale of unreality is revealed here in this childhood regression. Viewed rationally, Gatsby's dream is pathological, a compensation for what is not, a means for stepping outside adult reality into a fairy-tale fantasy world that can never be. The immensity of his over-dreaming of Daisy projects the parallel immensity of his creation of himself out of nothing.

It is no surprise then that once Gatsby's dream pops, so does he, or as the narrator puts it, at the end: '*Jay Gatsby* had broken up like glass against Tom's hard malice.' The fairy is crushed by the rock. A pitiful empty ruin is all that remains. Virtually no one turns up at Gatsby's funeral.

Let me switch back to Nick himself. He is driven by moods that alternate between angry disgust and gorgeous dreams. For Nick, all the other characters in the story, apart from Gatsby, are horrible—cheats, crooks, the rich who are idle and callous, the poor who are mean and bitter, all alike men and women who have never dreamed, or whose dreams have failed.

Every time the party ends at Gatsby's a sudden emptiness flows from the house. The mansion packed with people having fun points forward to Citizen Kane's Xanadu, a parody of the modern dream of the luxury home—the suburban palace which every man and woman can actually build, to house a fairy-tale life of enchanted meaning made real. The discomfiting implication is that Gatsby is a slightly larger-than-life incarnation of everyone; with a larger capacity to make teenage dreams come true.

The story, as Nick tells it, is a collage of nostalgic inflation and fantasy, strung to a loose thread of what might have actually happened. Dazzled by this gossamer canopy of half-lies—another role for the fairy—the reader is left with little idea of what is true. The narrator is desperate to remain loyal to his own fantasy Gatsby, what Joseph Conrad's Marlow would call 'the nightmare of his choice'. Although: 'I disliked him so much by this time (after the death of Tom's mistress).' Nick, like his predecessor Marlow, has shot the dream down, but he continues to cling to it in spite of his knowledge. For without Gatsby, without the eternal reassurance of his smile, there would be nothing.

Red lights flash over the story. The first is that there is no reality principle. Over-dreaming is doomed. If the dream is too detached from reality, then everything will revert to the void that was in the beginning. The central persona is smashed to bits on the rock of reality, reverting to Mr Nobody from Nowhere, who soon dies. Yet, to go further, what is unredeemably gloomy in the Fitzgerald vision is less the failed dreaming, than that there is no alternative to the Gatsby way. Gatsby is as good as it gets; there is no better. And, if Gatsby is indeed as good as it gets amidst the human squalor, Nick is justified in clinging on to his dream.

Gatsby is drawn to Daisy, in part, because of her very inaccessibility. He knows he can make the wealth, win the prestige, and become somebody—but he recognises this as a false dream. Likewise, Nick is not fooled by Daisy. That the content of the hoping is so over-dreamed, so false to the ideal, doesn't seem to matter—neither Gatsby nor Nick are interested in the content. It is the capacity of a seventeen-year-old boy to conjure up an identity and a life that makes the difference. The dream is the purer for being patently unrealistic. Dreams are serene and radiant; reality is sordid. This is the gospel according to Don Quixote.

There is more at issue than a hollow dream, than a mask covering over an absurd and horrible reality. Daisy's voice plays as a duet with the lights and music flooding the Gatsby mansion, each serenading the other. Gatsby is concert director, as he stands alone on his balcony gazing out across the water, enchanted by the green light. To what is he attempting to tune in?

It is an eternal rhythm he craves, not Daisy herself. She is the chosen medium for his prayer, no more than a meditative device. Specifically, he hears music in her voice. Gatsby's misfortune may be that what he gets is the Sirens, drawing him hypnotically across the water, only to dash him on the rocks. The story does not explain why he has tuned in to this particular music. It does not explain where he went wrong, if indeed he did go wrong. It tells us simply that this is the Gatsby tragedy.

Nick's story is steeped in Jesus longing. The narrator is in desperate need of a saviour, someone to point the way, or so he thinks. But he chooses the wrong man. And, even if Gatsby were the Second Coming, what could Nick possibly learn from him? As it is, Gatsby isn't the messiah; the green light is just a green light; the Gatsby mansion is just a mausoleum filled with uncut books; and the void echoes eternally over Long Island Sound, untroubled by the passing of a mere mortal like Nick.

This story is not new. The Western canon is repeating itself, as if in fixation, trapped in the essence of disillusion. Post-Jesus the procession begins, and it is led by some of the greatest literary imaginings in the culture. First there were Hamlet and Don Quixote—one man having lost all his dreams, finding himself left with a solitary love, that

of death, the other man the most magnificent over-dreamer in Western fiction. Then there were Dostoevsky's Stavrogin; and Joseph Conrad's dual personality Marlow/Kurtz. Nick/Gatsby borrows heavily from these predecessors. Finally, at the end of the twentieth century, came *Fight Club*, in novel and film form, updating the protagonists, and the character of the saviour, but failing to do anything new with the challenge of finding a way forward.

This *danse macabre* over the last four hundred years serves to illustrate that the story is not a trivial byway. From the moment that Hamlet commands centre-stage, skull in hand, speaking warmly of his long-departed childhood court jester, the governing metaphor becomes the death of God, brooding overhead like a black cloud of pestilence. And if God is dead, does not his saviour son also lose authority?

Gatsby and his metaphysical companions raise the issue of whether Jesus is the only way in the West. Nietzsche's late formulation, as he stared over the brink of his own impending descent into madness, was: 'Dionysus versus the Crucified.' He too, the master diagnostician, identifying himself ludicrously with the Greek god of wine, his alternative saviour, belongs in this procession of despair, a major player, crying out his version of the fateful either-or. Nick refers to Gatsby as a son of god.

If it is Gatsby versus the Crucified, we are left with further questions. The Gatsby parable challenges what would be the role—and in any era—for a charismatic teacher with commanding presence? If the student himself lacks the capacity to dream quixotically, what would be the point, for him, of a saviour? It is telling that when Nick first meets Gatsby, he fails to recognize him. Colossal dreaming cannot be taught. Nick is in awe of Gatsby, drawn to him, precisely because he—Nick—lacks both the dream, and the capacity for forming himself from nothing, and building a life in the dream's image. As Shakespeare mused: 'Nothing's but what is not.'

Those are the preconditions in this story, the metaphysical terms it sets—dreaming and making the dream real. But they are only preconditions. Nick does recognize that it is music that is the ultimate key to Gatsby, and his over-dreaming of Daisy. But Nick himself lacks an equivalent musical talent. Gatsby is saved by his capacity for tuning in to the eternal rhythm, even though that tuning in is fleeting, like the flutter of the fairy's wing—lasting merely for one summer.

It seems that dreaming of an impossible saviour, whether Daisy or Gatsby himself, might be redeemed, by metamorphosis into another realm—that of music.

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To return to first principles, Jesus was the man who found the truth that matters, the key to human existence and its significance; the key to how to live. He delivered that truth through his role as teacher, and by incarnating it—in his own charismatic example. Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel, *The Possessed* (1871), presented a modern saviour more directly in this lineage than Don Quixote or Gatsby.

Nicholas Stavrogin is a Russian aristocrat, around Hamlet's age when we meet him, and also a Prince. He has the aura of the mysterious stranger, arriving from beyond, haunted, solitary, fearless, and living outside all normal social bounds and conventions. He carries direct Christ allusions, *stavros* meaning 'cross' in Greek. Everybody from his own generation is in love with him, male and female. A few years earlier, adoring disciples travelled the world with him—one says, Stavrogin brought him back from the dead. He taught them, for instance, that if it could be mathematically proved that the truth excludes Christ, he would choose Christ. But Stavrogin lost his faith, and thereafter plunged into a life of violence and debauchery—seducing a number of women in the town, and even, it is rumoured, a twelve-year-old girl. Without faith, he is equally without passion. Having lost the one indispensable thing, he kills himself.

Gatsby and Stavrogin make a contrasting pair, as did their literary precursors, Don Quixote and Hamlet. Gatsby is extroverted, simple, vital, and is driven by commanding belief. Stavrogin is introverted, complex, tormented, steeped in inner mystery, and has had access to the truth. The truth—what Jesus had referred to as the 'mystery'—contrasts with belief and dream.

There is more to this contrast. It points to a dichotomy in transcendental reference points—a dichotomy between God and Jesus. These two supernatural beings that have commanded the Western imagination have quite different distinguishing traits. Gatsby, like Don Quixote, is more god than son of god. This is God in the sense of the unyielding presence, the omnipotent one who creates the universe, giving meaning to the whole. God stands as the Archimedean fixed point in an ever-turning world, an anchor against the heaving seas of chaos and absurdity. Gatsby, as god associate, is not personal saviour; nor does he forgive. In the eyes of others, he is invincible power rather than bearer of truth, quite unlike Jesus, who wrestles as best he can along the human path laid out for him, and who is, at least in part, one of us.

Shakespeare himself wrestled with the saviour problem. Hamlet is preceded by Prince Hal, a wild, head-strong, near delinquent youth who metamorphoses, on inheriting the English crown, into Henry V, the ideal king—good, worldly, shrewdly intelligent, a master tactician, just, and courageous. In this coming of age story, King Henry

represents the composite English hero and saviour—the exemplary person. He wins an impossible victory over the French at Agincourt. Yet, Shakespeare appears restless in his upbeat nationalist optimism. His mood darkens a mere year or so later, when he writes *Hamlet*. Dostoevsky saw the connection: having some of his *Possessed* characters liken Stavrogin to Prince Hal, those hoping that transgressive youth would transform into mature and wise adulthood. But the Russian Prince is rather a malevolent, yet metaphysically inspired *Hamlet*. *Hamlet* and Stavrogin both fail their initiation into adulthood.

The young men and women in *The Possessed* seek the one who has the truth and might transform their lives. They seek a plausible contemporary Jesus. But no one in the modern secular world can provide them with what they want. They look in the wrong place, as did Gatsby's Nick. Further, teaching and influence do not work in the way they hope.

Stavrogin prefigures the twentieth century's commanding literary allegory, Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1952). That play projected the modern problem in stark simplicity. Two tramps tepidly clown through their days, bereft of purpose, ambition, or desire. They stumble around and fall into ditches, hardly bothering to stand up again. They talk of suicide but lack the energy to carry it out. Days pass in a blur; nothing happens. One of them lives in hope that a stranger called Godot will soon arrive, to 'save' them—this tramp is a modest, fitful version of Gatsby, in his occasional dreaming. It is unclear whether Godot actually exists or is a desperate attempt at redemptive illusion. Life is absurd.

Beckett takes his cue from the story with which Luke ends his *Life of Jesus*. The *Road to Emmaus* reports two unnamed men leaving Jerusalem on the Sunday, two days after the crucifixion. A stranger appears from nowhere and accompanies them on the twelve-kilometre dirt path to the village of Emmaus, shattering their composure. In the evening, he joins them for dinner in a local tavern. As he breaks bread, it becomes clear that he is Jesus, who disappears on the instant.

Stavrogin provides flesh for what Godot might be like, if he existed, and it is a charismatic Satan, not the phantasmal Jesus who manifested in Emmaus. Dostoevsky's bleak message is that, in the modern world, there is either the devil, or nothing. Beckett's allegory moves on from this point, beyond *The Possessed*, and its chaotic, demented setting. The possibility has gone for heroic grandeur or a knightly quest for some holy grail. The stranger has become merely a figure of the imagination, the day is just like any other day, and the track is just another rutted way, which could be anywhere, and nowhere. The tramps are historical nobodies fleeing in dread from they know not what, continuing, in the words of Mark's Gospel, 'to fear the great fear'. For them, the ordeal of unbelief intensifies. There is no saviour; there is no transfiguration; and there is nowhere to go. There hasn't been any progress: *Waiting for Godot* ends in exactly the same despairing way as its trinity of powerful modern precursors—*The Possessed*, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and *The Great Gatsby*.

A variant on the Stavrogin/Godot theme comes in the yearning for another with saving vitality. Stavrogin had killed himself out of disgust at his own debilitating aimlessness and lack of passion. *Hamlet*, preoccupied by his own lack of drive, had the same problem. Likewise, Nietzsche's identification with Dionysus, as Christ replacement, was a grasping for redemptive vitality.

Akira Kurosawa's 1952 film *Ikiru* focuses on a public servant with thirty years of service, flattened by the news that he is dying of stomach cancer. His whole life, past, present, and future is, on the instant, emptied of sense. In a desperate final move to experience the life he fears he has missed, he attaches himself to an effervescent younger woman. He feels that being with her may give him the capacity for living he lacks. However, she makes him see the futility of this tactic, and in response he changes mode, devoting his final weeks to relentless campaigning to turn a disease-infested piece of urban wasteland into a children's playground. He succeeds, and dies a happy man, spending his last night swinging in the playground, singing the haunting song, 'Life is Brief'.

Marilyn Monroe, in her final film *The Misfits* (1961), screams at three men who have been clinging to her: 'You're three dead men!' She cannot save them from death. In their different ways, these men are drawn by her vitality, by what one calls her magical capacity for life. Mimicking Kurosawa's dying public servant, they hope to gain the quality she embodies—that of being truly alive—by just spending time in her vicinity. They call it an honour to know her. But the hoped-for osmosis never occurs. The three men remain uprooted, bewildered, and inwardly void. They are like Beckett's tramps. The *Misfits* screenplay was written by Arthur Miller, Marilyn's deeply suffering husband at the time, as an idealisation of her character, which is childlike; it continues the dead-man theme at the core of his seminal work, *Death of a Salesman*.

Aristotle had noted the variability of *energy* amongst humans, and its importance to their wellbeing. Henri Bergson conceptualised this, in his 1907 notion of *élan vital*, borrowed from Nietzsche, who sometimes called it *frenzy*. The popular belief was held by intellectuals at the time that the key to human fulfilment was the possession of a type of vibrant inner energy. In the wake of declining Christian faith, and Nietzsche's declaration of the 'death of God', individuals were now left on their mortal own. They were, at best, driven by an egomaniacal, if unconscious, will-to-power; or, in the more benign version, a vital *élan* such as later possessed by misfit Marilyn.

The appeal of saving vitality is illustrated in a number of noteworthy modern films. The list would include *My Fair Lady* (1964), *The Sound of Music* (1965), *Sabrina* (1954, 1995), and *Pretty Woman* (1992). Significantly, in all these examples the redeeming presence is a woman, who brings a grumpy, tired, cold, or world-weary man back to life. These saviours succeed, whereas misfit Marilyn fails.

Even in *Waiting for Godot* there is a drop of nostalgia, tinged with hope. Early in the story, the leading tramp, Vladimir, muses about 'our Saviour', and, in particular, the vignette in the Gospels about the two thieves who were crucified alongside Jesus. Vladimir is troubled that although the four evangelists, or gospel-writers, were in attendance at the crucifixion, only one of them reported a thief being saved. The other writer who mentions the thieves merely says that they both abused the Saviour, and for not 'saving' them. Vladimir adds his own interpretation: the thieves sought to be saved, not from eternal damnation and Hell, but from death.

Beckett pares the modern condition back to its bare bones. There is no spare flesh, no distraction, just the skeletal truth. That truth may be translated into a sequence of simple equations. The one commanding reality about the human condition is the need to be saved from death. For this, there has to be a saviour, or belief in a saving God. The tramps echo Hamlet, who was spiritually flattened by his encounter with death, and whose mind turned to suicide as the only answer to the dreary meaninglessness that his life, on the instant, had turned into. They end their story in rumination on tomorrow, when either Godot will arrive, and they will be saved, or they will hang themselves. Stavrogin did hang himself.

Gatsby, *Stavrogin*, and *Godot* demonstrate that the saviour is the key to the modern condition. They set the terms for the post-Christian life challenge.