

# *The Literary London Journal*

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**Vesna Goldsworthy, *Gorsky*, hardback, 277 pages, London:  
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The polyglot, peripatetic critic George Steiner, who found a kind of home in England, once remarked: “The most stringent test of the aliveness of an imagined character—of its mysterious acquisition of a life of its own outside the book or play in which it has been created [...] is whether or not it can grow with time and preserve its coherent individuality in an altered setting. Place Odysseus in Dante’s *Inferno* or in Joyce’s *Dublin* and he is Odysseus still” (Tredell 1994: 78). In her first novel, Vesna Goldsworthy, herself a polyglot scholar born in Belgrade but long settled in London, places Jay Gatsby in her version of the English capital and reconfigures his hapless love through the prisms of English, European and Russian literature (especially, perhaps, Turgenev). Her *Gatsby* is Roman Gorsky, a billionaire Russian Jewish oligarch and her novel’s eponymous hero; but her author’s note observes that its main character might not be Gorsky but London, the city she has lived in and loved for nearly thirty years.

Goldsworthy’s Nick Carraway, the narrator of the novel, is Nick Kimović (actually Nikola, though he calls himself Nick or Nicholas because he is bored with being told that Nikola is a girl’s name in English). A Serbian, he came to Britain from his family’s two-room flat on the edge of Belgrade in the early 1990s among ‘a wave [of refugees] that was swelling in the war-torn Balkans and breaking on the hard but porous cliffs of Dover’ (10). He calls himself a ‘draft dodger’ (9) but it was his mother who refused delivery of his call-up papers. Equipped only with an otiose doctorate on William Hazlitt, he found work in privileged London zones, first as a male au pair in the Eaton Square maisonette of a British banker’s American wife and then, in 1995, as an assistant in Christopher Fynch’s bookshop, buried ‘in a row of mews houses in the no man’s land between Knightsbridge and Chelsea’ (6). Fynch, ‘a gentleman bookseller’ (13), pays a pittance but leaves Nick largely to his own devices; the bookshop has few customers and Nick spends most of his time reading. He has paid particular attention

to books on Russian art and to building up a stock of books on 'late Soviet art history' because this is a special interest of a customer with whom he is 'smitten', Natalia Summerscale, a tall, willowy Russian woman who 'made Grace Kelly look like a market trader' and whose voice, in contrast to Daisy Buchanan's in *Gatsby*, is not 'full of money'; rather, 'she made you feel vulgar because you dared think that money had any bearing on anything' (20, 22).

Natalia is the second wife of Thomas Summerscale, a 'strongly built man' (26) who towers over Nick, a 'very English' echo of Tom Buchanan in *Gatsby*, though more intelligent. An ex-barrister from an 'old money', respectably prosperous family (his father was a diplomat), he has made a lot of new money as a 'consigliere' (in the Mafia sense) helping super-rich Russians to pursue more wealth in London (27). The Summerscales live in The Laurels off the Fulham Road, a large converted former NHS hospital—an index of one of the key drivers of hospital closures in the later twentieth century, the profits to be made from selling off publicly owned property. They have a daughter of nearly six who, in a nice onomastic variation on *Gatsby*, is called Daisy and who shares an anatomical feature with Gorsky that is revealed when the latter visits their rooftop swimming pool—a 'disproportionately tiny' small toe 'turned inwards in a way that made it look as though it was made of plasticine and attached as an afterthought to the foot itself' (203). The implication, later confirmed, that Gorsky is Daisy's father is an intriguing departure from *Gatsby*, where Tom's paternity of his daughter seems certain and Pammy is the outward and visible sign of a bond with Daisy which excludes Gatsby.

Nick himself lives virtually opposite The Laurels, in 'a mere matchbox', like Nick Carraway's 'cardboard bungalow' (31, 7). It is the gatehouse of the vast edifice of the former Chelsea Yeomanry Barracks, whose passing into private hands is another index of the sale of national assets for profit. A listed building in baroque style with a cathedral-size central dome and long stretches of covered colonnades, it is undergoing a dramatic reconstruction to a design by a top architect for its absent and anonymous owner. Then one day the owner—Roman Borisovich Gorsky—walks into Fynch's bookshop and asks that it furnish—money no object—the best library in London, in Europe, for his new dwelling. It should be 'a library tailor-made for a Russian gentleman-scholar' and should 'look as though Gorsky had acquired the books himself and read them over many years' or 'was fully intending to do so' (17). There are echoes of *Gatsby*'s 'Merton College Library' here (Fitzgerald 1991: 71). Nick embarks on his rather Borgesian task with relish:

I once dreamed of being a writer but found that I was too lazy to put words on paper. Now I was determined to make Gorsky's library my literary masterpiece, a work of fiction as imaginative as any story composed of words, a piece of installation art rivalling anything Natalia wanted to showcase. Every volume in Gorsky's library would connect with every other one and create a perfect text: the collection would be a work of characterization as perfect as that of Julien Sorel or Ivan Karamazov (59).

While pursuing this project, he is drawn further into the worlds of Gorsky and Natalia. He goes to a lavish Gorsky party at the Serpentine Gallery—'You could hear the sounds of laughter and jazz rising into the night sky even before you crossed

Kensington Gore' (85). With Natalia's encouragement, he gets involved with the novel's reinscription of the 'incurably dishonest' amateur golf champion Jordan Baker (Fitzgerald: 1991, 47) in the shape of the 'amoral creature' Gergana (Gery) Pekarova (97), a famous Bulgarian gymnast who holds an Olympic gold medal and who now works as Natalia's personal trainer. As Jordan tells Nick Carraway of Gatsby's romance with Daisy five years before, so Gery tells Nick Kimović of Gorsky's romance with Natalia eleven years before. She was then nineteen, the youngest child of the Mayor of Volgograd (formerly Stalingrad), Nikolai Semyonovich Volkov, who was encouraging Gorsky to expand his business interests into the Balkans. Gorsky, twelve years her senior, fell for her and proposed marriage but she rejected him, saying she was too young, and returned to studying for an art history degree in the city that had been Leningrad but was now once again called St Petersburg. He promised to return to propose again three years later when he had made money, and he did so, but by then she had married Tom Summerscale and left Russia. Now, like Gatsby with Daisy, Gorsky wants to win back Natalia. Gery tells Nick that Gorsky's great reconstruction of the old Barracks is to provide a house where he and Natalia will live and that he wants Nick to arrange a meeting in Fynch's bookshop 'in exactly two weeks' time', the 'anniversary of his original proposal' (140). Gorsky pays for the rapid and radical refurbishment of the bookshop and Nick arranges a reunion between Gorsky and Natalia in its new art history section, which he watches via the CCTV system that is one of the shop's new accoutrements.

Gorsky's attempt to take Natalia away from Tom leads to a confrontation in which Tom directs anti-Semitic abuse (in Russian) at his rival and Gorsky, who packs quite a punch, hits him—a notably less subtle encounter than that of Tom Buchanan and Gatsby in the Plaza Hotel suite, though Summerscale's anti-Semitism does link up with Fitzgerald's own (in the representation of Wolfshiem) and with Tom Buchanan's racism, and also connects with those recent readings of *Gatsby* (see, for example, Goldsmith 2003) which relate it to novels in which an ethnic outsider (Jewish, African American, mixed race) tries to assume a mainstream identity, such as Abraham Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917) or Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929).

As in *Gatsby*, a concatenation of circumstances culminates in lethal violence. Gorsky's counterpart to Fitzgerald's Myrtle Wilson is Janice Allaoui, Tom Summerscale's mistress and the wife of Mahmoud Allaoui, his Mahgrebian cocaine supplier; she is found battered to death in her flat. While Tom Buchanan in *Gatsby* never falls foul of the law, Tom Summerscale in *Gorsky* is unjustly convicted of killing Janice and sent to prison. Gorsky himself is fatally stabbed on a path by the Chelsea Embankment, but his assassin proves elusive. Although Gorsky's murder is global news, Nick is one of only three mourners, none of them Jewish, at his memorial service in a synagogue off Edgware Road—less than the seven or eight present at Gatsby's Lutheran burial. While Gatsby's helpless, dismayed father arrives before the funeral, Gorsky's frail and bewildered mother, still a Communist and atheist, arrives afterwards.

The many correspondences and divergences between *Gorsky* and *Gatsby* offer readers the pleasures of recognition and recalibration, as we identify alignments to the earlier novel and deviations from it. The key critical question, however, is: do the likenesses and differences create a pair of interilluminating texts—like Homer's

Odyssey and Joyce's *Ulysses*—or is the later novel, at this stage of the twenty-first century, a chamber of fading intertextual echoes, a pale spectre of postmodernism? The latter description of *Gorsky* seems the more accurate: in particular, the love affair at the heart of the novel is never brought to life through the deployment of salient detail in the way that it is in *Gatsby*.

This absence of salient detail is also evident in the other love affair the novel pursues: with London. It relies heavily on what might be called mass description (very different from the specific details of mass observation). Here, for example, the narrator describes the crowds coming out of Sloane Square underground station, which he often pauses to watch from nearby cafés:

[...] sales staff about to open the stores, professional dog walkers on their up to Hyde Park with half a dozen empty leashes in each hand, au pairs and nannies hurrying to take their uniformed charges to local schools, waiters and cooks, hairdressers, beauticians, manicurists and pedicurists, acupuncturists, masseurs, life coach and psychotherapists, personal assistants, psychic healers and spiritual guides, professional de-clutterers, hundreds and hundreds of people like me offering every form of personal service imaginable (64–5).

Apart from the 'professional dog walkers' with 'half a dozen empty leashes in each hand', there are none of those small but striking details that turn descriptions of masses into evocations of humans; the list seems generated more from an abstract economic and sociological idea—that personal service has become a major mode of employment in London—than from observation. How would the narrator know, from just looking, all the occupations of these crowds emerging from the underground? You might know professional dog walkers by their leads, but even a latter-day Sherlock Holmes might find it difficult to identify a life coach or psychic healer if he saw one in the street.

Gorsky's London descriptions also employ what we might call constipated metonymy, in which an exiguous ensemble of dribs and drabs is supposed to stand for a complex whole. Thus, speaking of his Serbian 'co-nationals', the narrator says: 'They shared ramshackle homes in places like Walthamstow or Peckham, where the main streets were lined with African markets, fried chicken vendors and laptop repair shops' (62). Are these three items sufficient to sum up the main streets of such places? Constipated metonymy is also evident in the attempt to capture the odour of London by night, even when it invokes vomitory and urinary aromas in a gesture towards gritty urban realism: 'The town smelled of grilled meat, pickles, beer, vomit and piss' (80). This seems a rather limited range of olfactory sensations by which to conjure up the bouquet of night-time London as a whole, though it could evoke certain corners of it.

Lyricism rather than urban realism is *Gorsky's* main take on the capital, however, epitomized at the start of chapter 3 which begins, riskily, with an allusion to the great palimpsest poem of London by the maestro of Modernist intertextuality, T. S. Eliot: 'In London April is not the cruellest month but the gentlest' (57). The passage goes on to aim to evoke those occasional April days when 'the light breaks through and teases every bit of red around' (57–8).

You realise that the place is defined by its scarlets and its blacks: red for the post boxes and phone booths, the buses, the coats of Chelsea Pensioners and the guards on duty in front of the royal palaces; black for the taxis, the heavy doors, gates and railings for iron enclosures everywhere (57–8).

If the allusion to Stendhal raises expectations of sharpness, these quickly vanish with the parade of familiar tourist metonymies (slightly reminiscent of Roger Miller's song 'England Swings') in a postcard palette like that of those black-and-white London scenes with a bus or post or phone box in red. The description has a measure of visual veracity and appeal but paints over rather than pushes at the doors of perception.

The passage goes on to evoke the April flowering of London parks:

Then, as though prompted by an invisible Pied Piper, the milky green grass emerges and amidst it flowers in every colour, like light refracted through a prism. One remembers that no other city in the world has so many parks, so many gardens. The million-pound handkerchief-sized lawns join up into one continuous floral ribbon trailing from Green Park all the way to Richmond and Hampton Court—a relay race of hellebores, daffodils, hyacinths and crocuses under the parasols of magnolia and cherry blossom. In no other city can it be so good to be a bee. (58)

This urban pastoral has a certain charm, with its fanciful conceits—the 'continuous floral ribbon', the 'relay race', the 'parasols of magnolia and cherry blossom'—but it is a rococo bagatelle that bears little relation to the narrative, seems inappropriate to the narrator, perpetrates infelicities (the formal impersonality of 'One remembers that', the awkward chime of 'be'/'bee') and—as with the novel's description of crowds—fails to get to grips with specifics.

If crowds are in question, it is notable that *Gorsky's* green and pleasant metropolitan spaces are ghost parks and gardens, void of humans in the daytime and peopled only by constipated metonymy at night—'the click-clack of high heels on pavements, the ringing of mobile phones and voices saturated with boozy laughter and desire' (58). Imagine Dickens resting content with such an impoverished nocturnal repertoire! The diurnal impoverishment of *Gorsky's* London parks in April emerges in comparison to Virginia Woolf's Regent's Park in June in *Mrs Dalloway* with its proliferation of detail—seats, railings, trees, leaves, sparrows, squirrels, dogs—and its human profusion: the 'children playing, dragging carts, blowing whistles, falling down' (Woolf 1947: 26); the 'little troop of boys carrying cricket stumps' (29); the 'old men and women, invalids most of them in Bath chairs' (30); the grey nurse knitting over the sleeping baby; Maisie Johnson, Carrie Dempster and Elise Mitchell, fleeting figures but endowed with life; and the central characters, Lucrezia and Septimus Warren Smith and Peter Walsh.

It may be said that such comparisons with Woolf, Eliot, Joyce and Fitzgerald, or with the great Russian authors like Chekhov, Dostoevsky, Pushkin and Tolstoy referenced in *Gorsky*, miss the point because Goldsworthy is not trying to reproduce their effects for today's readers but to generate a different and distinctive vision of her own. In a minor way, she succeeds: *Gorsky* is a curiosity of literature, a final fibrillation, in 2015, of the postmodern *fin de siècle*. We can imagine its accession, in a limited edition on lilac paper with flowers from London parks pressed between its

leaves, to the library Nick created for Gorsky where it would sit, rarely read, on the lower shelves. Goldsworthy's ideas are good but she fails to find the prose that would give them pressure and particularity; instead *Gorsky* offers London-lite, Russia reduced, *Gatsby* gelded.

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### **Note on Contributor**

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