

Was Derrida a Party Pooper?

Party-Crashing in *Specters of Marx* and *The Great Gatsby*— or some Partial Notes on the Hol(e)y (G)host

Party pooper, *n.* (1954), one who refuses to join...the party...
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DICTIONARY

It was very difficult not to join the Party.
—JACQUES DERRIDA¹

I was within and without, simultaneously enchanted and
repelled...
—NICK CARRAWAY²

I am essentially Marxian.
—F. SCOTT FITZGERALD³

For someone whose work increasingly revolved around questions of the host, of hospitality, and of the invitation (how to respond to the invitation of [the] other[s])—i.e., precisely those things we commonly associate with parties (and parasites)—, Jacques Derrida, interestingly, could seem, at times, downright inhospitable to the idea of “the party”—the “actual” party “itself”—and its future. Note, for example, the following scene of party-crashing from *Specters of Marx* (1993)—how Derrida seems to crash the party’s future:

What tends to disappear in the political world that is shaping up, and perhaps in a new age of democracy, is the domination of this form of organization called the party . . . which finally will have lasted, strictly speaking, only two centuries, barely longer than that, a period which belong as well certain determined types of . . . Nazi, fascist, or Soviet totalitarianisms. Not one of these regimes was possible without what could be called the axiomatics of the party . . . [T]oday, the structure of the party is becoming . . . more and more suspect (and for reasons that are no longer always, necessarily, “reactionary” . . .) . . . A reflection on what will become of Marxism tomorrow, of its inheritance or its testament, should include, among so many other things, a reflection on the finitude of a certain concept or of a certain reality of the party. (Derrida 102)⁴

The crucial part is the bit at the end, when Derrida enjoins us to reflect on the *finitude* (the end? the telos?) of a “certain reality” of the party, i.e., of a part-y’s (a part’s) claim *to be*, to be (the) whole—the “last class consciousness in the history of mankind” (70), as Georg Lukács wrote of the proletariat’s universal vocation in 1920.⁵ What does it mean when a part claims to be the “most advanced part” (the Vanguard Part-y), whose “mission” (once *realized*, once *incarnated*), as Lenin wrote in 1920, “transform[s] the whole” (553).⁶ In Derrida’s reading of the “specter” ([g]host) of Communism announced in the opening lines of Marx and Engels’ “Manifesto of the Communist Party” (1848)—i.e., that spectral promise of radical upheaval to come, as if some uninvited guest or party-crasher standing on the doorstep of bourgeois society—it is precisely this *paradox of incarnation*, this paradoxical claim of a particular part-y *to be* the (w)hol(e)(y) embodiment, the calculated realization, of the “specter” (as if simultaneously party-crasher and host) that both fascinates and troubles Derrida about the Part(y)’s “Manifesto.” Indeed, what all such manifestos entail, as Derrida notes, is a paradoxical

manifestation of the manifest. As party [A]s party that would accomplish the essence of the party as a communist party the self-manifestation of the manifesto, in which consists the essence of any manifesto that calls itself: by saying “it is time,” time rejoins and adjoins itself here, now . . . : here I am. (Derrida 103)

It would seem that, for Derrida, this totalitarian temptation of incarnation—or what we might call the temptation of Gaps-BE (“Gatsby”), i.e., of a gap’s claim *to be*—hinges on the question of what it means to “join the part-y,” as if “time rejoins and adjoins itself here, now,” as Derrida says. What kind of *bond, bind, or double-bind* is related by this “joining”? What kind of strange *joint* is this? (Is it by chance that parties imply intoxication?) What does it mean to be a/part? When I scream, *I want to be a/part*, what am I saying? Do I mean I want to be a participant, a partisan, a part of the whole? Or do I mean I want to be in pieces, separate(d)? (Cf. Fitzgerald’s “The Crack-Up” [1936].) With these questions, we find ourselves in the realm of synecdoche—i.e., those relations of part-to-whole, parasite-to-host—or what Georges Bataille called *La Part Maudite* (*The Accursed Share*). What I want to suggest here is that the irreducible gap between—or what we might call the irreducible Gatsby-tween—“being apart” and “being a part” is precisely the paradox of the hol(e)y (g)host—or of “mediation”—as theorized by the “great” party-planning texts of the 1910s-1920s: i.e., those of Lenin, Lukács, and Fitzgerald. In other words, the paradox of both Gaps-BE (“Gatsby”) and the Vanguard is one of binding (the) gaps—one of (the) joining (the) part-y—or what Nick Carraway (the narrator of *The Great Gatsby*) calls: “the bond business” (3).

The Nick(s) of Time

When Derrida crashes the party’s future because of what he calls its “dogmatic and irresponsible mechanics” (“Friendship and Politics” 182), it is in the (nick) name of a “new International” which promises, precisely, a new thought of—

a new hospitality toward—the (im)possibility of a *mediation without incarnation*: i.e., a spectral “relation of non-relation,” a “joining” that would simultaneously be “out of joint,” or carried away (“Nick Carraway”): the “bond” of a jimmied gap (“Jimmy Gatz”). Listen, then, to what Derrida (via his reading of Maurice Blanchot’s 1968 essay, “The Three Voices of Marx”) enjoins us to do:

[T]o think “the holding together” of the disparate itself . . . without wounding the dis-jointure . . . to turn ourselves over to the future [it will be important to keep this *overturning* in mind—C.H.], to join ourselves . . . there where the disparate is turned over to this singular joining, without concept or certainty of determination [turned over to the accident—C.H.], without knowledge [without plan, preparation, party-line—C.H.], without . . . the synthetic junction of the conjunction and the disjunction [without dialectics—C.H.]. The alliance of a rejoining without conjoined mate [a fling—C.H.], without organization, without party . . . (Derrida 29)

“Without party”? But what kind of “alliance” happens when we de-part from a certain reality of the (host, Vanguard) party as incarnation? Wouldn’t such a de-parture put an end to Marxism-Leninism? Or, as will be my claim here, does Fitzgerald’s constellation of parties, crashes, and flings in *The Great Gatsby* help us to think about a certain paradoxical “future” for the (Vanguard, host) party as parasite planner? Let us read carefully, then, the following scene of party-crashing from *The Great Gatsby*, a scene which is simultaneously one of de-parting from the party—i.e., the dis-joining of parts by a violent car-crash—as well as one of accident(al) “alliances,” as if joined by this accident(al) (as) host:

In the ditch beside the road [out-of-joint—C.H.], right side up [turned over—C.H.], but violently shorn of one wheel [a part

apart—C.H.], rested a new coupé which had left Gatsby's drive [departed from his party—C.H.] not two minutes before. The sharp jut of a wall accounted for the detachment of the wheel, which was now getting considerable attention from half a dozen chauffeurs.

[. . .]

The crowd [alliance?—C.H.]—it was now a crowd [but not a party? why?—C.H.]—stepped back involuntarily, and when the door [of the coupé] had opened wide there was a ghostly pause. Then, very gradually, part by part, a pale dangling individual stepped out of the wreck, pawing tentatively at the ground with a large uncertain dancing shoe.

[. . .]

“What's the matter?” he inquired calmly. “Did we run outa gas?”

“Look!”

Half a dozen fingers pointed at the amputated wheel [a part apart—C.H.]—he stared at it for a moment, and then looked upward as though he suspected that it had dropped from the sky.

“It came off,” someone explained.

[. . .]

At least a dozen men, some of them little better off than he was, explained to him that wheel and car [the part and the whole?—C.H.] were no longer joined by any physical bond.

[. . .]

The caterwauling horns had reached a crescendo and [Nick Carraway] turned away and cut across the lawn toward home. [He] glanced back once. A wafer [a host?—C.H.] of a moon was shining over Gatsby's house, . . . his still glowing garden. A sudden emptiness seemed to flow now from the windows and the great doors, endowing with complete isolation the figure of the host [Gatsby], who stood on the porch, his hand up in a formal gesture of farewell. (Fitzgerald 54-56)

“No longer joined by any physical bond”? The typical gesture of Gatsby criticism, of course, would be to read this scene, and not without some warrant, as Fitzgerald’s *condemnation* of modern capitalist society’s fall into “alienation” (spiritual, existential, politico-economic, take your pick!).⁷ Thus, as if colliding particles in an empty “valley of ashes,” Fitzgerald’s lesson would seem to be that we are all mere party-crashers in a Godless void, flung here by sheer accident—uninvited—fallen apart from some “lost,” “physical,” “organic” bond. In this *pathetic* interpretation (in every sense of the word), there would seem to be no distinction between the “bonds” of people like Tom and Daisy Buchanan—who “drifted here and there unrestfully wherever people played polo and were rich together” (6)—and the “bonds” between the nameless party-crashers who merely “show up” (uninvited) at one of Gatsby’s house-parties—i.e., those spectacles where “introductions [are] forgotten on the spot, and enthusiastic meetings [happen] between women who never knew each other’s names” (40). Indeed, when Fitzgerald (above) juxtaposes the merely accident(al) “crowd,” joined only in their shared fascination with the spectacle of a wreck (a car-crash), next to a group of guests de-parting from one of Gatsby’s house-parties, i.e., all those uninvited party-crashers joined only in their shared gossip regarding their absent/present host (“joined,” in other words, by a gap: Gatsby), the typical critical gesture, once again, is to read this scene as Fitzgerald’s *condemnation* of the “sham” superficiality of this (accidental) “host” (Gatsby)—a mere “billboard deity”—little better than those empty, bespectacled-eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg—a mere “Mr. Nobody from Nowhere” (Fitzgerald 130).

But we should, I think, resist this reading (and its left-wing humanist existentialism). Not only must this pathetic assumption of “alienation” be challenged if Fitzgerald’s text is to be relevant to a certain “future” (Vanguard, host) party (“Marxism-Leninism”), but, ironically, the very tools for such a challenge are provided by Derrida. It is Derrida, in other words, who shows

us how to *affirm* the (im)possible (“sham”) hospitality of a gap (a “Mr. Nobody from Nowhere”), i.e., a shared/parted “host” who must remain a/part (like the bread that must be broken into bits in order to be “shared,” or like the servants who work Gatsby’s party, and who thus cannot “join the party,” or rather who only “join” the party precisely by remaining a/part). Indeed, the “terrible mistake” (Fitzgerald 88) of Gatsby (Gaps-BE)—i.e., Fitzgerald’s lesson to any “future” (Vanguard, host) party—involves this temptation of re-union,⁸ i.e., the temptation of a (g)host—or a gap—to join its own part-y. In *The Great Gatsby*, this “terrible mistake” is dramatized as a movement from jimmied gaps (“Jimmy Gatz”) to Gaps-BE (“Gatsby”). Crudely put: if *The Great Gatsby* is divided in two parts (before and after Gatsby’s attempt to re-join his own part-y), then it is in the first part (*before* Gatsby’s re-union with Daisy) that we see the possibilities of a (host, Vanguard) party faithful to what Derrida calls “absolute or unconditional hospitality”—i.e., the absolute welcoming of the anonymous new arrival, the uninvited guest. Or as Nick Carraway says, all those party-crashers:

all those who accepted Gatsby’s hospitality and paid him the subtle tribute of knowing nothing whatever about him. (Fitzgerald 61)

But can party-crashers be planned for? This is the crucial question, the *aporia*, at the heart of Gatsby’s strange hospitality (his preparation? his program? his partyline?). For as Nick Carraway observes:

People were not invited—they went there. They got into automobiles which bore them [carried them away?—C.H.] out to Long Island, and somehow [by accident?—C.H.] they ended up at Gatsby’s door. Once there, they were introduced by somebody who knew Gatsby [knew of him? shared rumors? no physical bond?—C.H.], and after that they conducted themselves according to the rules of behavior

associated with amusement parks. Sometimes they came and went without having met [their absent/present host—C.H.] Gatsby at all . . . (Fitzgerald 41)

Can we imagine Lukács observing something similar about Lenin's party?

[I]n the very casualness of Gatsby's party there were romantic possibilitiesWhat would happen now in the dim, incalculable hours? Perhaps some unbelievable guest would arrive . . . (Fitzgerald 110)

And yet, by the second part of *The Great Gatsby*, we learn with Nick Carraway that all these apparently purposeless house-parties (spectacles) have, in fact, been highly-calculated, purposefully-planned "events" all along (an oxymoron?). Thus we learn of Gatsby's association with Meyer Wolfsheim—"the man who fixed the World's Series back in 1919" (74)—and that Gatsby's parties, too, have been purposeful—*planned and calculated*—attempts to "fix" a re-union (a re-joining) with Daisy. As Jordon Baker tells Nick Carraway: "it wasn't a coincidence at all" (79). Indeed, at this point in *The Great Gatsby* (the very hinge on which the novel swings), Gatsby seems to come "alive to [Nick Carraway], delivered suddenly from the womb of his purposeless splendor" (Fitzgerald 79). It is as if our hospitable "host" (Gaps-BE) has suddenly flipped into a demanding, calculating "parasite." And it is precisely here that we learn of Gatsby's secret past as "Jimmy Gatz"—the penniless punk who "took" Daisy one night in October 1917, like some party-crasher jimmying¹⁰ his way into her "house":

. . . he knew that he was in Daisy's house by a colossal accident [an uninvited party-crasher—C.H.]. However glorious might be his future as Gatsby, he was at present a penniless young man [Jimmy Gatz] without a past, and at any moment the invisible cloak of his

time [he made himself at home—C.H.]. He took what he could get, ravenously and unscrupulously [like some inhospitable devouring parasite—C.H.]—eventually he took Daisy one still October night, took her because he had no real right to touch her hand. (Fitzgerald 149)

Thus, not only has our hospitable “host” (Gaps-BE) always-already been a party-crashing “parasite” (a jimmied gap), but, as we learn here with a now incredulous (party-pooper) Nick, this “host,” Gatsby, harbors a totalitarian plan: “I’m going to fix everything just the way it was before (111).

It is in this totalitarian plan, perhaps, that we hear echoes of other “great” party-planners of the 1930s declaring similar ambitions to “fix” things. Like Meyer Wolfsheim’s “fixing” of the World’s Series, Gatsby’s strange appellation— “How you doing, Old Sport?” —now seems to make sense. In attempting to “fix” a sporting event, doesn’t Wolfsheim turn the World’s Series into “old sport,” in the same way that a Hegelian-Marxian dialectics also attempts to “fix” a certain “World’s Series” by re-joining “alienated” parts into a higher synthesis, as if made whole (re-united) by a part-y: totally “fixed”?

Perhaps we can now also understand Daiy’s response to Gatsby— “Oh, you want too much!” (133)—as if she’s responding to a hostile parasite bent on a totalitarian devouring. And, indeed, isn’t this how anyone would respond to being taken hostage by some (Vanguard, host) part-y as calculating parasite, i.e., with a cry: “Oh, you want too much!” Isn’t this, in fact, the “political gesture” of the party pooper? And yet, Derrida, in the 1960s, will choose to remain silent—to bite his tongue— vis-à-vis his own host’s (Louis Althusser’s) “house” party at the Ecole Normale—insisting that this, his silence, his “paralysis,” was his “political gesture” (“Politics and Friendship” 156). As Derrida recalls: “Personally, I saw the Party as being closed up in suicidal politics already then [in the 1960s]” (“Politics and Friendship” 175).

Committing Suicide (“Fleas die on pebbles”)

There was a moment . . . when it was a reactionary gesture to call for the end of the party Let us put forward here with many precautions . . . the hypothesis that this is no longer the case

—JACQUES DERRIDA, *Specters of Marx*

I promised earlier that, unlike Derrida’s inhospitable crashing of the party’s future, Fitzgerald could help us think about a paradoxical “future” for the (host, Vanguard) party as parasite planner. Derrida, of course, insists on the irreducible paradox of an “absolute hospitality” towards a future “to come” that cannot be anticipated (“a waiting without horizon of expectation”), because “if one could count on what is coming, hope would be but the calculation of a program” (168-169). As “the motor of the revolution” (Derrida 102), the party’s attempt to *realize* (*incarnate* = *be*) the “specter” of communism (its “universal vocation”) by turning it into a *living present* (making it “real,” “now”) portends, for Derrida, the hopeless calculation of a “dogma machine” (13): a “suicidal politics.” But what if we were to affirm—rather than condemn—this paradoxical “future” of the (Vanguard, host) party *as* “suicidal” (self-canceling)? In fact, I would suggest that this paradoxically suicidal “future” of the (Vanguard, host) party has already been (“heroically”) recognized and affirmed in some of the “great” party-planning texts of Marxism-Leninism. Listen, for example, to what Marx and Engels say of the proletariat (parasite) in *The Holy Family* (1845):

When the proletariat [parasite—C.H.] wins victory, it by no means becomes the absolute side of society [an autonomous living host in its own right—C.H.], for it wins victory only by *abolishing itself* and its opposite . . . it cannot liberate itself [i.e., from its host bourgeois society—C.H.] without *destroying its own living conditions* [i.e., without committing a kind of suicide—C.H.] (134; emphasis added)¹¹

Any parasite (party) that “liberates itself” —i.e., becomes an “autonomous,” “whole,” “living,” “present being” — by devouring its host (e.g., bourgeois class-society) “wins” only by *killing itself*. Or as Michel Serres puts it beautifully in his articulation of this paradoxical parasite-host relationship: “Fleas die on pebbles” (230).¹² The irony of this fatal paradox is not lost on Antonio Gramsci, who, in a fragment on “The Political Party” (1933), writes:

. . .the paradox is. . .that [parties] are complete and fully-formed only when *they no longer exist*—i.e., when their existence has become historically redundant. . . . [I]t is obvious that the party [parasite—C.H.] which proposes to put an end to class divisions [i.e., its host: bourgeois capitalism—C.H.] will only achieve complete self-fulfillment [BE] when *it ceases to exist* because classes [the gaps between haves and have-nots—C.H.] . . . no longer exist. (152; emphasis added)¹³

Amazing! But the question that now insists is this: How could any partisan prepare him- or herself (Christ-like!) for such a (sacrificial? suicidal?) “future”? This, I think, is what the “great” party-planning texts of the 1920s (Lenin and Fitzgerald) can help us think about (if read through the lens of the *parasitic* rather than the *dialectic*): namely, how to pre-prepare a “host.” A host that would let itself be parasited (as if it had any other choice!). Isn’t this what Daisy means by “self-control” in that scene from *The Great Gatsby* in which Tom Buchanan (as host) confronts Gatsby (as uninvited parasite)?

“What kind of row are you trying to cause in my house anyhow?”
[Tom says]

[. . .]

“He isn’t causing a row,” Daisy looked desperately from one to the other. “You’re causing a row [Tom]. Please try to have a little self-control.”

“Self-control!” repeated Tom incredulously. “I suppose the latest thing is to sit back and let Mr. Nobody from Nowhere make love to your wife . . .” (Fitzgerald 140)

Yes, indeed! This is precisely the kind of absolute, hyperbolic hospitality (as Derrida calls it) that will be required (impossibly!) of any future (vanguard, host) party. A strange, perverse kind of “self-control” (as Daisy calls it) or “iron discipline” (as Lenin calls it) that will not only be like letting some uninvited guest (party-crasher) come into “your house” and fuck your wife or husband (“make themselves at home”), but, more radically still, like letting “yourself” be parasited, suicided.¹⁴ (Here, of course, we would have to re-read again and again Pierre Klossowski’s *The Lams of Hospitality*, as well as Tracy McNulty’s reading of “the hostess.”)¹⁵ Who among us, after all, is capable of such Christ-like self-sacrifice (“iron discipline”) without at least some pre-paration? the way one prepares a “host”? breaks the bread? Every Donner Party becomes a Dinner Party.¹⁶ Or as Fitzgerald says:

All rather inhuman and undernourished, isn’t it? Well that, children, is the true sign of cracking up. (“The Crack-Up” 60)

A bit like reading Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* laughingly crashed into Lenin’s *What Is To Be Done?*

Notes

1. Jacques Derrida, “Politics and Friendship,” in *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971-2001*, ed. and trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2001), 164. Print. All further references appear in the text.
2. F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* [1925] (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1953), 36. Print. All further references appear in the text.
3. F. Scott Fitzgerald, from his notes, in *The Crack-Up*, ed. Edmund

Wilson (New York: New Directions, 1945), 178. Print.

4. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994). Print. All further references appear in the text.

5. Georg Lukács, "Class Consciousness" [1920], in *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* [1922], trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), 70. Print. Emphasis added.

6. V.I. Lenin, "'Left-Wing' Communism, An Infantile Disorder" [1920], in *The Lenin Anthology*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1975), 553. Print.

7. See Ross Posnock, "'A New World, Material Without Being Real': Fitzgerald's Critique of Capitalism in *The Great Gatsby*," in *Critical Essays on F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby*, ed. Scott Donaldson (Boston: Hall & Co., 1984), 201-213. Print.

8. See Ernst Bloch, "Reunion Without Connection," in *Traces* [1910-1929], trans. Anthony A. Nassar (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2006), 62-64. Print.

9. Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000), 23. Print.

10. According to the *Dictionary of Slang*, "jimmy" is defined as: (1) n. a new chum or immigrant; (2) v. obtaining entry into cinemas, theaters, dog-tracks and enclosures by subterfuge and without paying.

11. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Holy Family*, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978). Print.

12. Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, trans. Lawrence R. Schehr (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1982). Print.

13. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1995), 147-157. Print.

14. On the Bolshevik Party's resistance to this "logic" of parasitism, see Slavoj Žižek's reading of Lenin's Tomb and the special attitude of Leninist Communists towards this mausoleum: "their obsessive compulsion to

preserve intact the body of the dead Leader,” as if against the horrors of parasitic decomposition. Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London: Verso, 2002), 256-260. Print.

15. See Pierre Klossowski, *Roberte Ce Soir and The Revocation of the Edict of Nantes*, trans. Austryn Wainhouse (New York: Dalkey Archive, 2002), and Tracy McNulty, *The Hostess: Hospitality, Femininity, and the Expropriation of Identity* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2006). Print.

16. On Derrida’s readings of “cannibalism”—and its ties to certain politico-theological motifs of “sacrifice” and “host” (Eucharist)—see David Farrel Krell “All You Can Eat: Derrida’s Course, *Rhétorique Du Cannibalisme* (1990-1991),” *Research in Phenomenology* 36 (2006): 130-180. Print. Needless to say, I think any rigorous thought of “the party” today would have to come to terms with this (still largely untranslated) part of Derrida’s corpus, i.e., its undigested remains.