Dorothy Parker in Hollywood: The Politics of Privilege

By Bruce Bawer

At least among those increasingly rare souls who actually recognize the names of dead writers, Dorothy Parker (1893-1967) is probably most famous these days for having sat at the fabled Algonquin Round Table in the 1920s, swapping quips over lunch with legendary figures like the playwright George S. Kaufman and the humorist Robert Benchley (her lifelong best friend). When she wasn't having lunch, she was banging out snappy, snotty pieces for the *New Yorker* and *Vanity Fair* (both of which magazines, in those days, were fun) and penning morbid, morose, and mordant light verse, her collections of which were, improbably, bestsellers. (Her poem "News Item" reads, in its entirety: "Men seldom make passes / At girls who wear glasses.)

But Parker, as we learn from Gail Crowther in her new book *Dorothy Parker in Hollywood,* also had a long and profitable career as a screenwriter. I consider myself to be relatively knowledgeable about the Golden Age of American Movies, but somehow I was unaware that Parker had been

nominated for no fewer than three Academy Awards – for the original version of *A Star Is Born* (1937), for Hitchcock's *Saboteur* (1942), and for *Smash-Up: The Story of a Woman* (1947), which made Susan Hayward a star. Similarly, I like to think of myself as knowing quite a bit about the Golden Age of American Song, but I had no idea that it was Parker who, as part of her work as a writer under contract to Paramount, wrote the lyrics to two terrific songs: "How Am I to Know?," for a 1929 Cecil B. DeMille film called *Dynamite,* and "I Wished on the Moon," sung by Bing Crosby in *The Big Broadcast of 1936.* Both tunes were later covered by Billie Holiday and became standards.

Parker is already the subject of a comprehensive 1989 biography by Marion Meade entitled *Dorothy Parker: What Fresh Hell Is This?* As Crowther explains at length in her introduction, she hasn't really come by any new information, and her frequent references to Meade's book in the main text make it clear that she relied on it heavily while composing the present volume – whose big selling point is that it foregrounds Parker's Hollywood years. Now, repackaging biographical material by putting a sexy, sales-friendly spin on it is a popular ploy in contemporary publishing. (Another recent instance was Lawrence Leamer's 2021 book *Capote's Women: A True Story of Love, Betrayal, and a Swan Song for an Era,* which was the basis for this year's limited – but not limited enough – FX series *Capote vs. the Swans.*) Crowther deployed a related gimmick in her previous book, *Three-Martini Afternoons at the Ritz: The Rebellion of Sylvia Plath & Anne Sexton* (2021). It's a "dual biography" – a concept that most of the time, as illustrated by Thomas Ricks's *Churchill and Orwell: The Fight for Freedom* (2017), just doesn't work.

Who was Dorothy Parker? Born Dorothy Rothschild ("Not *those* Rothschilds, Dorothy was keen to stress") to a prosperous New York family in 1893, she began at around age twenty to "perfect the persona" – witty, acerbic – "that would

make her name." Her drama reviews for *Vanity Fair* (1918-20) and book reviews for *The New Yorker* (1927-33) stood out for their irreverence and amusing personal references. (On a staging of Tolstoy's *Redemption:* "I went to the Plymouth Theater a comparatively young woman, and I staggered out of it, three hours later, twenty years older, haggard and broken with suffering.") Along with poems, articles, and short stories – including her frequently anthologized "Big Blonde" (1929) – these reviews are included in *The Collected Dorothy Parker* (1989) and are still good for a laugh a century or so after they were written.

Yet as delightful as Parker could be on the page, she could be absolutely miserable company in real life, verbally abusing the people around her and physically abusing herself. From early on she was an extremely heavy drinker who insisted (but was it just schtick?) that she hated her life, hated her writing, and hated the stuff she wrote, and who, over the years, underwent at least one abortion, two miscarriages, and four suicide attempts (first by slashing her wrists, then by taking an overdose of sleeping pills, after that by drinking shoe polish, and finally by ODing on barbiturates).

But our focus here is on Parker in Hollywood, a place that she (like many New Yorkers) claimed to loathe but that made her rich. From the time she first went "out there," as she put it, in 1929, her paychecks were staggering. Nonetheless, if she hated writing, she especially hated film writing – partly, at least, because it involved deadlines and bosses and that dreaded thing, collaboration. At the studios, scripts routinely went through several writers before being handed off to a director, with only one or two of the scribes generally receiving screen credit. (Crowther makes much of this lack of "accreditation," as she not quite correctly puts it.) Among the scripts that passed through Parker's hands were those for such reasonably popular but now-forgotten titles as *Here Is My Heart, One Hour Late, Paris in Spring, The Moon's Our Home,*

Suzy, Sweethearts, and *Trade Winds.* For a long time she and Alan Campbell — who was her second (1934-47) and third (1950-63) husband (her first, back in her New York days, was a stockbroker, Edwin Pond Parker II, whom she divorced in 1928) — were a rather celebrated screenwriting team, like Ruth Gordon and Garson Kanin, or Joan Didion and John Gregory Dunne.

What I didn't know about Parker, and what Crowther dwells on throughout, is that she was a major lefty. As early as 1927, Parker wrote in the *New Yorker* that her "heart and soul" were "with the cause of Socialism"; in the same year, she traveled to Boston to protest the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti. But as Crowther puts it, after Parker went to Europe for a taste of the Spanish Civil War and, both there and in Hollywood, fell under the influence of lefties like Ernest Hemingway and the unabashed Stalinist Lillian Hellman, a "new, serious Parker emerged" — a development that Crowther refers to as Parker's "socialist awakening." In other words, her politics got even more extreme. Here, for example, is the "new, serious" Parker talking: "When the day comes that you can accept injustice anywhere, you've got to kill yourself." Is this political seriousness? No, it's narcissistic hyperbole. At one point Parker declared her determination "to overthrow prejudice and injustice." Paging Jordan Peterson! Make your bed before you try to change the world.

From one perspective, Parker was, like Cher, Bette Midler, and Rob Reiner in our own time, a typical Hollywood lefty, oozing fake empathy and posturing as a champion of the oppressed even as she took uncongeniality, self-absorption, and brutal behind-the-back putdowns to new heights. (How remarkable that the type has hardly changed for a century!) From another perspective, she's a type of American woman that isn't found only in Hollywood, and that's even more familiar now than it was during her lifetime — namely, a privileged, bibulous neurotic who embraces leftist ideology as an apparent

distraction from her personal unhappiness. As is invariably the case with such people, Parker's professed ideological commitment involved significant self-contradictions: while claiming to be a fierce believer in the cause of human dignity and brotherhood, she was capable of chilling cruelty toward even her most devoted friends; and although Crowther wants us to take Parker seriously as a critic of Western consumerism, she habitually spent colossal sums on designer hats, lingerie, perfumes, and other luxury items.

In the 1930s, Parker helped establish a Communist Party front group called the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League (HANL). (One of her fellow founders, Otto Katz, was a Soviet agent who had been directed by the Kremlin to start it.) When, in 1939, the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the HANL changed its name — "quietly," notes Crowther — to the Hollywood League for Democratic Action. What she omits to mention is that this name change was ordered by the Comintern, which, after the signing of the pact, forbade Communist front groups to oppose Nazism. But how did Parker react to the pact? She "did not publicly speak out" about it, reports Crowther, even though it certainly created a "difficult situation" for her. A "difficult situation"? A tame way to describe the presumed impact on Parker of a treaty in which the USSR, purportedly her guiding star, allied itself with the Nazis, whom she viewed as the ultimate embodiment of evil. One might have expected Parker to do at least a bit of soul-searching — or just plain thinking! — at that sobering juncture; that she didn't feel compelled to address the pact publicly would appear to mark her as, shall we say, a less than serious political actor. But Crowther doesn't think so: she plainly approves of Parker's abiding leftism, although she tiptoes around the fact that Parker was, as a leader of the HANL, effectively a tool of Stalin.

So much for Parker's politics, of which Crowther serves us a generous helping. But as it happens, Crowther gives us, in

addition, a double dose of her own politics. As one might expect from the author of a book about Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, Crowther is an ardent feminist, depicting Parker consistently as a victim of the patriarchy. “Parker,” she professes, “fought her way in a world that was much kinder to confident men.” On the contrary, Parker’s professional advancement was a thing of wonder: in New York and then in Los Angeles, she rose like a rocket. Complaining that the questions asked by journalists who interviewed Parker in the 1930s focused more on her screenwriting and personal life than on her politics, Crowther suggests that “it was almost as if the serious, thinking, political side of a woman was best quietly ignored.” Nonsense: we’re talking about a time when American readers turned eagerly to female war correspondents like Martha Gellhorn and Dorothy Thompson for gripping reports from the front as well as for their informed commentary. But why should anyone profiling Parker – a First Nighter who was famous not for her geopolitical know-how but for her sardonic takes on love, loss, and the Seven Lively Arts – ask her about politics?

Crowther can’t stop finding misogyny where there was almost certainly next to none. “Perhaps if she had been a man it would have been different,” she writes apropos of some slight, adding that “eighty years later…little has changed for women today.” There’s “something depressing,” she opines, “about the amount of attention given then – and now – to a woman’s appearance.” For her, Parker is “a classic case of the misunderstood woman,” an example of “women who refuse to conform.” There’s plenty more where all this silliness came from. Crowther even quotes with approval some cockamamie scholar’s theory that “an alcoholic woman” like Parker “is subversive because she disrupts the paradigm in alcohol culture of the man as alcoholic and the woman as his accomplice.” (Got that? Female alcoholism is a form of rebellion against the patriarchy. You heard it here first.) Crowther is such a fierce feminist that she even criticizes

Parker, whose snotty digs at Zelda Fitzgerald and Anita Loos (author of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*) she regards as a failure to exhibit "female solidarity."

Even harder to take than Crowther's tiresome politics, however, is her writing. First of all, she's a Brit, and this book about a distinctively American writer is packed with disconcerting Britishisms ("adverts," "moved house") that its editors should have purged. She frequently uses familiar words in unfamiliar ways: the book, she promises in her introduction, will offer "a closer revision of" – by which she means "a closer look at" – Parker's work in Hollywood. She also proffers easily avoidable ambiguities: when Crowther says Parker was well-known "for the superficial put-downs of the century," does she mean that Parker was putting down the twentieth century, or that her put-downs were among the century's best? And there's more, much more. This book is awash in basic grammatical errors, from agreement problems to faulty word order ("Some writers were able to better deal with this than others") to dangling modifiers. (Here's Crowther explaining that one reason why the movie studios moved to California was to escape possible lawsuits by Thomas Edison, who owned most of the motion-picture patents: "By moving West under the jurisdiction of California law, Edison could not take action against them.") But forget grammar: on every page, Crowther's prose is just plain awkward – often excruciatingly so. Here's Crowther on Parker's birth: "Dorothy Parker appears for the first time as Dorothy Rothschild in a seaside town during a hurricane to her well-to-do parents, Eliza (née Marston) and Henry J."

What to say, in the end, about Dorothy Parker the writer? Well, the best of her poems and reviews are still a blast. As for her Hollywood work, forget the three Oscar nods: *A Star Is Born* alone is enough to show that, unlike many of her colleagues who made the pilgrimage from the East Coast to the West (F. Scott Fitzgerald being the most tragic example), she

was able to adapt her talent quickly and easily to the special demands of the screenplay. And it's nothing less than extraordinary that this woman who'd apparently never written a song lyric rolled up her sleeves when asked to do so and managed to produce two of them that are still considered part of the Great American Songbook.

So much for Parker the writer. But Parker the woman? On the plus side, she loved dogs. On the minus side – well, when it comes to interpersonal relations, there are, generally speaking, two kinds of people: the kind who, like Jonathan Swift, hate "all nations, professions, and communities" but love individual human beings, and the kind who nod in agreement at Father Zosima's statement in *The Brothers Karamazov:* "The more I love humanity in general the less I love man in particular." Dorothy Parker, like so many leftist ideologues, was Father Zosima on steroids – a curmudgeon who oozed fishy concern about the welfare of the masses. But boy, did she write some funny stuff.

First published in Front Page Magazine