

wanted to be a great poet but now is remembered for his satiric novel and his savage criticism.

Jeffrey Meyers has written about Randall Jarrell in Manic Power: Robert Lowell and His Circle. He has recently completed a life of Somerset Maugham.

Myth of Ages

by Paul Gottfried

The Most Reluctant Convert: C.S.

Lewis's Journey to Faith

by David C. Downing

Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press; 180 pp., \$15.99



David C. Downing's study of C.S. Lewis and his conversion to Christianity in his early 30's offers more than the title might suggest. What we are given is not a repetition of the well-known narrative from *Surprised by Joy*, in which Lewis recounts his journey from youthful atheism to Christian belief 15 years later. Nor does Downing lean conspicuously on the exhaustive biographies of Lewis that have appeared in the last 10 to 15 years (for example, the widely available works of George Sayer, A.N. Wilson, and Walter Hooper). Rather, he approaches his subject's religious life as a kind of intellectual problem, whose Christian end may have been more in doubt before Lewis's "reluctant conversion" than the remainder of his life might lead us to believe.

Although Downing has published a previous work on Lewis, his earlier interest was in the *Ransom Trilogy* and in other literary products of the figure whose "journey to faith" he traces here. For Lewis, as he is understood by Downing, religious and literary truths were inextricably related. Thus, "Christianity would become the fountainhead of all myths and tales of enchantment, the key to all mythologies as the myth that unfolded in history." Moreover, "for Lewis the incarnation became the archetype of a larger pattern, the principle of descent and reascent. In *Miracles* he calls this the 'very formula of reality.'" While Lewis spoke of a specific conversion experience that he underwent in 1931, Downing points to a cumulative process of shifts that, over

a 15-year period, resulted in an irreversible turning toward the Faith. Walter Hooper has described Lewis as the "most thoroughly converted man I have ever encountered." Although Downing does not question that conclusion, he nonetheless creates a portrait of Lewis in early manhood that may cause us to marvel at such an outcome.

The most striking aspect of that early life is how much was packed into it. After losing his mother and serving on the Western Front in World War I, Lewis, an Ulster Protestant who went to Oxford on scholarship, distinguished himself as a student and teacher of modern philosophy. At a time when mathematical and positivist trends were dominant in English philosophy and when the neonominalism of G.E. Moore was becoming the rage at Cambridge and Oxford, Lewis was drawing his learning from other sources: the voluntarism of Schopenhauer, the evolutionary vitalism of Henri Bergson, and William James' pragmatic defense of faith. In short, Lewis was an odd bird for an English academic philosopher; not at all surprisingly, he drifted into an intense, prolonged study of literary myth.

During this time, he frequented the magnificent poet—albeit dotty spiritualist—William Butler Yeats (a fellow Irish Protestant) and struck up a friendship with a circle of Oxford scholars who combined Christian convictions with a passion for pagan myth. Lewis's adherence to this group (the Inklings, which included J.R.R. Tolkien, Owen Barfield, and Hugo Dyson) was fateful for his spiritual journey. The members of this circle convinced the conflicted young scholar that Christianity and pagan mythologies were not at variance: "Mythology reveals its own kind of truth and Christianity is true mythology." In fact, "the life, death, and resurrection of Christ embodied central motifs found in all the world's mythologies."

Reading Downing's chapter "Finding Truths in the Old Beliefs," I was struck by how this drawing of comparisons between pagan and Christian stories and images decisively influenced Lewis's return to the Faith of his childhood. Unlike an Old Testament Jew or a biblically based Protestant, Lewis was not apparently concerned about the fit—or lack of one—between the doctrines of a particular Christian church and what the candidate for conversion could accept as divinely revealed truth. Rather, he was looking to see whether Christian redemptive history could be squared with the constant ele-

ments of world mythology. His test seems to have been more literary than historical and involved Christianity's compatibility with the ancient narratives of other cultures. I am equally struck by the range, clarity, and number of the books Lewis published or left in his estate (altogether, about 40) that were intended to be defenses of Christian belief.

Downing leaves the reader asking how Lewis's journey to faith could result in such a multitude of brilliant apologetics. To his credit, he avoids p.r. gimmicks in dealing with the biographical aspects of Lewis's life. He does not go into his subject's tragic love life with poetess Joy Davidman, but he does refer briefly and unobtrusively to the successful presentation of this story in the play and movie *Shadowlands*. And he mercifully eschews speculation about Lewis's alleged affairs while a young tutor at Oxford. In this case, *deus* may indeed be *veritas*.

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The Virtues of Dorothy Parker

by Lawrence Dugan

Complete Poems

by Dorothy Parker

Introduction by Colleen Breese

New York: Penguin Books;

320 pp., \$13.95



Literary biography is often an opaque filter for the work of modern writers. The interference comes not so much from the cockeyed analysis we may encounter of an artist's life but from the mass of irrelevant detail. We read the novels and short stories of Ernest Hemingway and J.D. Salinger but also know the events of their lives recorded in newspapers, magazines, books, newsreels, movies, television interviews, memoirs, court documents, and websites. But what does any of that biographical detail have to do with the merits of *A Farewell to Arms* or *Franny and Zooey*?

Attempting to separate Dorothy Parker, even for a few minutes, from the mystique of her life—the awful details, if you like—is not easy. She came of age as a writer in the first great morning of modern publicity just before and after World War I. She wrote for the first- and second- and third-rate magazines that Franklin P. Adams and P.G. Wodehouse and H.L. Mencken wrote for and joked about in the 1910's. In the 20's, she was a founding member of the Algonquin Roundtable; one of the first writers for the *New Yorker*; a friend of Woolcott, Thurber, Ross, Benchley, *et al.*; and became famous for her smart remarks in conversation, gossip columns, book reviews, and drama notices. She was one of the first generation of Hollywood scenarists and won an Oscar for best screenplay for *A Star Is Born* (1937). You can see her credits on a number of other good movies, such as Hitchcock's *The Saboteur* (1943).

Parker also wrote short stories and poems, some of them very good. And to try to pull any of this work loose from the tangle of her marriages, love affairs, and suicide attempts, and those of her friends and family, is like attempting to read a paragraph by Hemingway or Salinger without seeing a whole life behind it: not impossible but often difficult. So, for the rest of this piece, I shall not say another word about her life but just about her poetry, which is among the best written in the last century in a style that has almost disappeared—classical.

Razors pain you;
Rivers are damp;
Acids stain you;
And drugs cause cramp.
Guns aren't lawful;
Nooses give;
Gas smells awful;
You might as well live.

In an essay on Alexander Pope, Lytton Strachey said that the key to understanding the classical style is found in the quality of compression. It unites, through rhyme and meter and other literary devices, various ideas and objects into an intense, coherent statement. Let us play an Orwellian game and rewrite that poem as a modern paragraph.

Thoughtful analysis leaves us convinced that suicide, as a rational alternative to existence, involves use of materials with secondary effects parallel to and even counter to the

desired death so discomfoting as to challenge the original desire for self-extinction . . .

We can stop there. The Parker poem concentrates the ghastly choices that might come before a suicide attempt into a nightmarish list of understatements. My prose fabrication almost obscures the topic completely, using many more words without including one concrete noun. Which passage would you give to a person in especially narrow psychological straits? The poem, in memorable classical fashion, reduces the alternatives to their starkest reality—nouns and verbs. The prose passage destroys the meaning of the poem and, most importantly, of the idea behind it. The poem is buoyant, comic, memorable; the prose is lard.

I do not mean to simplify what classical verse attempts, but when we look at the poets whose styles are classical—Chaucer, Marvell, Dryden, Swift, Pope, Goldsmith, Gray, Tom Moore, Byron, and Praed down to Yeats, Frost, Belloc, Roy Campbell, and Parker in the last century—we see that poetic compression of an idea has intensified and clarified it, sharpening whatever edge it has to the finest possible blade of effect, often comic. Shakespeare, Donne, Milton, Keats, Hopkins, Browning, Marianne Moore, and Dylan Thomas do something different. Their language is denser, compacted; their intention, less didactic (even allowing for Milton); their lyricism, more obvious; and they are rarely comic, with the exceptions of Shakespeare, Browning, and Moore. They also concentrate words, but less to sharpen the meaning than to intensify the sound, allowing the meaning to be drawn from that intensity.

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame

The force that through the green fuse drives the flower

The first line is from Hopkins; the second, Dylan Thomas. They push to the extreme what Shakespeare, Donne, and Keats had started. Dorothy Parker is not of their school. Comedy is an essential element of her style.

To down all kings and presidents
Our Mr. Tench proposes;
His loudly uttered sentiments
Are redder than the roses.
He urges anarchism's cause

In terms concise, but notable;
And what he says about the laws
Would barely pass as quotable.

Sharp as her humor can be, it usually mellows, accepting the parlor-red for what he is. And if a certain type of person, a certain kind of human entanglement, will always be with us, death is at the end of it all. Morley Callaghan (himself a writer of the 1920's) wisely remarked of Hemingway that he kept death in his work in the same way that a medieval scholar kept a skull on his writing table, to remind him of his own mortality. So it is with Parker. She may have been perfectly happy when she wrote "Satin," but its bitterness is convincing, suggesting Sylvia Plath's "Daddy" a generation later. Yet she is never as personal as Plath and always seems somehow to use the formality (for want of a better word) of her style to keep her despair at a comic, or at least an ironic, distance.

Wool's to line a miser's chest
Crape's to calm the old;
Velvet hides an empty breast;
Satin's for the bold.

Lawn is for a bishop's yoke;
Linen's for a nun;
Satin is for wiser folk—
Would the dress were done!

Satin glows in candle-light—
Satin's for the proud!
They will say who watch at night,
"What a fine shroud!"

That poem shows the influence, I think (we never really know), of Emily Dickinson, whom I omitted from my list of classical poets but who probably belongs there. Dickinson, A.F. Housman, and Robert Frost all kept the classical tradition alive and popular well into the 20th century, and, in Frost's case, within living memory. At least one Roman poet, Catullus, also comes to mind whenever you read Parker for more than a few minutes. A nameless absent lover—physically gone but still very much in mind—is often apotheosized in her poems in a tone that exudes a palpable contempt. It is not the lunacy of Plath or Anne Sexton but the disgust that very few poets—Catullus, Pope, and some others—have managed to set down for the ages toward those they once loved or admired, then came to detest. Few have ever bridled their anger as Parker did. Notice the careful combina-

tion of poetic commonplaces and precise language.

Somewhere the sunbeams dance
and play;
(Where is the love that used to
thrill?)
Somewhere the riotous roses sway,
(Little white love, so still, so
still.)
Somewhere the skies of young
April shine
Bright as the heavens we prayed
to then . . .
Somewhere you're pulling the
same old line
Over again.

The first line is conventional, but "Bright as the heavens we prayed to then . . ." is clear and original, preparing us for the last two lines. After awhile, we are not surprised by her harshness, and the game-playing is not annoying. There really is a shift in emotion with Parker: She is not simply tricking the reader; she is of two minds. She is amused by her circumstances, and then she is not. Comedy leads to anger, and the poem is completed. There is a great deal of the performer in her art, but that is not something to look down on in a time that has tolerated so much from attitudinizing poets. It is a valid strategy for a writer, and an obvious comic one. Yet comedy has slipped out of our poetic voice as the classical clarity has faded into the past.

Parker published several books of poetry between the world wars, including *Enough Rope* (1926), *Sunset Gun* (1928), *Lament for the Living* (1930), and *Death and Taxes* (1931). (Imagine an academic facilitator at a conference reading off that list of titles!) Colleen Breese's introduction to the *Complete Poems* published by Penguin is a very good comprehensive essay, mixing in much biography. Most important, it is a first-rate edition that pays attention to chronology and the importance of the poems as collections of work, although the primary life of a poem is always by itself, not in an anthology. Many of Parker's appeared in the *New Yorker*, the *New Republic*, the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Vogue*, but apparently never in small or literary magazines. She published no poetry after World War II, although she lived until 1967.

These career items are useful in assessing the value of her work. It is of a very high caliber, in some respects, but Park-

er's technical skill seems to outrun what she has to say. Her use of classical elements for comic effect, including the essential devices of rhyme, meter, and a comic matching of sound and sense, is almost always skillful. She knows how to mix patches of apparent rosy feeling with paradox and reversal. There may be a silver lining, but there may be another, darker one under that; and so on. But the final range of her emotions—you might almost say of her thinking—is not great. She is a defeatist, if a rather heroic one. She is bitter, if able to give her anger a comic turn. The scope of an elegy by Dryden or Gray is beyond her—as it is beyond most poets, to be fair. Even Housman (and I do not mean to take anything away from his greatness as a poet) rises to a grander view of mankind than does Dorothy Parker. Not that she was merely a poet of the beautiful people or of Manhattan sophistication. But beneath it all is a stark simplicity directed at a very small range of life. Had she attempted something larger, she might have been a far greater poet.

There is no way of knowing for sure, and so few people who attempt to write poetry succeed that it is churlish to begrudge her what she achieved, even if you feel that she might have accomplished much more. The entire *New Yorker*/Algonquin school of writers is in need of a monumental critical sorting-out of talent. They left behind an aura of suspicion about their talent and sincerity that has caused much of their work—indeed, much

of American literature between the wars—to be neglected. Besides Parker, Franklin P. Adams, Woolcott, Donald Ogden Stewart, Kaufman and Hart, Herman Man-
kewicz, Wolcott Gibbs, Edna Ferber, Robert Sherwood, Marc Connelly, and many others need critical reexamination. Only Thurber and Edmund Wilson have received their due. This first complete collection of Parker's poetry is proof of that.

They were a contradictory group of writers, of people. They could be supportive and loyal in a pinch, yet frequently, sometimes memorably, bad-mouthed one another. Several started out their careers getting fired from newspapers or magazines for refusing to compromise their standards and then finished them with Hollywood contracts. There is nothing automatically contradictory about that; but with so much wealth and fame thrust upon them, in spite of strong doses of idealism and misery, we wind up back in that muddy biographical trench. The gossipy attention of such books as Brendan Gill's *Here at the New Yorker* and Pauline Kael's *The Citizen Kane Book* (a fascinating work in places) did a great deal 25 years ago to confirm their status as opportunistic, alcoholic lightweights who got lucky. They certainly did little to enhance their stature as writers, which may turn out to be substantial.

Lawrence Dugan's poems have appeared most recently in *Chronicles*, *First Things*, *Image*, and *Modern Age*.

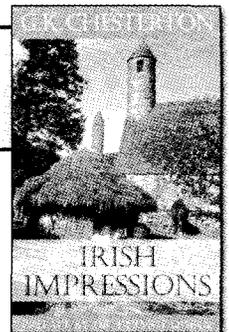


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by Samuel Francis

The Grinch Who Stole Kwanza

The political plum on last year's Christmas pudding, so to speak, was *l'affaire* Lott, which, erupting at the birthday party for retiring Sen. Strom Thurmond in early December and continuing until Trent Lott's less-than-voluntary resignation as Senate majority leader three weeks later, threatened to ruin Kwanza for just about everybody. The Lott crisis was an unhappy one for President Bush and the Republican Party because it forced them to think about their real political base of middle-class whites—not a few of whom are Southerners—rather than twaddle on about the entirely fictitious coalition of blacks and Hispanics mobilized by the GOP's ethnic sensitivity. The President could not simply dump Mr. Lott as unceremoniously as he would have liked, because that would have alienated the millions of white Southerners who saw nothing wrong with the senator's comments. But neither could Mr. Bush keep Mr. Lott as majority leader, because keeping him would have been a plum pudding in the faces of the real custodians of the Republican conscience, namely, the Rev. Jesse Jackson, the Rev. Al Sharpton, and the millions of American blacks whose votes Mr. Bush continues to imagine he can win. The President was thus reduced to the coy stratagem of having his brother Jeb, governor of Florida, and Secretary of State Colin Powell denounce Mr. Lott; by allowing surrogates who had no business saying anything about the senator to say what they did, he slyly communicated to the nation, his party, and Mr. Lott himself that he wanted the majority leader to walk the plank. Once Governor Bush and Secretary Powell had spoken, it was clear that Mr. Lott would have to resign almost immediately, and so he did.

The Mississippi senator's defenestration would have been a largely insignificant event had it not revealed some of the underlying realities of American politics and especially the realities of what currently passes for American conservatism. Mr. Lott had few defenders, and even those who did defend him hastened to do so not on the merits of what he said about Mr. Thurmond's segregationist presidential campaign of 1948 but rather on the assumption that he did not really mean

what he seemed to have said. That defense was probably accurate; you do not become Senate majority leader these days by saying what you really believe, and, if Mr. Lott really did disclose the fruits of his meditations on race, segregation, and the course of American history since 1948, it was likely the first and only time in his entire career that he spoke the unvarnished truth about much of anything.

What was significant about the Lott affair was not what he really meant or believes, nor what he and his supporters chose to say, but what his foes said—and not the obvious and predictable ones on the political left. Of course, Mr. Jackson and Mr. Sharpton chose to strut and rant about Mr. Lott's remarks, and, of course, a good many Democrats eager to make what political gains they could from it did so as well. But the foes who really did Trent Lott in and made it impossible for the Republicans to defend him or for President Bush to keep him were the neoconservatives. Had they not immediately denounced Mr. Lott and demanded his resignation, he might well have come through the crisis successfully.

The neoconservative onslaught was immediate and total. Almost to a man, their spokesmen damned Mr. Lott's remarks: "disgraceful" (David Frum); "indefensible" (Jonah Goldberg); "ludicrous" (William Kristol); "appalling" (Charles Krauthammer); "shameful" (a public statement issued by four Republican appointees to the Civil Rights Commission, led by neoconservative race guru Abigail Thernstrom); *etc.* Neoconservative ex-football-star Jack Kemp panted that, "until [Mr. Lott] totally repudiates segregation and every aspect of its evil manifestation," the Republicans would continue to suffer damage from his remarks. According to the *Washington Post*, the quarterback demanded that Mr. Lott "go before a civil rights group and make a major speech about race and racial reconciliation in the New South to help clear the air."

The hostility of the neocon press gang was essential to the collapse of whatever political support Mr. Lott could have garnered for himself. Had there existed a corps of conservative columnists and commentators willing either to defend what



he said or to dismiss his remarks as irrelevant and harmless, the majority leader might have been able to retain his position. Facing the nearly unanimous opposition of those who now constitute the permissible "right," however, he had no ground to stand on and no defenders to whom he could point. He could not say to President Bush or his fellow senators, "Stand up for me: My strong support in the media shows we can keep public opinion on our side," because he had no support in the media even from the right (save Pat Buchanan and Robert Novak), and, without such support, he could hardly expect to win or even to keep any allies. Foolishly, having lost the right and whetted the salivary glands of the left, he tried to placate the black left by his ill-advised and disastrous interview on Black Entertainment Television, an act that only hastened his demise.

Mr. Lott's collapse was unfortunate because, for all his personal weaknesses and evasions, he was a reasonably reliable conservative vote in Congress, as his record shows. We could expect nothing radical from Mr. Lott as majority leader, but we could also expect him to do little harm—far less harm, for example, than Newt Gingrich did when, in the 1980's, he led House Republican support for such measures as the Martin Luther King, Jr., holiday, extension of the Voting Rights Act, and sanctions on South Africa, all of which Mr. Lott opposed.

The difference in the voting records of Mr. Lott and Mr. Gingrich, a neoconservative hero, should tell us why the neocons were so eager to purge the Mississippian from the Senate leadership, and, if it does not, their motives soon became clear in their own columns. As Charles Krauthammer wrote, "Neocons have been the most passionate about the Lott affair and the most disturbed by its meaning."