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WORD MEN

The Good Word & Other Words

by Wilfrid Sheed
 Henry Robbins/Dutton, 289 pp., \$10.95

Reviewed by Ross Feld

THEY DON'T COME much smoother than Sheed. Or more droll: "Roth is a comedian as well as a novelist, and the novelist must make his fictions out of the clown's simplicities. Roth has tried every way he knows how to get his Panza and Quixote onto the same horse, but one of them usually falls off. Without his clown, as in *When She Was Good*, Roth doesn't quite make the weight. With Sancho up, as in *Portnoy*, the woeful knight slides gracefully off the horse's rump." Taking time from working on his own novels, Sheed for awhile was providing this kind of triple-sec perceptiveness for the *New York Times Book Review* on a regular basis. More than passably entertaining Sundays resulted. "Waugh, trying to write about love in *Brideshead Revisited*, stammered into a phrase that even embarrassed him in retrospect: 'He made free of her loins.' Trying to locate the loins wasted a lot of valuable time for young readers in those days, and even then an overwhelming vision of pork chops ruined it for many." "Letters by a living man," Sheed observes, going through E.B. White's, "are a bit like a stately home with the owner around—one isn't sure how much one can touch."

Someone able to glide like this isn't really serious, is he (wonders a little Puritan worm inside)? A critic with his nap so patted down is not one to bite hard at a book, to rip a chunk off and really chew, right? Well, a little right, a little wrong. Sheed's candor ("Our best critics are known for their hammiest moments"), together with his novelist's amused opinion of the whole like it/don't like it enterprise, plus his sense of the dead (that they're never quite), put him a little to the side of the whole question. Once, in the Time-Life Building, I stepped into an elevator that contained, among other suited males, Johnny Unitas. Not one of us shrimpy non-Unitases dared utter a word, and with silly, knowing half-smiles we rode to our respective floors—yet what a bunch of the happy elect we were. Sheed's essays have some of that elevator atmosphere: Literature is virtual, vicarious, "The only game we have now, and it fills the moment as a great game would, even sharing some of the same textures. If you don't enjoy it, you wouldn't enjoy a great game either, except for its damn greatness."

So Sheed's all over the place. With a fondly personal, touchingly humble recollection of Edmund Wilson. The bad form of middle-aged writers who kick at those on the more groundly rungs of the ladder below. A shrewd appraisal of George Orwell. A piece on hacks (including, begging everyone's pardon, Graham Greene): "Whom the gods would destroy, they first oversell." A look, unconvinced, at ethnic chic: "If you happen to have a lousy temper, it's good to know it's an Irish temper. And you can walk a little taller knowing that rotten disposition is Slavic soul. It certainly beats 'you know how sensitive we Scorpions are.'"

An examination of the wit of Dorothy Parker and George S. Kaufman: Parker's cynicism "at least partly a literary manner... which hardened into a characteristic as life belted her around" and Kaufman's Stakhanovite approach to being funny, grinding it exhaustedly out "at those witmarathons at the Algonquin with everyone whoring after laughs and press mentions, as much a part of the period as six-day bike races and flagpole sitting." Sheed owns some wonderful moves; where he learned to use the parenthesis I don't know, but possible models may have included Edgar Bergen, Señor Wences. Nor does he ever seem numbed (numbing, sometimes: when that rich sauce of style is poured over piffle); he's always ready to break his swing. Someone who appreciates Cyril Connolly isn't expected to also let in Jack Kerouac, but the door is opened to both here. Terrible books by splendid writers, fine ones by duds receive mention, too. Such books do happen.

With these skills, if Sheed were mean he'd be a pogrom. But he isn't. See him on Hemingway, who *was* mean. Like Richard Nixon, whom we've chased out into the light and won't let back to any manner of dignified shade, every revelation of what a creep Hemingway was excites us immoderately. But Sheed slips away from the mob. All the reflux pieties the biographies have whipped up in us are neatly dismissed: "People who have never tried it have no idea how pleasant being nasty can be." When we light fires at the base of Hemingway's crumbling castle of personality, we've been suckered into exactly his game. Too much a Catholic to get worked up over something so fly-by-night as a life, Sheed directs us to look once more upon the Hemingway style: the midwesternness of it (is the world real if you can't name it simply?), the true foolish bravery it took to try to make an art "in which the creator could be as intelligent as he liked but in which intelligence must be

transmuted entirely into form, so that no lumps of thinking are left showing." So Hemingway failed, so the thinking soon got left out entirely—does it matter? In this essay of large artistic sympathy, Sheed knows that art is never particularly furthered by success. The attitude is hardly kamikaze.

Savoring the modest, the self-effacing, even the failed, comes off, in fact, as one of the hallmarks of the essays. V.S. Pritchett, Cyril Connolly, Ring Lardner, James Thurber, E.B. White—writers all who didn't or couldn't make the top—Sheed's interest in and attitude toward them is level, mature. He commends Pritchett for having the guts to "refuse the magic mushroom that makes a man bigger than his material," for not being "the type to make a whole carpet just to hide one thread." Nor is there blindness to the defensiveness that usually hems minor work which Sheed calls "the common mistake of enlarging the subject matter while playing the same basic notes: like a minuet in honor of Napoleon."

And yet. The pieces on Wodehouse, on the novel of manners, on George Gershwin, football, Watergate, Henry Luce, push toward the impression that the outside edges are maybe a little *too* well-patrolled. About marginalia, Sheed not only has the good word—he has just about the last one—his agility heaping rhythm and cleverness atop little boxes that are thus sealed tight under a glittering weight. When, more infrequently, Sheed steps into a free-fire zone (and takes, or is given, more room)—such as with the Hemingway essay and a fine consideration of W.C. Fields—his intelligence stirs a shifting center, gamesmanship peels away, and he responds to the ambiguity of greatness as well as anyone writing today.

I've done now exactly what Sheed says we should never do (in "The Art of Reviewing," an essay here that qualifies as compulsory reading for you who are at all prone to taking what you read in these and other back pages too seriously). A reviewer should hang by his thumbs if he, "In the bracing tones of a juvenile magistrate ... tell[s] the shivering wretch out there to forget his nasty little mistake as quickly as possible and get on with the book we all know he can write." But this juvenile magistrate is going to let it stand. Every time Sheed hits one of his sharp, quick singles, he drives a man in. What's more satisfying, though, are the homers, where he gets himself across, too. ●

Ross Feld is a novelist and essayist living in New York City.

Books in Brief

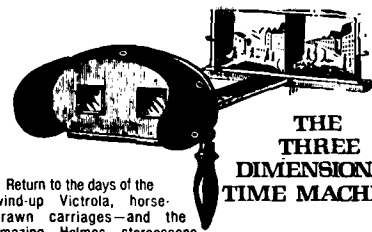


The Bass Saxophone: Two Novellas

by Josef Skvorecky
Translated by Kaca Polackova-Henley
Knopf, 176 pp., \$8.95

JAZZ IS NOT just music," writes Josef Skvorecky—and he should know. As a teenage jazz buff and hack tenor-sax man in Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia, he had to blow and dig the blues while scating around between the lines of Dr. Goebbels's racist, anti-jazz codes of censorship. ("St. Louis Blues" was passed off as "The Song of Rešetová Lhota" by one Jiří Patočka, with the immortal lyric: "I'm on my way ... to see my Aryan folk.") Nor did Ella Fitzgerald and Dixieland fare much better under the Communists a few years later; suddenly jazz became degenerate capitalist decadence rather than "Judeonegroid" barbarianism. Either way, as we learn in Skvorecky's sad, hilarious autobiographical preface to these two novellas, the individualism of jive just didn't jibe with totalitarianism.

It's understandable, then, that the theme of free music's free spirit is played upon with rather a heavy pedal in these first-person fables originally written in the mid-Sixties, before 1968's Prague Spring triggered Skvorecky's emigration to Canada. In "Emöke," a jazz-loving Angry Young Man of the Fifties (a "brother in the international brotherhood of rhythmic, antiracist, antifascist syncopated music") tells how, on a drab, state-organized vacation at a barren recreation center, he woos a considerably mixed-up but intensely spiritual young widow—a walking argument against everything empty, beastly, and indifferent in everyday Czech life. After much fruitless, logical cajoling, he finally wins her, if only for a few moments, with a homemade blues, a poem somehow borne "from the heart and throat of a half-stoned black shouter of the Memphis periph-



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