

Between The Covers

By Gerald Gargiulo

Bravo for memories recounting, and not done to other's harm. Wilfred Sheed, who lives in North Haven, in this chronicle of his repetitive and plaguing illnesses, has not only succeeded in letting us experience what he has gone through — any good writer could do that and Mr. Sheed is an exceptionally good writer — but has, I believe, conducted his own psychoanalysis and, to all appearances, done it rather well.

Sheed's writing in *In Love With Daylight* (Simon and Schuster) is like a dancing brook leaping over rocks with surprising eddies; he carries us through a major portion of his life with a conviction of its goodness and a commitment to its continuity. The story starts with his contracting the "AIDS" of the 1940s, polio, a painful detour for a 14-year-old in love with sports and alive with the belief that a "cure" was sure to be found.

Further on in the text, and in his life, we are brought to a place where the waters of life seem absent, namely Sheed's struggle with alcoholism and sleeping pills. Along with whatever else may have been a factor, these were major contributors to his depression which we are allowed to glimpse without being burdened. Finally, the author's struggles in his 50s with tongue cancer, and the reality of death

is recounted and encountered. Encounter is what we experience throughout this text. No self-pity here; no excesses of praise or blame at parents, or spouses, or the unavoidable ambiguities and detours of life.

Motivational Mantras

There is anger in the text but it seems aimed at the right targets: the all-too-frequent simplistic formulae that pass for psychotherapy today. That is, the tendency of some mental health professionals to speak of resolving complex psychological and physical illnesses by way of conscious motivational mantras. In this regard Mr. Sheed's criticism of AA, which does not lessen his appropriate appreciation, is well taken. Here is a life that has had a rendezvous with an angel of darkness, and while the struggle continued Sheed's highly productive life went on.

The text highlights, somewhat overly so, the physical realities the author has struggled with, as a counter-point, I suspect, to some of the naive psychological formulae he was exposed to. But his very writing and his struggles to understand his sickness, as well as himself, betrays an expressive capacity for self-awareness which is neither maudlin or self-indulgent.

Both of Sheed's parents, Frank Sheed and Malsie Ward, were well-known and highly respected lecturers and writers, particularly among Catholic intellectuals. Yet their presence and fame do not shadow the text and, although it is clear that young Sheed, with polio, was offered everything from the waters of Lourdes to the warm springs of Colorado, we are not distracted by any glamour. Rather we are privy to a young man's loss at not being able to play his beloved sports.

As he comes to terms with polio's permanent presence in his life, we simultaneously see someone who will not think of himself as handicapped — it cripples one to do so. The constant motif, throughout the text, is that polio has serious and permanent consequences, as does alcoholism and drugs, and cancer, none of which can be talked about, simplistically, as psychosomatic illnesses.

Latent Factors

Unfortunately, some of the professionals at "Happy Village," a recuperation retreat for drug and alcohol abuse, so overplayed the accepted formulae, e.g., once an alcoholic always so — never a drink for the rest of life — that individual differences and variations were lost to a mass mentality. Consequently, whatever of value was trying to be conveyed about the importance of any role of the mind in sickness went astray or was eclipsed by jargon. The author, undoubtedly, is familiar with the hidden or latent factors which propel many of our actions; any good text can be read on many levels and this text is no exception.

I have to conclude, therefore, that Mr. Sheed made an effort, as he did when he contracted polio, to stand tall — an all-too-forgotten admirable position in life. Physical pain, chemical dependencies, debilitating depression became for him the warp and woof of a life that is in self-creation. And self-creation, with all its lights and darkness, is what "shrinks" should be midwives to. The goal of any decent analysis is to aid people to take ownership

WILFRID SHEED

In Love with Daylight

A Memoir of Recovery

of what has happened to them as well as recognize that they had a hand in bringing about themselves.

Mr. Sheed has clearly done this with a humor and charm that transcend mere awareness. Whatever help some competent analysts may have offered in forging this awareness is left unclear. What is clear is that Mr. Sheed has found his own words, as we must all do, to name himself and his life place.

Note, for example, Sheed's comment: "So one of the several gifts that nobody so much as hinted at down in 'Happy Valley' has turned out to be the best of all, namely the gift of gifts — the ability to face sickness and death with something like equanimity." Life can become a celebration without turning that awareness into a formula thereby denying the personal task, for each of us, of reaching that awareness. "Task" is, I believe, the word. There is no automatic promise or success, despite the self-help books that drug our eyes, or the self-help missionaries who have a cure for whatever it is that ails us.

Perceptive Reflections

In one of his final chapters, "Radiation," we not only hear some of his musings on life but see that the self-understanding that he has achieved is evidenced in his sensitive and mature musings about some homosexual men he and his wife met while in Florida, as are his perceptive reflections on adolescent depression and how parents should respond. Sheed's celebration of his life is the recognition that there is strength, all too frequently unrecognized, which is ours when adversity stalks.

Look death in the face and you can, with sobriety, know the beauty of life.

It is a beauty not marred by self-occupation or self-gratification, i.e., "lets get all we can!" but rather a sober appreciation of the daylight and the quiet joy of spending it with those whom we love. All this is done without recourse to psychobabble or religious formulae.

Mr. Sheed reaches, I believe, a usable spiritual awareness, having struggled with the angel of physical and mental pain for most of the night and grown through the battle. Few of us may have such dramatic encounters — our lives are made up of ordinary, everyday pain. This text is, nevertheless, a tribute to what is best in all of us — the sporting fight that can make of our days a human life. Mr. Sheed is quite an athlete. Bravo!