

THE HACK, by Wilfrid Sheed; Cassell, 18s.

Mr Sheed has now written a Catholic novel; one, that is to say, in which the entire action turns on the Catholic or anti-Catholic feelings of his characters. The range is deliberately narrow in space and time; the respectable, claustrophobic New Jersey suburb, the few hectic weeks that end with Christmas; speed conveyed by the short chapters, the sharp definition of the writing. In this second novel Mr Sheed has achieved the power to convey precisely what he wishes with fine economy, as much by what he leaves unsaid as explicitly. His suburb lives, in all its horror.

His central character, a writer of hack spirituality for Catholic magazines, is struggling vainly to achieve the old fresh glibness that had made his living for him so well so long. We watch him move towards the inevitable breakdown without sympathy. For he is no tragic hero; too small, too unloveable, like the trivially unpleasant people who surround him. He does not fail because of any glimpse of truth that could help him reject his tinsel world. He fails because he cannot see any truth at all. And indeed the reader is only once allowed to glimpse it, and equivocally, in a central scene between his wife and his editor, the wavy whitehaired Father Chubb:

'Even you must have felt that the things that exercised him were pretty trivial for a grown man. Seat-money and dirty movies, you say, and where angels go in the winter, such childish concerns—he seems to have had no sense of the sacramental, of sacred places and things, of liturgy and initiation into mystery.'

'I never saw anything like that in the *Passenger*, either' was what Betty felt like saying to this: nor did these things seem much in Chubb's personal line.

We do not come across them again; the Church Mr Sheed so brilliantly depicts is smoothly irrelevant to his characters' concern, offering 'neither joy nor love nor light, nor certitude nor peace nor help for pain'. And thus it is the Church's failure we are asked to witness, total and complete. It is she who is the novel's tragic hero, and our pity and terror is not for the personal catastrophe of the poor hack, but for the evil brought upon itself by what is yet the body of Christ.

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