

GYÖRGY KONRÁD

A látogató

Budapest: Magvető, 1969. Pp. 272.

The author introduces the reader to a part of society seldom revealed in postwar Hungarian literature — the substratum of those subsisting on the fringe: the poor, the abandoned, the suicidal, the physically and mentally retarded, and the sexually deviant. The setting may be taken to be an industrially somewhat backward metropolis in which the transition from feudal-capitalism to socialism meets with resistance from traditional ways of thinking and a life-style rapidly becoming obsolete. The world depicted is sordid, but it is presented in an appealing light; for similar relish in naturalistic details one would have to turn to a Sue, a Hugo, a Dickens, a Dostoevsky, or a Gogol. This vegetative way of life may be a remnant of the past as in the author's compatriot Endre Fejes' highly acclaimed *Generation of Rust* (1970), but unlike the latter, Konrád suggests no likely remedy. Skepticism is voiced at the outset, and the experience related only confirms the foreseeable.

The first person narrator, who has served in various branches of legal and social work is now the head of an office assigning guardians to children. By showing the mystifying power of an office, and thus setting the tone, a Kafkaesque situation serves as introduction; an old woman wishes to enter the office in order to apply for financial help, but the massive gate resists her efforts while the guard passively looks on with his eyes half closed. The desperate woman hangs herself. The door will be repaired in a month's time; as in Gogol's *Overcoat*, conscience awakens only when it is already too late.

The narrator, who daily receives these wretched applicants, regards himself as the agent of indifference and mediocrity. In most cases, he views their problems as incurable and he is very skeptical about his ability to help them (pp. 27, 162-163). Institutional interference with the petitioners' lives is even likely to do more harm than good. Thus, while the officer may seem formidable to the person in need, his authority is not so much due to his real power as to his title.

The main plot concerns the vain attempt of the narrator to rescue a retarded boy from his father, whom the neighbors had reported for mistreating him. After the father's suicide, it proves unsuccessful to place the child in the care of an individual or an institution — a digressive journey of the imagination into one such institution suggests the futility of this solution. All that remains for the narrator is to move into the deceased father's flat and to take care of the child himself. The oddity of the situation and the ironic reversal of roles further emphasize the novel's basic premise, that the distinction between applicant and bureaucrat, abnormal and normal, is arbitrary. We all live out our lives within confines which are only partly visible.

Conditions appear far from unbearable in the protagonist's voluntary refuge: he enjoys protection from the hazards of the weather, he can walk up and down in his room to his heart's content, food is plentiful, sufficient information reaches him through the window about the outside world, and occasional visits by a flat-chested, deaf-mute, agile gypsy girl even bring him the delights of passion. He could go on in this manner, happily for a life time, were

it not for an unexpected incident and for the realization that he is just as ineffective with the child as the parents were. His successor in the office visits him and now holds him responsible for the child's treatment, basing his charges on denunciations by the very people who caused the narrator to come here in the first place. Well recognizing that a like solution is untenable, the author has his narrator carry out this bizarre experiment only in his mind. The fantasy comes to a halt when he is ordered back to his office; there can be no question of not complying, disobedience would lead to the lunatic asylum, the place to which this society delegates its eccentrics.

In the meantime temporary custody is found for the boy with another of life's injured. Life continues for the narrator as before. Genuine problems seldom lend themselves to regulations. In most cases it is best not to do anything and to let things take their natural course. If there is any hope, it is, as in this case, in the gratuitous help of individuals.

In theme *A látogató* (The Visitor) is reminiscent of Chekhov's celebrated *Ward No 6*. The story's protagonist, doctor Ragin, advocates the acceptance of the existence of evil and a stoic attitude to the suffering it causes. Only when he himself falls a victim does doctor Ragin recognize his error of preaching non-resistance to evil. Konrád's narrator, in contrast, never had any illusions about either evil or its cures. His solution more closely resembles Dostoevsky's theory of collective responsibility or Camus' solidarity of individuals. The narrator's disinclination to judge further relates him to Camus' Merseault and Clamence. The emphasis on ethics rather than ideology makes this novel representative of Hungarian literature in the nineteen sixties.

Above all *A látogató* is remarkable for its language, style, and composition. The various stages of the plot — they take place mainly in the mind — blend skillfully and imperceptibly with the narrator's profuse commentaries and associations concerning the human condition, suffering, relationships, freedom, responsibility, good and evil. Thus, a case history and elements of an essay-novel are given a very concise structure and are combined in a small book of merely 272 pages.

Just as Konrád draws heavily upon his expertise as a sociologist, so does he draw his stylistic inspiration from the prose writers who were the subjects of his earlier critical writings. The book's many comparisons call to mind Gogol's *Dead Souls*, especially when they extend into digressions; they well convey the incongruous and absurd nature of things. The various techniques used by the exponents of the French *nouveau roman* are even more evident. In an earlier study of the *nouveau roman* (*A francia új regény*, Debrecen: Európa, 1967), Konrád speaks of the "literature of resignation" and here he deliberately borrows such devices as long descriptions and catalogues of objects in order to stress man's alienation from his oppressive environment. Curiously, the atmosphere of the novel at times recalls some poems by the outstanding Hungarian poet Attila József (1905-1937), for example the poems "Elegy," "Suburban Night," and "On the City's Fringe." The affinity is especially evident in the poet's evocative descriptions of the periphery of the capitalist metropolis; the laborer vegetates amidst abject poverty, he is alienated from his work, ruled by the machine, and breathes air which is contaminated by the smoke of factory chimneys.

Does the author imply an equation of past and present, in spite of the

substantial improvements in social justice and living standards? Such an interpretation of his message would be short-sighted. Konrád views the fact of the human condition in broader terms and shows little faith in progress.

György Konrád's first novel is, without doubt, one of the finest written in Hungary in the last twenty-five years. The various translations, scheduled to appear shortly, can hardly be expected to do justice to the linguistic wealth of the original prose-poem. (The English translation will be published in the United States by Brace-Harcourt early in 1974.)

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NATALIE SARRAUTE
Vous les entendez?
Paris: Gallimard, 1972. Pp. 223.

In her latest novel, *Vous les entendez?*, Nathalie Sarraute draws us down, once more, into the depths of the human mind, which she has explored so intensively now for over thirty years. The continuity of her work is remarkable, yet so is its variety, for each new novel explores a fresh aspect of those ever-changing, ambiguous relationships with others, which are as much the substance of our lives as of her novels. Technically, *Vous les entendez?* moves further in the direction which has become gradually more apparent in her last three novels. The narrative thread, never very strong and always subordinate, is here reduced to a single sequence, which is repeated time after time through the novel, and its variations reveal to us the characters and the changes in their relationships.

Two men sit quietly smoking after dinner, when, from upstairs, the sound of laughter floats down to them. For the guest it is the innocent laughter of carefree youth, but for the host it is the mocking laughter of his own children, provoked by an incident earlier in the evening when the guest took from the mantelpiece, a pre-columbian statue of a mythical beast and placing it on the table, began to examine and admire. Their father knows that the children are now laughing at him and his guest and at their idea of Art and good taste.