

A brilliant first novel about human refuse in Budapest

The Case Worker

By George Konrád.

Translated by Paul Aston.

A Helen and Kurt Wolff Book.

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Book Review

By IRVING HOWE

Beneath the lowest rung of society live the speechless. They are the broken and deranged, the flotsam and the lumps, all those helpless people who have signed a separate peace with reality and now choose not to confront regulations, skills, responsibilities. The hierarchy of class crushes them, but they do not form part of it. They are the waste of modern life, and they are kept going, and kept down, by agents of the state whom we call social workers.

Modern literature has noticed them not as "cases" but as creatures. They appear as tragic buffoons in Dostoevsky, rasping comic voices in Céline, grotesques in Nathanael West's "Miss Lonelyhearts," stumps of life in Hubert Selby's "Last Exit to Brooklyn." But never, to my knowledge, have they been evoked with such intimate authority and grating clarity as in "The Case Worker," a brilliant first novel by a new writer from Hungary. With this one book George Konrád, himself a social worker in Budapest, strides to the forefront of contemporary European literature.

Because it is an original book, one grasps at straws of comparison in order to stake out its originality. The claustrophobic atmosphere of unfeeling bureaucracy and torpid streets — a faint echo of Kafka? The bizarre gaieties of the deformed — perhaps like Grass? A fixation upon physical detail and sensory assault

— doesn't it remind one of Smollett? Such comparisons come to mind only to be dismissed: Konrád speaks in his own voice.

He speaks as a case worker, a fairly decent and competent bureaucrat whose job it is to record the pleas, the lies, the revelations of his "clients" and then send them to some home, or to another office, or back to the street. A humane man, he is also a policeman regulating "the traffic of suffering." Who can cope with the battalions of misfits, the regiments of victims? "My interrogations make me think of a sur-

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geon who sews up his incision without removing the tumor." Something lies imbedded in the nature of things that is radically terrible, not so much evil in purpose or end, as gratuitously malformed. The case worker does his job in Communist Budapest, but except for the absence of drugs, it seems very much like capitalist Manhattan.

The narrator makes no accusations and places no blame. He speaks in a rhetoric of dispassionate grief. He is not indignant: who can imagine these shattered "clients" being stirred to revolt? He is not sentimental: who can suppose them to be models of innocence or morally admirable? They stink, they cheat, they lie — quite like successful people. Thrust into the endless web of their troubles, the case worker is shaken, implicated, drawn to their fumbling, stained by their need. He must record everything, because he is "a burden bearer without illusions, specifically of the complaining type."

"The Case Worker" is constructed as a chain of vignettes, quite as if the narrator were thumbing through his files and stopping at an especially vivid or wretched case. There is the old man "standing on a chair with his pants down, he is blowing kisses out of the window"; mistaken for a common exhibitionist, he is freed on the case worker's recommendation, and the next day he strangles a child who had run away from home. There is the asthmatic widow who can't breathe at night, but has never been so happy as with her "half-witted son . . . in the darkness of the room" where he pounds his drums for entertainment. There is the senile couple: "both of them have false teeth, and after depositing them in glasses of water for the night, they shout lisped insults at each other." There is the apartment of another client: "A black lace brassiere hung from the window fastening; in a corner two stringless tennis racquets, on a shelf an alcohol stove, an illustrated horoscope, some old lottery tickets with a rubber band around them, and a cheese bell with two white mice inside." There are, at doorways, "unwashed milk bottles . . . tattered boots." And everywhere,



"the smell of poverty, that yellow star."

"The Case Worker" offers rather little of such traditional novelistic materials as story and characterization. It has a plot of sorts, with the narrator becoming involved with an idiot 6-year-old child whose parents have killed themselves. The case worker abandons his job and family, moves into a moldy room with the child, cleans it, feeds it, plays with it. "This child," barely able to communicate its desires and reeking of urine, "has become my fate."

What is the case worker searching for? Not solidarity with the oppressed, nor any response that can be socially defined. He has been seized by a kind of metaphysical vision, a persuasion of interchangeability among men. "I search for my fellow man, always certain that the chosen one, my brother, is the one who happens to be coming toward me." This quest, for the bottom condition of life fails, as it must, and at the end he is again a case worker, almost adjusted, regulating "the traffic of suffering."

It is a powerful book, and it gains its power from Konrád's gift for the vignette, the suddenly snapped picture, as if taken through a slightly over-focused camera. The graphic prose carries one from paragraph to paragraph, with no expectation of pleasure or accumulation of suspense, yet a need to share in the fated jour-

ney of a mind seeking to reach its limits.

Necessarily, there are losses in this kind of fiction, and the very success of this novel helps to define them. The vignette, the prose snapshot, the virtuoso passage cannot yield us that experience of a sustained narrative that Lionel Trilling has described as "being held spellbound, momentarily forgetful of oneself, concerned with the fate of a person who is not oneself but who also, by reason of the spell that is being cast, is oneself, his conduct and his destiny bearing upon the reader's own." No; in reading "The Case Worker" we are not held spellbound, we are not forgetful of ourselves, since the author is trying for other effects—the effects of a kind of ratiocinative blow, almost a cringing before the extreme possibilities of existence. But what saves the book from mere shock is that Konrád believes overwhelmingly in the moral significance of other people's experience, and writes out of the conviction that the world, no matter how terrible, is still the substance of our days.

The materials of this book are of a kind that in recent years have often become the special property of documentary movies—we have even been told that the old-fashioned printed word cannot match the film for vividness. But "The Case Worker" shows, if anyone doubts it, that language remains the greatest of human powers, with unrivaled capacities for evocation, parallel and echo. A notable debut, a remarkable achievement, and a vindication of the word. ■