

Non Videri Sed Esse: *Folke Leander (1910–1981)*

C L A E S G . R Y N

Modern Age is happy to make available to its readers Professor Claes G. Ryn's assessive tribute to the late Folke Leander, the Swedish philosopher and teacher whose writings and espousal of the American New Humanism constitute an important interpretive examination of the ideas of that movement. In his own philosophy, scholarship, and teaching, Leander stressed both the necessity and the acceptance of man's moral responsibility. Because of his unorthodox approach and positions he was doubtlessly penalized in his own professional career by the progressivist and liberal academic establishment in his own country. But his courage of principle and his faith in his mission, constant and consistent to the end, imbue his work and thought with centrality and value and prove that a reigning orthodoxy of enlightenment is not as unchallenged or as invulnerable as its spokesmen presume it is.

A SWEDE BY BIRTH and residence, Dr. Folke Leander was truly a cosmopolitan philosopher. His thought ranged widely in the fields of ethics, aesthetics, and logic. Fluent in classical languages and in seven modern languages, he was a man of genuine learning and of penetrating, independent mind. His thought passed effortlessly across national borders and historical periods. Leander was strongly attached to the classical and Judaeo-Christian traditions of humanism. He dedicated himself to their reinvigoration and development with reference to the best in modernity. His orientation ran counter to the predominant intellectual currents in his own country and his own time and earned him much opposition. But unfair criticism, lack of encouragement, and even isolation did not embitter him or make him lose interest in his work. Unlike most men, he was not dependent on the praise and support of others. Although a man of modesty in the classical

sense, he had confidence in his own judgment. He found the only scholarly satisfaction he needed in the discovery of truth itself. And as a man of family and a beloved teacher he did not lack sources of personal warmth.

Leander was the son of a well-known professor of semitics. Swedish culture at its best exposed him early to other national cultures and historical periods. At a young age he sensed the sharpening tensions within both Western society and his own country. As a university student he felt the necessity of studying broadly and deeply. The various academic degrees and other credentials that he acquired were not so much requirements for a career in scholarship as the by-product of a need to make sense of his own life and times. For long, Leander was primarily attracted to the study of literature. Although philosophy emerged as his main area of academic expertise, his literary interests remained strong throughout his life. In spite of excursions into various disciplines and extensive reading outside of the prescribed curriculum, Leander finished a doctorate in philosophy several years younger than most who completed a Ph.D. in those days.

The intellectual environment in which Leander studied philosophy had been shaped in large part by the Swedish philosophers Hägerström and Phalén and was increasingly imbued with the ideas of Bertrand Russell. It became more and more apparent to Leander that, in this climate of mathematically oriented naturalism and positivism, the central questions of human existence were being addressed inadequately or not at all. A decisive influence on his intellectual development was to be his discovery in the early 1930's of Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More. For the rest of his life, during which he would study with care the leading philosophers of his own time and of the past, he would have a special admiration for their

work. Babbitt and More were not professional, technical philosophers and did not always express themselves systematically and with precision. Yet, their writings were based on immense humane learning and exhibited a profound grasp of life's central questions, especially as these relate to ethics. Leander was drawn to their notion of a transcendent ethical will as the ultimate source and guarantee of goodness, indirectly also of beauty and truth. He would feel an ever growing admiration for Babbitt's understanding of the relationship between will and imagination. Babbitt's concept of the moral imagination seemed to Leander an original and highly significant synthesis of classical and modern aesthetics. The concept joins the modern notion of a creative imagination to elements of the classical idea of imitation. Virtually alone among leading thinkers of his day, Babbitt had diagnosed the central problem facing modern civilization, a general dissipation of moral character inspired by corruption of the imagination. While most of the technical philosophers fiddled, Babbitt held the key to a restoration of Western life and letters. Leander came to see his own extensive studies of philosophers of the past and present as an effort to explicate, develop, and supplement the central wisdom of Babbitt and More. Their position needed strengthening most of all in the understanding of the nature of reason.

Leander started to pursue these interests systematically in his doctoral dissertation. Both his subject and his approach were to earn him the intense and lasting opposition of the Swedish philosophers. The academic orthodoxy they represented has been strictly enforced to the present day. Leander was most fortunate to have as his doctoral sponsor a broad-minded and tolerant German philosopher, Ernst Cassirer (1874-1945). The latter had left his Nazified home country for Oxford in 1933 and had accepted a personal chair at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden in 1935. By implication, Leander's *Humanism and Naturalism: A Comparative Study of Ernest Seillière, Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More* (1937), with its sympathetic treatment of the American New Humanism, was critical of elements in Cas-

sirer's own philosophy, which was similar in some respects to that of Russell. Still, Cassirer's view of the book went contrary to the opinions of the Swedish philosophers. He found Leander's study to be an insightful and original analysis. Leander had provided very fruitful ideas for interpreting a new and complex intellectual and cultural movement. Cassirer's favorable assessment ran parallel to that of men of prominence abroad. In the United States one of Babbitt's sharpest critics, Arthur Lovejoy, concluded his review of *Humanism and Naturalism* by calling it "a learned and *gedankenreich* volume."¹ As late as 1956 Austin Warren wrote of the same book that it had remained "the most philosophically able work" on the ideas of the New Humanism.² In France the book was treated extensively and respectfully by Henri Peyre. It was praised profusely by Ernest Seillière in spite of the fact that he was the target of criticism in its pages.³ It seems not to have occurred to the Swedish philosophers to question their own judgment.

It might be mentioned that Leander has not been the only Swedish academic to admire Babbitt and More. Indeed, several years before he started work on *Humanism and Naturalism*, More had been proposed for the Nobel Prize in literature by the literary historian Fredrik Böök. Since then, other academics, especially in the field of literature, have been influenced by the two Americans. Today this tradition survives in one of Sweden's most well-known and widely read authors, the Roman Catholic literary historian and novelist Sven Stolpe.⁴

Leander spent most of 1937 in the United States, primarily at the University of Wisconsin, studying at close range the philosophy of pragmatism that appeared to be the main intellectual alternative to the New Humanism in the 1930's. Not yet thirty years old, Leander published his second book, *The Philosophy of John Dewey* (1939). Here he seeks to do justice to Dewey's pragmatism, but he also criticizes his naturalism and his failure to take systematic account of that element in man's moral and theoretical life which transcends change. In spite of its criticism of Dewey, Leander's book received high praise even among the followers of

Dewey. In *The Journal of Philosophy*, its editor, Herbert W. Schneider, called the book "an exceptionally conscientious and subtle exposition"; and in a letter he referred to it as the best criticism of Dewey with which he was familiar.⁵ Dewey himself praised Leander's "marked power of philosophical insight" and called him a man of "unusual capacity."⁶ Another admiring reader was the young Robert Nisbet.⁷ During his year in the United States, Leander also met Paul Elmer More, who was then dying.⁸ He made the acquaintance of some of Babbitt's and More's disciples. He lectured and contributed articles to *The American Scholar* and *The American Review*.⁹

With the strong support of Cassirer, Leander was made a *docent* of Philosophy at the University of Gothenburg, an appointment with limited tenure that he kept for seven years. While holding this position he wrote a number of books and other studies, most of them in Swedish. They gave ample evidence of his familiarity with German, Italian, French, and Anglo-Saxon philosophy. Besides ethics, Leander went deeply into problems of logic and aesthetics, including the theory of language. In all of these areas he departed from the ideas prevailing in his intellectual environment. Leander published a study in German, *Lessing als ästhetischer Denker* (1942). In *Några språkteoretiska grundfrågor* (*Some Basic Questions of Language* [1943]), which shows the influence of Benedetto Croce, he argues that conventions of language and conventionally separated "symbolic forms" (Cassirer) are unified in the end by the aesthetic need of expression. This work has been studied even outside of Sweden and has been praised in print by Professor Eugenio Coseriu.¹⁰ Leander's most ambitious volume of this period was *Estetik och kunskapsteori* (*Aesthetics and the Theory of Knowledge*), which was completed in 1944 but not published until 1950. Here Leander argues at length that all philosophical knowledge is preceded by a non-conceptual, intuitive synthesis of reality. Philosophical reason raises immediate experience of life into conceptual awareness and is thus dependent on the prior work of intuition.

Early in his academic career Leander knew that he would not be given serious consideration for appointment to one of the handful of professorial chairs available in the four Swedish universities. In 1941 his main supporter, Cassirer, left Sweden, with its dangerous proximity to Hitler's Germany, to take a position at Yale University. (The war dashed Cassirer's hope of returning to Sweden in a couple of years, and he died in the United States in 1945.) In 1946 a chair in Philosophy at Uppsala University was to be filled. The selection committee had no choice but to pronounce Leander qualified for the post, but he was passed over for a representative of the reigning orthodoxy.

Another example of appreciation abroad may be cited. After Cassirer's coming to the United States a volume in the series *Library of Living Philosophers* was to be devoted to his work. The contributors were selected in consultation with Cassirer. Partly because of his almost six years in Sweden, several Swedish philosophers had studied and written about Cassirer's work. But only one of them was invited to participate in this volume: Folke Leander.¹¹

In 1946 Leander took a position as *lektor* of Philosophy and Literature in a Gymnasium in Norrköping. Lektorates were then much sought-after positions similar to college professorships in the United States. Leander's new position meant much less time for concentrated research and writing, but it was to bring to full fruition an extraordinary career of teaching. The wisdom and humaneness of Leander's scholarly insights lent themselves to engrossing lectures. He taught the central lessons of the classical and Judeo-Christian traditions not through abstract discourse but by letting ideas come alive in literary illustrations and other concrete examples. He made his students see that to be exposed to the great ideas and literary works of the past is to understand better oneself and one's own period in history. A central theme of Leander's teaching in both philosophy and literature was to expose various types of evasion of moral responsibility, as in the lower forms of romanticism. Decadent romanticism is inspired by a chronic longing to escape from

the burdensome obligations of the here and now to a vaguely dreamt-of self-realization through uninhibited freedom. Leander showed how this escapist *Wanderlust* is easily transformed into the *Marschieren* of the tyrannical personality and political regime. A legendary teacher with imposing academic credentials, he somehow managed to get away with virtually ignoring the official teaching plans handed down from Stockholm by "progressive" educational bureaucrats. The admiration and affection of students followed him when he retired in 1975. To honor him on his seventieth birthday former students arranged for the publication of a new edition of his book on romanticism, first published in 1944.¹²

Leander spent another year in the United States in 1954–1955. A study called *Irving Babbitt and Benedetto Croce: The Philosophical Basis of the New Humanism in American Criticism* was published in Sweden in 1954.¹³ Of his other writings in English, readers of *Modern Age* may remember an essay on "Irving Babbitt and the Aestheticians" in 1960.¹⁴ Leander knew well that Babbitt and More had been poorly understood in the United States and that they and many of their followers had suffered much unfairness and even persecution. He deplored the state of intellectual culture that would prevent Americans from recognizing the true significance of two great men. Among those who did hold Babbitt and More in high esteem and who read Leander's writings on them with appreciation were Russell Kirk, Peter Viereck, Austin Warren, and Richard M. Weaver.

The continuity of Leander's scholarship is evident from his short but important monograph on the central philosophical concept in Babbitt and More, *The Inner Check* (London, 1974), for which Russell Kirk wrote a Foreword. In this book, concentrating on More's "Definitions of Dualism," Leander brought to a conclusion perhaps the most important aspect of the interpretative effort which he felt had reached only a tentative conclusion in *Humanism and Naturalism*. In *The Inner Check* Leander writes with the clarity and authority of a man who has fully mastered his subject. He permanently lays to

rest some old and persistent misinterpretations of "the inner check," such as the notion that it signifies some merely negative power. He explicates the concept with philosophical precision, placing it within the great traditions in ethics. Kirk described Leander's approach as having "a cosmopolitan breadth of view unhappily rare today."¹⁵ In a review, the philosopher Robert Caponigri wrote of *The Inner Check* that "a sense of well-being and refreshment comes over one on perusing this little volume. . . . One breathes again the air of Socrates, of Plato, of Aristotle and the great moralists."¹⁶ Unfortunately, this treatise was published in a small, semi-private edition that seems never to have been properly distributed by the publisher. The text of *The Inner Check* had been extracted by Leander from a much larger manuscript on Paul Elmer More for which he did not expect to find a publisher in the prevailing philosophical climate.

In retirement Leander continued to work on other projects. Only a few months before his death, and in declining health, he helped to complete the first draft of a book manuscript which he was co-authoring with this writer dealing broadly with the problem of knowledge and examining in particular the contributions of Babbitt and Croce.

In historical periods threatening the fabric of civilization it falls to men of exceptional insight, dedication, and perseverance to preserve for others to come the continuity in man's quest for truth. This can be a wearing task, for although the spirit of decadence is usually gross and crude, it is quick to recognize and strike out against irritants to its own bloated self-esteem and sore conscience. During his life Leander had to contend with this spirit. But he had the intellectual and moral strength to continue his work for its own sake. And it is likely that when the Swedish philosophers who enjoyed recognition and lofty academic positions are names of the past, Folke Leander's writings will be studied and appreciated. Contributing substantially to the philosophical renaissance that must eventually come in the Western world, he, the outsider, may help to redeem the philosophical heritage of his own country.

¹*Modern Language Notes*, LIV (1939), 372-374.
²*New England Saints* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1956), 191. ³See Henri Peyre's review of *Humanism and Naturalism* in *Mercure de France*, XLVIII (1937), 575-579; and Ernest Seillière's review of the same book in *Journal des Débats*, February 21, 1937. So impressed by the book was Seillière that he personally translated over half of it into French. ⁴Sven Stolpe acknowledges his indebtedness to Babbitt in the Foreword to the first volume of his multivolume work, *Svenska folkets litteraturhistoria* (*The Literary History of the Swedish People*) (Stockholm: Askild och Kärnekull, 1972-). ⁵XXXVI (1939), 586-587 and letter to Folke Leander, March 1, 1940. A review by Max Otto is in *The Philosophical Review*, XLIX (1940), 262-264. ⁶Letter to Sverige-Amerikastiftelsen (The Swedish-American Foundation), Stockholm, April, 1939. ⁷Letter from Robert Nisbet to Folke Leander, May 2, 1955. ⁸See Arthur Hazard Dakin, *Paul Elmer More* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960), 378. ⁹See Folke Leander, "More—Puritan à Rebours," *The American Scholar*, 1938, 438-453; "The Materialistic and the

Humanistic Interpretations of History," *The American Review*, IX (1937), 380-406; "John Dewey and the Classical Tradition," *The American Review*, IX (1937), 504-527. ¹⁰See his *Sincronía, Diacronía e Historia* (Montevideo: Universidad de la Republica, 1958), 36. ¹¹See Folke Leander, "Further Problems Suggested by the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms," in Paul Arthur Schilpp, ed., *The Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer* (Evanston: The Library of Living Philosophers, 1949), 337-357. Folke Leander's chapter was revised for the much later German edition of this book, Paul Arthur Schilpp, ed., *Ernst Cassirer* (Berlin: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1966). ¹²*Romantik och moral*, with an Introduction by Claes G. Ryn (Borås: CETE Förlag, 1980). ¹³In *Göteborgsstudier i litteraturhistoria tillägnade Sverker Ek* (*Gothenburg Studies in Literary History in Honor of Sverker Ek*) (Göteborg: Elanders Boktryckeri, 1954), 147-168. ¹⁴VI (1960), No. 4. ¹⁵Foreword to Folke Leander, *The Inner Check* (London: Edward Wright, 1974). ¹⁶"P. E. More and Benedetto Croce," *The University Bookman*, XV (1975), 60-62.