

The Problem of Romanticism

Romantik och moral, by Folke Leander, with an introduction by Claes G. Ryn, Borås, Sweden: CETE Bokförlag, 1980. 94 pp. \$8.00.

FOLKE LEANDER'S death in August 1981 ended a remarkable philosophical career. For almost half a century Leander had been dealing perceptively with the central intellectual problems of his time. Experiencing in his native Sweden the opposition and the isolation of the dissenting scholar, he continued to contribute to the international scholarly discussion. He wrote much on aesthetics, on epistemology, and on ethics. In the United States, Leander is best known as a skillful explicator of Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More. Although primarily a philosopher, he was also a close student of literature. Especially in his teaching, but also in his writing, he turned his eye to literary examples of certain flawed forms of modern romanticism. To his dualistic understanding of man, inspired by ancient and Christian thought and by neohumanism, the romantic belief in human goodness and limitless freedom appeared both philosophically inaccurate and morally dangerous.

To honor Leander on his seventieth birthday in 1980, a few of his friends and former students took the initiative to publish a new edition of his short study of Swedish literary romanticism, which first appeared in 1944 under the title *Nya synpunkter på romantiken* [New views on romanticism]. The 1980 edition carries the title *Romantik och moral* [Romanticism and morals]. It contains a short retrospective essay by Leander and a foreword and a bibliography by Professor Claes G. Ryn. The initiative is laudable, since the analysis it provides applies to contemporary literature as well. Although available only in Swedish and using Swedish writing for illustrations, Leander's concepts for analyzing romanticism are applicable to any national poetry.

Leander sees at the heart of the inferior (or "lower") forms of romanticism an inversion of the ancient and Christian notion that man should strive for virtue, humility, and self-restraint instead of indulging indiscriminately his ego. The moral and the psychological effects of the inversion are summarized by Leander in the following way: "The Christian man often found himself happier than expected and almost always happier than he deserved. The de-Christianized man, however, expecting and demanding much of life, invariably gets disappointed. As he is not aware of any great faults in himself, he has to blame others, the environment, the society." But for all his criticism Leander does not denounce romanticism of every kind. He distinguishes between an inferior and a superior (or "higher") form of romanticism, claiming that the latter not only constitutes a deepening of the imagination but also is compatible with high moral and intellectual standards. The principle of "higher" romanticism is: "Become what thou art." We should try our utmost to realize our own individuality, insofar as it is indistinguishable from our universal humanity. Leander's discussion of Swedish poetry develops the criterion by which to discern "higher" romanticism. Like T.S. Eliot, Leander seeks "the assertion of order and discipline in literary taste." But his criterion of "higher" romanticism is not abstract or didactic but concerns the quality of experience intrinsic to the poems themselves. "Lower" romanticism is an invitation to irresponsible or merely trivial experience, whereas "higher" romanticism seeks the elevated experience of morally ordered life. Leander's method is to let the poems illumine the criterion, and vice versa.

Swedish literary life is often under the spell of foreign aesthetic and intellectual currents. In the early nineteenth century it was heavily influenced by European, and primarily German, romanticism. Many a restless, inconstant imagination fell victim to "lower" romanticism. Among them was, at least temporarily, August Strindberg, the playwright, novelist, and poet. In

an early prose story, "De lycksaliges ö" [The island of the blissful], he expressed the longing for a dreamland: "We have regained the paradise, but a paradise rid of the tree of knowledge. Thus we cannot sin, even if we wanted to." To Strindberg, as earlier to Rousseau, the cause of human misery lies in civil institutions that have robbed man of his natural goodness and spontaneity. The early Verner von Heidenstam, a brilliant poet, novelist, and Nobel Prize winner, also began as a romantic adorer of the beautiful moment and of the *flux*. His dreamland was the Orient, which he rather inaccurately portrayed as a place of lovely carelessness, where "the working hour was a mere jest, and blissful as the ecstasy [was] men's rest." To Heidenstam's romantic imagination even the severe Islamic religion became a call to spontaneity and sensuality, a belief which Leander rightly calls "fantastic." When Heidenstam turned his eye from the Orient and depicted an ideal Nordic life, he found just another form of happy carelessness: "I love to lie lazy and free, burying all tiring thoughts in a giant snore," and so forth.

"Lower" romanticism at the same time appears as a disappointment with or hatred towards the need for reasoned, informed decisions, and as a bent towards unconscious or at least unreflective action. The former kind of decision is seen as painful, boring, and inhumane since it emerges as a result of the repression of human impulses. The novelist Selma Lagerlöf describes the heroine of *Gösta Berlings saga* [The story of Gösta Berling] as follows: "She could never surrender herself fully to anything. If she loved, or whatever she did, that other part of herself seemed to stand aloof, watching with a cold, mocking grin. She had been longing for a passion that might carry her away in a wild recklessness." The tendency to "stand aloof" is here portrayed as negative. The ability to become carried away is seen as a virtue.

Almost necessarily the romantic attitude

in its lower form brings with it a fascination with the changeable person. One example is the male hero in Selma Lagerlöf's novel — the charming but fickle drunkard-clergyman Gösta, who wields an almost demonic influence over his parish, especially over its women. Another romantic, the poet and social reformer C.J.L. Almqvist, admired the inconstant character. We read of one of his heroes, Richard Furumo: "A spirit of independence and freedom dominated his gestures; he always appeared in a different manner, never entirely the same. He often unexpectedly displayed a new side. He seemed brave when deference and quiet charm were expected from him, but soon enough he resumed his delicate, exquisite movements."

The antidote which Leander offers is classical in spirit in that it seems to respect the famous motto, *fastidium et electio sui*. But "higher" romanticism does not rely on rules, as did literary neoclassicism. To "higher" romanticism the human purpose that art should support is the full and self-determined but ethically responsible development of individuality, undertaken without the impediment of false convention. "Higher" romanticism contains an insight of enduring value, namely, the peculiarly romantic understanding of individuality. However, to "follow the law of one's being," to be true to oneself, is, rightly understood, compatible with a classical search for the universal, the ethical, the plausible, the representative, and the tasteful. Only a pursuit of the unique and the individual for their own sake threatens chaos and irresponsibility. The right and the value of developing personal talents has been well defended by the Swedish poet and historian E.G. Geijer. Seeing the higher potential of everything unique and individual, he wrote: "This is *my* liberalism: to let all things yield what they may yield! I know of no other."

— Reviewed by Carl Johan Ljungberg