The Regrettable Silence of Paul Elmer More

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I

PAUL ELMER MORE (1864-1937) once referred to himself as the most hated and least read author in America. No longer the most hated, but perhaps the least read would be a fair estimate of his current reputation. Since his death in 1937 there have been a number of books and articles treating his literary work, but none seems to have provoked the interest in his thought the authors had hoped they would. This is regrettable when what he stood for could help enrich today's conservative awakening.

During the first dozen years after his death most of what was written about More sought to sort out what had gotten lost about him in the "New Humanist" war of the early 'thirties which More had fought alongside his more famous ally, Irving Babbitt, against the "Progressives." These studies were largely reconstructive of More's special kind of classicism, and most were done in the confidence that More would go on being viewed as a major American critic. Stuart G. Brown, for example, writing about More's studies in American literature in the *Sewanee Review* of 1939, argues that More's ideas must be studied apart from "the abortive" movement in which they were ensnared. More, he asserts, was simply trying to find those universals in classic American literature which are present in the key pieces of any world literature and use them as building blocks for a sound American criticism.[1] David Soper, three years later in an article in *Religion in Life*, tries to establish More's religious position as one that, far from being reactionary, actually attempts to pave a middle way between mysticism and fideism on the one hand and, on the other, a mechanistic view of the universe fostered in the popular imagination by technological advances.[2]

In 1943, in an article in the *Sewanee Review*, J. Duncan-Spaeth reminisces about More, the personal friend and teacher. He describes how genuinely religious More was and that what he objected to in the idolatry of science was how it was eliminating religious reverence in education and public life. He notes that More's antipathy to post-Kantian Protestantism was not so much prejudice as it was a preoccupation with Platonism and the early Greek church fathers.[3]

A year later, in *Accent*, Horace Gregory does a retrospective on all More's *Shelburne Essays* and concludes that More's failure to reach the public was a compound of personal and stylistic choices. He points out that More's pessi-

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mism about technological progress went against the American spirit; that his views, drawing deeply from the wells of ancient and Oriental literature, made him seem remote; that his urbane prose gave the impression of his being affected and exclusive to a public bent on seeing everyone as equal; and that he lacked the imaginative equipment to understand twentieth-century poetic techniques.[4]

No major American critic gave more enduring attention to More than Austin Warren (1899-1986), whose assessments of More's accomplishments began even before More's death and extended well into the late 'sixties. Still, his articles about More, cogent as they are, were few and far between. One of them, "The 'New Humanism' Twenty Years After," in *Modern Age* (Winter 1958-1959), gives more attention to Babbitt than to More and stresses how T. S. Eliot and company are keeping alive the humanist "double discipline" of bonding aesthetics to the larger questions of existence.[5] Warren's earliest published estimate of More was in a 1928 review of *Christ the Word*, where he finds More's orthodoxy shaky, suspecting that More's idea of the Incarnation is mostly "the private satisfaction of a purely intellectual construct." He scores More for rejecting the full personhood of the Holy Spirit and finds his concept of "Catholicism" vague. Warren (correctly) sees More as a "spiritual empiricist" who rests his case for the truth of Christianity in personal experience. He just as incorrectly believes orthodoxy will rejoice over More's book.[6] It did not.

Forty years later Warren takes up More again as the case of a scholar seeking to live by his discoveries in literature and theology. More, he writes, was not interested so much in wisdom as in salvation. All his studies in Plato were, Warren argues, an invitation to the *practice* of moral philosophy, and he quotes Eliot's tribute to More, that all of "More's works are, in the deepest sense, his autobiography, ... the concentrated mind seeking God." Warren twits More's arrival at his "Catholicism" on Protestant principles, but reminds those who have seen More only through his antagonists' eyes that More was not a Puritan. Looking back at one of More's most admired collections of essays, *Aristocracy and Justice* (1915), Warren finds one of the clues to his failure to reach the public was in not distinguishing private property from finance capitalism. Warren errs, in my opinion, when he writes that More does not differentiate adequately between aristocracy and plutocracy, when the key point of More's title essay (and that of all More's other social works) is that *aristocracy* is always the aristocracy of mind and character.[7]

II

It was in the 'fifties that lengthier studies began to appear. Lynn Harold Hough, decidedly an admirer of More, makes him the climactic chapter in a book called *Great Humanists* (1952); Russell Kirk places More solidly in the Burkean tradition in *The Conservative Mind* (1952); Peter Viereck huddles him together with Babbitt in *Conservatism* (1956); W. D. Geoghegan attacks him in *Platonism in Recent Religious Thought* (1958); Robert M. Davies does a well-balanced study of More's humanism in *The Humanism of Paul Elmer More* (1958); and Arthur H. Dakin, who had brought out *A Paul Elmer More Miscellany* in 1950, closes the period in 1960 with the one biography we have of More. It should be added that in 1954 More gets studied in a monograph written by the Swedish philosopher Folke Leander (of whom more below),[8] and in a perceptive article by Joan Harding in the *Contemporary Review*.[9] Only two of these writers, Kirk and Viereck, see More as a fountain from which the new conservative political movement can draw. The others are retrospective efforts to understand what made More both special

and especially difficult to appreciate in the movement of which he had been a leading, but suddenly forgotten, leader. The Dakin biography, through its generous use of More's correspondence and the recollections of friends, allows the reader to see More at home, in the classroom, among his friends, and in the private throes of personal doubt. The letters and conversations provide subtle nuances to his public utterance, but offer few clues to his diminishing popularity.[10]

Davies's book is a carefully crafted full-length study of More's labors, and if one is seeking for a wholly sympathetic defense of More, *The Humanism of Paul Elmer More* is the place to go. It could serve almost as a "Barnes Notes" for all of the major Morean ideas, how they fuse together and where they come out, but it does not make clear how these ideas failed to reach More's contemporaries.[11] Surprisingly, it is the usually wholly enthusiastic Lynn Hough, in his study of More in *Great Humanists*, who takes up these difficulties. After doing very much what Davies does—showing what the Morean mission was about—Hough reveals how More boxed himself into a private vocabulary, using the word "metaphysics," for example, to mean any ontological position he opposes, but habitually of philosophical systemization of any sort. More's "Demon of the Absolute" extended even to certain logical necessities, with the result that More junked reason itself just when he needed it. Hough suggests mildly that More should have been more skeptical of his skepticism. Hough could have added that the finality with which More clung to his dualism shows that More had not exorcised the absolute in his own thought.[12]

Acute as some of his observations are, Hough is still facing rearwards towards the battles over New Humanism. It never occurs to him, as it does to Kirk, that More is an exemplar of still another tradition than the Platonic, and that he fits neatly into the new conservative awakening as one of its Burkean progenitors.

III

The writer who deserves special consideration because of his lifelong interest in the New Humanists is the Swedish philosopher Folke Leander (1910-1981). After doing a comparative study of the work of More, Babbitt, and the French traditionalist Ernest Seillière for his Ph.D., Leander made a special trip to the United States in 1937 to interview More and do a study of the pragmatism of Dewey. In the course of the years Leander wrote a number of papers on the New Humanism, focusing especially on Babbitt, but bringing his life work to a close with a small booklet on More's concept of the Inner Check. In working out his own views Leander fell under the spell of the Italian idealist Benedetto Croce, and under this influence began to reinterpret More's failures as philosopher/critic. Leander never fully entered into More's religious convictions, although recognizing their importance to More, but preferred to see him as the old dualist of "The Definitions of Dualism" found in *The Shelburne Essays*, Volume VIII (1913). The central concern of Leander's doctoral dissertation was to show the superiority of the American humanist involvement, with its doctrine of ethical intuitionism, to European traditionalism. Leander believed Babbitt's and More's discovery of "the Higher Will" gave promise of providing a stable basis for literary judgment. This Higher Will was the will-to-good operative in all human consciousness, but obscured by bad education and popular equalitarianism. In the individual it is usually felt as a "negation" or "check" on impulse, hence a *frein vital* (a will to refrain). Leander says More moved from seeing this inner check as a sheer inhibition to a more positive force in his later years.[13]

The year after he was in the United

States Leander wrote an article for *The American Scholar* in which he showed More's transition from a non-theistic ethicism to Christianity. At first, Leander writes, More could only see ethical principles as "unimaginative projections of the facts of moral consciousness," but then realized as he grew intellectually that the Ideal Sphere was the face of a Personal God. He became more and more convinced that the human sense of purpose is an intuition of a basic directedness, or *telos*, at the heart of the universe itself. This intuition, or spiritual sensing, Leander asserts, while conceptually Platonic, is really a reawakening of More's childhood faith which at the end of his life he clothes in a richer, more humane form.[14] Whether there was anything in More's religious sensibility to make it describably Puritan is, in my view, questionable. What Leander is undoubtedly getting at is the rigorous moral ingredient in More's judgment of what he read, a judgment his enemies all too superficially called "Puritanical," something quite different from Puritanism.

There is little in Leander's assessment of More up to this point that is critically adverse to his subject, but thirty-seven years later Leander takes up More again in *The Inner Check: A Concept of Paul Elmer More With Reference to Benedetto Croce*, in which he sees More's central insight as a failure needing correction.[15] Between his earlier and later studies Leander had been studying Croce and saw in Croce's logic a way More could better have understood what he was trying to say. Struggling to iron out More's "paradox of dualism," Leander shows that in his Definition LXX More is on the edge of the solution to his paradox when he notes that whatever checks a man obeys in bringing order to himself are structures enabling him to assist in bringing harmony to the social order outside himself. In other words, the inner check is a will to civilization (Babbitt's phrase—and Croce's).[16]

It is at this point that Leander begins to assimilate More to Croce. It is only in Croce, Leander says, that More's idea of a spiritual hedonism is "combined with the idea of an ethical ultimate." Croce warns that there is no use arguing against philosophical naturalists that there are cases of moral action in which a care for pleasure and success do not exist. Rather, the proper question to ask is "Success for what purpose? ... Pleasure in what achievements?"[17] In the truly moral person the individual desires are metamorphosed in a will-to-civilization. The negative brakes in the moral life shock the ego into willing universal ends as one's own ends. What Croce is describing, says Leander, is what More means by "Platonic participation." In fact, Leander goes on, More's critics would have been less inclined to rebuff his notions had he seen his way to identifying the inner check with Plato's love of ideas. Leander even goes on to say (I think mistakenly) that More in his Christian years could have identified the inner check with the agape.[18]

It is on More's notion of intuition and reason that Leander brings the full weight of Croce's concepts to bear. Leander sees More's intellectual difficulties with the cul de sacs of logic as stemming from his dependence on William James's psychology, which is a causal concept of mind. Leander holds that More has no philosophy of mind whatever, since he limited his interests to ethical analysis; he failed to see the immanent teleology in every sort of mental activity.[19] More falls into his paradoxes of dualism by using a logic that doesn't apply in the fields of his interests. In trying to overcome the eristic of a reifying, pragmatic reason he rejects reason altogether and falls back on what he calls intuition to justify his insights. It is in Croce, Leander points out, that a different kind of logic, a dialectical logic, is developed that opens

religion, history, and the arts to the understanding. The "right sort of reason," Leander asserts, can grasp the dilemma of the One and the Many; More's dualism is "knowable" because it is immanent to consciousness. Plato's idea of participation, where the divine and the human share a common reality, is not "unthinkable," as More says, but as easily thinkable as our own awareness of being both a "better I" and a "worse I" at the same time, of being an indivisible identity that can rejoice and regret, change and stay the same simultaneously. There is a logic which finds the paradoxes of "becoming" the most natural thing in the world. What kept More from seeing this, Leander thinks, was his fear of admitting "multiplicity within the one" out of loyalty to a logic that had betrayed him. This logic, Leander adds, also deceived More into maintaining a false dichotomy between *spirit*, which More identifies solely with the moral conscience, and *mind*, which he associates with reasoning and the other activities of thought.[20]

It is obvious in all this that Leander is reading a pre-Christian More. More's dualism softened in his last years as his faith in the Incarnation tended to resolve the intellectual tensions of his purely Platonic years. He settled into a devotion to the Christian mysteries as a way of overcoming the annoyances of abstract thought. Leander misses all this. While there are glances in the direction of *The Religion of Plato* and *The Sceptical Approach to Religion* (and even occasional attempts to blend Christian teaching with the immanentism of Croce), Leander reveals no real appreciation for the other books of *The Greek Tradition*. Leander wants to perfect the More of 1913 and the "Definitions of Dualism," with the result that what he says More should have done (read Croce) misses the later direction of his thought. In fact, More's only contact with Croce's writings sent him packing in the other direction.[21] Croce is an absolute immanentist and is a total blank when it comes to the transcendencies of the Christian faith. More could never have read him.

But there were other Europeans he could have read. More, regrettably, appears never to have discovered in all his reading the Spiritualists of France. He could have gotten immense comradeship from the writings of Jules Lachelier, who saw every natural entity as the manifestation of a force spontaneously tending toward an end;[22] Leon Ollé-Laprune, who saw truth not as just that which the reason can recognize, but that which the whole moral person responsively embraces in a concrete act;[23] or perhaps, most decidedly a contemporary, Maurice Blondel, whose "philosophy of action" is a perfect parallel to More's insistence on beginning with inner intuition as the first step towards the awareness of the divine transcendence. Blondel, like More, focused on man's knowledge of his lack of self-sufficiency as pointing to what is beyond itself and as having an exigency for the supernatural. Blondel, too, dispenses with the notion that his contentions can be "proved" logically, and like More argues that obligation to the good arises from within, where the spirit meets the ideal and so is impelled to reshape the real. In comparison with More's doctrine that God through Christ is making a bid for human partnership in the task of redemption, Blondel believes God fulfills His own nature in working for the salvation of man.[24]

There are others, too, like Lucien Laberthonnière, who insists that the test of a philosophical truth is its capacity for being lived;[25] or German phenomenologists of value, like Max Scheler and Dietrich von Hildebrand, whose notion of the emotional apprehension of values could have shown More what he was trying to get at by "intuition."[26]

IV

Some serious studies, other than that of Leander, have appeared in the last thirty-five years or so. Francis Duggan, a professor at Santa Clara, who had contributed an article on More to *American Literature* in 1963,[27] wrote a full-length study of More's works for Twayne's United States Authors Series in 1966, presenting all of More's interests in a brief, but well balanced exposition which is not blind to More's shortcomings as a thinker. Duggan concludes that More's literary judgments are more serviceable to students of literature than More's religious views are to students of religion. The chief value of the literary studies, he believes, is that they exemplify the ideal of humanistic education and are truly introductions to a literary work, not substitutes for it. Duggan holds that if there is any truth in the dictum, "aesthetics depends on ethics," More is destined to be rediscovered.[28]

Daniel Aaron brought out an anthology of More's *Shelburne Essays on American Literature* in 1963;[29] Barrows Dunham and Stephen Tanner wrote articles on More in 1966 and 1971, respectively;[30] I presented a collection of his writings which concentrated on his theological and ethical studies in 1972, having also written an article for *Modern Age* three years previously.[31] Mention has already been made of Austin Warren's reflections in 1969 and Leander's book of 1974.

The last comprehensive study of More's literary criticism to date is that of Stephen Tanner: *Paul Elmer More: Literary Criticism as the History of Ideas* (1987). What is unique in Tanner's study is his emphasis on one of More's major, but less recognized, achievements, that of building a truly remarkable history of ideas out of the scattered and widely varying subject matter of his individual essays. Tanner notes the powerful continuity at work in More's intellectual career, primarily that of his dualism, the conviction that writers are obliged to take into account the way passions of the moment must be viewed against the backdrop of eternal law. Tanner, along with so many others before him, praises More for his integrity, literary scope, power of generalization, and even the prophetic aspect of some of his judgments. Like others as well Tanner believes that in the current reaction against antimimetic approaches to literature and the conservative surge in religion and politics, More should be increasingly relevant.[32]

The puzzle is that he continues not to be rediscovered.

V

Most of the reasons which the writers above have given for More's loss of standing in the literary world—his pessimism about technological progress, his inability to understand contemporary literary forms, his urbanity and remoteness, his private philosophical language, his failure to rise to a higher logic suitable to the humanities—make him only partly inaccessible. On the other hand his fundamental conviction that the universe is alive with purpose, that art cannot divorce itself from life, and that there are permanent moral standards link him strongly to the renaissance of conservatism of the last forty years and should more than balance out the negatives noted. Other writers, equally committed to the humanities, specialists in classical myth and medieval literature, skeptical about equalitarian democracy, and attached to tradition and natural law have survived and even flourish. One thinks of T. S. Eliot, G. K. Chesterton, and C. S. Lewis. Indeed, Lewis. One notices how this converted atheist has taken the reading world by storm. It must be granted that he writes in several different fields and genres and that his popular novels and children's stories open doors that More's books cannot reach. But central to his success is his power to attract a wide Christian following. Conservative

Christians, backed to the wall for over a century, were waiting for such a champion to articulate their beliefs.

While More was at Oxford in May 1933, he dined with Lewis who, he says in a letter to Christian Gauss, interested him "more than any other Oxonian" he had met for a long time, and that Lewis promised to send him a book detailing in disguised form the religious conversion he had undergone. The book was *The Pilgrim's Regress*, which More enjoyed immensely.[33] Later in the fall that same year More had luncheon with T. S. Eliot, and he asked Eliot what Lewis meant by "Mother Kirk" in the book and whether Lewis had become a Roman Catholic. A student who was present at the luncheon said he was sure Lewis had not, but went on to tell how one day, when several of the college's Fellows were in conversation, another burst in on them excitedly and asked if they had heard that Lewis had been seen in the college chapel and evidently had been going there for weeks without anyone knowing it. More writes:

> This brought out one of Eliot's sly little sarcastic digs: "It's quite apparent that if anybody in an Oxford college wishes to escape detection, the one place for him to go to is the chapel!"[34]

A year later, writing to Lewis, in response to Lewis's comments on his book *The Sceptical Approach to Religion*, More defends his opposition to the notion of an "Absolute" God by saying that to accept such an idea would force him to reject the sort of teleology on which he based his faith; which teleology, he explains, implies a limitation to the Agent's will. Without such a limitation, More goes on, we are left with "a static a-cosmos." He says what is needed is an "Ultimate," not an "Absolute"; meaning that what humans need is not so much an unsuffering God abstracted out of all touch with reality (in order to preserve His perfection), but a God "in whom the unsuffering element is absolutely in command, someone both infinite yet involved with human action, confessedly 'anthropomorphic.'"[35] There is no record of Lewis's reaction to this explanation.

Despite the fact that More's final mission was profoundly religious and what he wanted to leave to the world, he simply could not attract a strong Christian following. Contrary to Russell Kirk's estimate that he was the twentieth century's greatest apologist, and notwithstanding T. S. Eliot's enthusiasm for *The Greek Tradition*, More failed. Why? His Christianity was altogether too idiosyncratic for most Christians. Even his axial conviction that Chalcedon had got it right about the-two-natures-in-one-Person of Christ was based on an approach to the Christian faith that baffles most of those who try to appreciate him. If Jesus was indeed both God and man, by what process of thought do we arrive at that truth if the Gospel records are as unreliable as More says? Most believers cannot find a straight line from Plato's dualism to the Incarnation, even following More's argumentation. More advocated the continued use of the Apostles Creed in worship, but after his clause-by-clause analysis of it, one wonders why.[36] By contrast, Lewis is unabashedly orthodox; his core beliefs, what he labels "mere Christianity," have a power to bring Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, and even fringe believers together in a way that is the surprise of divided Christendom. For this reason his followers want to read *everything* he wrote, not just his theological books. G.K. Chesterton has succeeded in the same way.

Serviceable as More's social and political values might be for our time, they remain bottled up in a Christianity incomprehensible to many would-be conservative supporters. There is no resuscitation for views embedded in a faith too exotic to be intelligible and too conditional to be authoritative.

1. "Toward an American Tradition: Paul Elmer More as Critic," *Sewanee Review*, Vol. 47, No. 4 (Oct.-Dec. 1939), 476-97. **2.** "The Via Media of Paul Elmer More," *Religion in Life*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (Summer 1942), 373-83. **3.** "Conversations with Paul Elmer More," *Sewanee Review*, Vol. 51 (1943), 532-45. **4.** "On Paul Elmer More and His Shelburne Essays," *Accent*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (Spring 1944), 140-49. **5.** Page 86. **6.** "Mr. More Discovers Christianity," *Sewanee Review*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (Apr. 1928), 246-50. **7.** "Paul Elmer More: A Critic in Search of Wisdom," *Southern Review*, New Series, Vol. 5, No. 4 (Oct. 1969), 1091-1111. **8.** *Irving Babbitt and Benedetto Croce: The Philosophical Basis of the New Humanism in American Criticism* (bound pamphlet of pp. 147-68 of Särtryck Ur, Göteborgsstudier, I Litteraturhistoria, Tillägnade Sverkerek; "1954" in red ink, penned by author on cover). **9.** "An American Thinker," *Contemporary Review*, Vol. 185, No. 1057 (Jan. 1954), 34-39. **10.** *Paul Elmer More* (Princeton, 1960). **11.** New York, 1958. **12.** *Great Humanists* (New York and Nashville, 1952), 191, 196, 201, 212. **13.** *Humanism and Naturalism: A Comparative Study of Ernest Seillière, Irving Babbitt, and Paul Elmer More* (Göteburg, 1937), 145, 147, 157. **14.** "More-'Puritan à Rebours'," *American Scholar*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (Autumn 1938), 438-53. **15.** Foreword by Russell Kirk (London, 1974), 24. **16.** *Ibid.*, 24-25. **17.** *Ibid.* **18.** *Ibid.*, 34-35. **19.** *Ibid.*, 45-46, 48-49. **20.** *Ibid.*, 50-54, 58-59. **21.** Paul Elmer More, *The Demon of the Absolute*, New Shelburne Essays, Vol. I (Princeton, 1928), 29-31. **22.** Jules Lachelier (1832-1918), *Oeuvres*, 2 vols. (1933). **23.** Leon Ollé-Laprune (1839-1898), *e.g., Croyance Religieuse et croyance intellectuelle* (Paris, 1908). **24.** Maurice Blondel (1861-1949), *L'Action* (1893), trans. Olivia Blanchette (Notre Dame, 1984). **25.** Lucien Laberthonnière (1860-1932), e.g., *Esquisse d'une philosophie personnaliste* (Paris, 1942).**26.** Max Scheler (1874-1928), *Formalism in Ethics and Non-Formal Ethics of Values: A New Attempt Toward the Foundation of an Ethical Personalism*, trans. Manfred S. Frings and Roger L. Funk (Evanston, 1973) and Dietrich von Hildebrand (1889-1977), *Christian Ethics* (New York, 1953). **27.** "Paul Elmer More and the New England Tradition," *American Literature*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (Jan. 1963), 542-61. **28.** *Paul Elmer More* (New York, 1966), 143, 144, 147, 148. **29.** *Paul Elmer More's Shelburne Essays on American Literature* (New York, 1963). **30.** Barrows Dunham, "Paul Elmer More," *Massachusetts Review*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Winter 1966), 157-60 and Stephen Tanner, "T. S. Eliot and Paul Elmer More on Tradition," *English Language Notes*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (Mar. 1971), 211-15. **31.** *The Essential Paul Elmer More* (New Rochelle, 1972) and "Paul Elmer More and the Redemption of History," *Modern Age*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (Summer 1969), 277-88. **32.** *Paul Elmer More: Literary Criticism as the History of Ideas* (Provo, Utah, 1987), 223-38. **33.** Quoted in Dakin, *Paul Elmer More*, 327. **34.** Letter to A. H. Dakin, Jr., December 7, 1933, quoted in Dakin, 332. **35.** Letter to Clive Staples Lewis, December 29, 1934, quoted in Dakin, 358-60. **36.** See his *The Catholic Faith* (Princeton, 1931), 79-118.