

■ Anders Olsson. *Gunnar Ekelöf: Litterära profiler*. Stockholm: Natur och Kultur, 1997. Pp. 160.

In 1983 the poet and critic Anders Olsson published his dissertation *Ekelöfs nej* (Ekelöf's No) establishing himself thereby as one of the premier Ekelöf critics. Unlike other Ekelöf specialists such as Bengt Landgren and Pär Hellström of Uppsala University, both of whom have focussed on the literary-historical context of Ekelöf's work, Olsson concentrated almost exclusively on a close reading of the poetic text, with Ekelöf's secular and atheistic mysticism and the biographical-psychoanalytical background providing the context. The present work, written for Natur och Kultur's series "Litterära profiler" (Literary Profiles), is conceived along very similar lines.

In an introductory chapter, Olsson traces the broad outlines of Ekelöf's traumatic childhood: the syphilis and mental decline of his father, the indifference and coldness of his mother, and the only son's sense of isolation, loss, and estrangement. From such biographical contours, all of which are familiar to us from Carl Olov Sommar's 1989 biography, Olsson in a kind of psychoanalytical leap derives the great themes which dominate Ekelöf's work and which thus, in his view, have the value of compensatory mechanisms: the notion of the Virgin as compensation for the hated and traitorous mother or the poet's identification with Lucifer/Satan as tribute to the vegetative and deranged but beloved father. In a similarly simplistic psychoanalytical vein, Olsson sees Ekelöf's deep affinity for French literature as a protest against the pro-Nazi stance of his stepfather. Hamlet needless to say figures prominently in Olsson's presentation of Ekelöf's strained family relationships.

In the body of his study, Olsson gives the reader an overview of the great themes or motifs of Ekelöf's poetry: melancholy, dreams, places, the anti-poetic mix of high and low genres, blindness and mystic vision, the Virgin, and the microcosm-macrocosm theme of the *homo maximus* (Ekelöf's closest correlate by his own admission being Swedenborg).

In spite of the considerable merit in Olsson's thematic and largely synchronic approach, the reader fails to gain much insight into the evolution of Ekelöf's work over time; into the distinctiveness of the poet's various poetry collections—collections which Ekelöf insisted upon composing as unique atmospheric unities—not to mention into such issues as Ekelöf's literary-historical importance, his vast and highly personal borrowings from other artists, or his reception by the reading public or by professional critics. Olsson's emphasis on Ekelöf's themes and images, on his *Individualsymbole* (personal as opposed to collective symbols: Christian Kellerer) may well be warranted by the poet's enormous faithfulness over the years to his own personal mythology, something that Ekelöf himself underlines in a letter (written in English) of November 1966 to Leif Sjöberg: "I'm not highly sophisticated but extremely true to, or aware of, my impressions from an early age and always comparing them with later impressions, superimposing themselves." But one could have wished for at least some sense of the literary-historical context. Despite these reservations, Olsson deserves credit for providing a sensitive, insightful, and concise reading of Ekelöf's central texts, a reading which can appeal equally to either the general public or the professional reader.

Erik Thygesen
Harvard University