

Rolf Peter Lessenich (1940-2019)

Romanticists all over the world will be dismayed to learn that Rolf Peter Lessenich passed away suddenly in early February 2019. Although he was approaching 80, he was still an indefatigable and prolific writer on a wide range of comparative literature, from the Classical tradition of Dryden and Pope to Romanticism and late Victorian decadence. In 2012 and 2017, he published two brilliant and erudite books on the topics that had always piqued his academic interest: *Neoclassical Satire and the Romantic School* and *Romantic Disillusionism and the Sceptical Tradition* (both with Bonn University Press at Göttingen). These two most recent of his books show Rolf Lessenich at his best: wide-ranging, masterfully conversant in English and the Romance languages and literatures and with a staggeringly profound knowledge of canonical and non-canonical writers alike, he argues for a broader concept of Romanticism that emphasises its Neo-Classicist roots in poets such as Byron, and also for a broader horizon against which Romantic pessimism or Praz's morbidly black Romanticism could be re-negotiated and subsumed within the framework of a long sceptical tradition, which via Baudelaire, Heine and Leopardi eventually feeds into the poetry of *fin-de-siècle* poets such as Swinburne, James Thomson B.V. and Thomas Hardy.

Rolf Lessenich was a passionate and true-bred 'Rhineland': born in Cologne in 1940, the only child of Käthe and Peter Lessenich, he began studying English, French, Spanish and Theology at the University of Cologne in the early 1960s. After fruitful, but also difficult years in this vibrant city, which was still recovering from WW2, in 1962 he followed his supervisor, Helmuth Papajewski, to the University of Bonn, where he was awarded his doctoral degree in 1965, at the age of just 25. Rolf Lessenich's thesis, which had the rather ponderous German title *Dichtungsgeschmack und althebraische Bibelpoesie im 18. Jahrhundert. Zur Geschichte der englischen Literaturkritik* (Cologne: Böhlau, 1967), was later revised and modified into the book with the rather snappier English title *Pulpit Oratory in Eighteenth-Century England (1660-1800)* (Cologne: Böhlau, 1972), in which he amazingly combined his love of Neo-Classicist poetry and criticism with his profound knowledge of theology and his impressive command of Hebrew. After writing his official second book (the German Habilitation) on Lord Byron (*Lord Byron and the Nature of Man*, Cologne: Böhlau, 1978), which pinpointed Byron's nature as "antithetically mixed," and juxtaposed the poet's 18th-century affiliations with his tendencies towards modern nihilism and the absurd, Rolf Lessenich was appointed Professor of English Literature at the University of Bonn in 1982. He was to stay there as an acclaimed scholar, and a highly esteemed teacher for the rest of his

career, and, up until his retirement in 2005, he also willingly took on various other academic roles, such as head of department or chairman of the postgraduate examinations committee.

Generations of students will remember Rolf Lessenich as a brilliant, captivating and inspiring teacher. His lecture series on aspects of the British baroque, on Shakespeare's theatre, the Age of Romanticism or the Victorians, to name but a few, were unforgettable rhetorical fireworks and little academic happenings which attracted not only a great number of students, but also many members of the general public. Rolf Lessenich's philosophy was to make literature and culture accessible and palatable to his audiences, to disclose the sensual delights of texts and to show that the bursting of "Joy's grape" was never a Keatsian affair reserved for the splendid few. With his wonderful aptitude to make literature come to life (who but Rolf Lessenich could have spent a whole semester on Bunyan?), he took his audiences with him into intellectual spheres where theology, the arts and various literatures coalesced. Rolf Lessenich had at least a working knowledge of ten languages and was fluent in most of them, and this knowledge allowed him to take a comparative approach that exceeded the narrow confines of English studies as deliberately as the straitlaced definition of comparative literature as "littérature comparée." A dyed-in-the-wool professional, Lessenich was uncompromising in expecting his students to be as well prepared and responsive as he himself unfailingly was. Every one of those students was, however, immediately rewarded for their arduous preparation by then being able to experience and follow his stimulating close readings that treated texts as neither mere quarries of quotations to verify popular theories nor reverted to arcane jargon in which only elitist circles were accustomed to communicate. As one of the last representatives of an academic *uomo universale*, Rolf Lessenich was passionately committed to a language of European culture that never pandered to the colloquial and pop-cultural, but was universally understood by educated people in the same way as Ernst Robert Curtius's *topoi* of the late Middle Ages were, a book that took pride of place on Rolf Lessenich's bookshelf alongside Henkel and Schöne's *Emblemata* and Erwin Panofsky's iconological studies.

Classicist in taste (best evidenced in his love of dressage, horses in general and the *artes hippicae*), Romantic in his almost Faustian aspirations to know everything and to travel all over the world (he sadly never had the chance to enjoy his planned trip to Bangalore), he was certainly Dickensian in his conviviality and good humour. A lover of good Mediterranean food, (moderate) quantities of Riesling and a choice cigar, Rolf Lessenich enjoyed good company and was always a relaxed, but responsive, conference participant, always eager to be helpful, to let colleagues and young academics freely partake of his vast knowledge, never

rude or self-assertive. His comments were always well-founded and covered as extensive a range as his numerous articles did. Owing to his phenomenal memory, he was able to extemporise and quote, seemingly at will, from Dante, Shakespeare, Donne, Vaughan, Blake, Melville, Swinburne and countless other writers. For him, specialism was tantamount to narrowmindedness, and dilettantism and an amateurish dabbling in textual criticism in the manner of Smollett's Mr Palett in *Peregrine Pickle* was always his favourite butt of ridicule. Ever averse to limitations, Rolf Lessenich was essentially a generalist, but also a careful explorer of details, always ready to sharpen his critical lenses while keeping in view the wider cultural and philosophical contexts in which his favourite poets were situated. Most of his students, many of whom became intellectually well-stocked teachers, will never forget those momentous evenings at a little Alsatian restaurant in Bonn, close to his flat, where under Nadar's photo of a grim-looking Baudelaire, or in the garden of a cosy little wine tavern in Rhöndorf, Rolf Lessenich talked about literature, academia, his travels through Asia, and the illustrious past of his (and our) university whose Romantic heritage (with Heinrich Heine and August Wilhelm Schlegel) and whose Prussian tradition he was equally proud to be part of.

W.B. Yeats's oft-quoted sentence "That is no country for old men" at the beginning of his poem 'Sailing to Byzantium' was never a maxim endorsed by Rolf Lessenich. Old age in the shape of a "tattered coat upon a stick" never existed for him; his list of commitments and invitations to conferences and projects was long and refreshingly ever-growing. In his very last email to me, he was excited about the fact that in summer semester 2019 he was going to continue to serve his university and to teach the landmarks of modernist poetry, such as Yeats, Eliot and Auden. His well-meaning, erudite and ever-supportive voice will be sorely missed by his students, colleagues, friends and all those who had the privilege of being taught by him. And even if "poetry makes nothing happen," as Auden was to write in his lament for Yeats's death, Rolf Lessenich's lectures, essays and books about literature have amply contributed to the knowledge, education and happiness of his ever-grateful students and friends.

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