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[1940–2019]

**THE DEBATE OF SCEPTICS AND PLATONISTS
IN EUROPEAN ROMANTICISM¹
DEBATA SCEPTYKÓW I PLATONISTÓW
W EUROPEJSKIM ROMANTYZMIE**

Słowa kluczowe: debata, romantyzm, sceptycy, platonisci**Key words:** debate, romanticism, sceptics, platonists

On the 1st of December 1812, the well-known caricaturist Charles Williams, a contemporary of James Gillray, made a plate for *Town Talk* that satirized the Romantic Period's bewildering political and artistic conflicts. Instead of marked front lines, we see a chaos of voices – reminiscent of the chaos of the battlefield, where blind slashing replaces orderly warfare. Chaos calls for order and subsumption, invariably to the detriment of detail. The increasing chaos of voices around the time of the French Revolution became a subject for caricature, expressing the age's call for the formation of clear-cut, though terribly simplified, schools and front lines. Something similar had happened in the conflict of Christians and Pagans in the 4th century. A bad order has ever proved better than no order at all².

In the literature of the Romantic Period of 1780–1830, there were two battlefields: the Classicism-Romanticism debate on the one hand and the Platonism-Scepticism debate on the other. Both had socio-political implications.

The Classicism-Romanticism debate was concerned with questions of elitist or general education of the authors and their readership or audience; the exclusiveness or

¹ The article was presented at an international conference *Romanticism a point of contention (past and present)*, organized by the Faculty «Artes Liberales» and the Faculty of Polish Studies of the University of Warsaw on 10–11. October 2017. Tekst artykułu został wygłoszony na międzynarodowej konferencji naukowej *Spory romantyczne i spory o romantyzm (dawnie i nowe)*, zorganizowanej przez Wydział „Artes Liberales” i Wydział Polonistyki Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego w dniach 10–11 X 2017 r.

² Reprinted in *Parodies of the Romantic Age*, ed. Graeme Stones – John Strachan, vol. 2, London 1999, n.p.

inclusiveness of the Classical Tradition of Greece and Rome; the universal or regional validity of standards of taste and rules; the social rank and political loyalty of authors and artists; and support of or enmity toward the allegedly divine institution of the *ancien régime's* feudal order. The frequent border crossing and changes of political and aesthetic loyalty of authors such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Byron in England, Victor Hugo and Chateaubriand in France, or the Schlegel brothers and Beethoven in Germany show just how difficult it was for Romantic-Period theorists to come to a clear distinction between Classical and Romantic. Byron was not the only poet that switched his code from Romanticism to Neoclassicism and back again – others to do so included Thomas Campbell, Samuel Rogers, John Gibson Lockhart, John Wilson, and Thomas Love Peacock. It was long after the gunsmoke of battle had subsided in the 1850s to 1860s that the existence of a «Romantic School» became more widely accepted in Britain³.

The Platonism-Scepticism debate, by contrast, was an inner-Romantic debate, best known from Byron's satirical attacks on Wordsworth and Coleridge in *Don Juan* or Percy Shelley's arguments against Byron in *Julian and Maddalo*. Platonism is here understood as all philosophies inspired by Plato – not just Plato's philosophy proper, as is usual in histories of philosophy⁴.

Enlightenment philosophy famously turned its back on metaphysics, mostly banishing it in France and marginalizing it in Britain. Enlightened latitudinarian sermons were admonitions in practical Christianity, applied theology divorced from metaphysics. There was no room for Plato and Platonism, which had become syncretized with Christianity, although (as seen in the cases of Percy Shelley and John Keats) a non-Christian or neo-pagan Platonism survived. Christianity had thus become part of the Classical Tradition since the Renaissance: see Marsilio Ficino's *Theologia Platonica* (1482) and Desiderius Erasmus's «O Sancte Socrate, ora pro nobis»⁵. Enlightenment scorn of Platonism was felt everywhere – note Dr Johnson's derision of the subjective idealist George Berkeley when he hit his foot against a stone and found immaterial metaphysics refuted – the exact opposite of, later, William Wordsworth having to force himself to admit the reality of a fence or style, or Percy Shelley pulling a baby from his mother to get information on the real world beyond, or Ralph Waldo Emerson inverting the meaning of substance (the real world of ideas beyond) and appearance (this world as a mere projection of that substance).

It is typical of Pre-Romanticism and Romanticism that it blamed the Enlightenment for its reduction of reality to waking sensual perception to the exclusion of dreams, visions, superstitions, and epiphanies – the world of immaterial spirits. In the course of the formation of this counter-movement, Platonism – Christian as well as pagan Platonism – was revived. The most conspicuous Pre-Romantic Platonist was William Blake, but Platonism can also be found in the works of William Haley, James

³ R. Lessenich, *Neoclassical Satire and the Romantic School*, Super alta perennis, 12, Göttingen: Bonn University Press 2012.

⁴ R. Lessenich, *Romantic Disillusionism and the Sceptical Tradition*, Super alta perennis, 20, Göttingen: Bonn University Press 2017.

⁵ Erasmus, *Ten Colloquies*, translated by C.R. Thompson, New York 1986, p. 158.

Beattie, or Joseph and Thomas Warton. Romanticism had its famous Platonic philosophers – Thomas Taylor in England, Victor Cousin in France, the Idealists in Germany, and above all Friedrich Schelling, on whose philosophy of nature the Platonists Coleridge and Emerson built their entire systems. One of the most conspicuously Platonist Romantic poems is William Wordsworth's 'Intimations Ode', which is reminiscent of Blake's divine child. The child is closest to man's original home – the world of ideas beyond – and progressively loses its sense of this material world's original spirituality and holiness in adult years. The adult must be taught by the artist and poet to see the flowers and forests again as natural symbols pointing to eternity, in an *ars poetica* parallel to Platonic *kalokagathia*:

O joy! that in our embers
Is something that doth live,
That nature yet remembers
What was so fugitive!⁶

And one of the best Platonist Romantic prose treatises is Emerson's *Nature*, teaching its readers to regard all nature as symbols guiding modern materialist man's estranged perception of the world back to its home: the world beyond. The models of this primitivist *ars poetica* are children and savages:

Because of this radical correspondence between visible and invisible things and human thoughts, savages, who have only what is necessary, converse in figures. As we go back in history, language becomes more picturesque, until its infancy, when it is all poetry; or, all spiritual facts are represented by natural symbols⁷.

In the Classical Tradition, however, Platonism had forever been accompanied by its Other: Pyrrhonism. Plato's disciple Pyrrho had opposed his teacher's optimistic foundationalism with a scepticism that doubted the existence of firm truths as well as firm ethical standards, and Pyrrho had many followers – so much so that pessimistic Pyrrhonism had become the constant Other of optimistic Platonism. In times of unusual stress, thwarted expectations, and disillusionment, Pyrrhonism gained ground. This was conspicuously the case in the Romantic Period, when firm millennial hope for *liberté, égalité, fraternité* was repeatedly shattered throughout Europe: the three divisions of Poland in 1772 and 1793 and 1795, the outcome of the American Revolution of 1775–76, the failure of the French Revolution of 1789, the politics of Napoleon 1799–1814, the Congress of Vienna 1815 and subsequent congresses restoring the *ancien régime*, the failure of the Neapolitan Revolution of 1820 and the French July Revolution of 1830. The churches' support of the *anciens régimes*, from

⁶ Wordsworth, *Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood*, lines 133–136. In: *Poetical Works*, Oxford Standard Authors, ed. Thomas Hutchinson, rev. E. de Selincourt, London 1936, 1971, p. 461.

⁷ Emerson, *Nature*, 1836, in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, 5th edition, New York 1998, I.1082. The adjective 'radical' is here used in its original etymological sense of 'fundamental'.

whose feudal rule people expected to be saved, aggravated doubt of both Platonic and Christian belief in a dialectical salvation.

This explains why Romantic authors show the Platonism-Scepticism debate in their works, so even predominantly Platonic or Pyrrhonic works are often fractured with ambiguity by the disturbing presence of the opposite position. Wordsworth's Platonic 'Intimations Ode' and his sonnet 'The world is too much with us' stand side-by-side with other poems that express the author's doubt of Platonism and Christian doctrine, such as his 'Lucy Poems'. The contrast leads some critics to conclude he was basically a philosophical materialist. The Romantics, however, cannot be pinned down to one conviction, and were in fact constantly moving along a broad scale between the extremes of Platonic belief and agnostic or sceptical doubt, vision and disillusion, Positive Romanticism and Negative Romanticism. Otherwise expressed, anti-Platonic scepticism, including Epicureanism and materialism, was Platonic Romanticism's dark underside – its doppelgänger.

Goethe, a Weimar Classicist rather than a Romantic, expressed that split in his protagonist Faust's dialogue with his simple-minded, earthbound servant Wagner. His words on the two souls in his breast, the one winged upwards (a Platonic image) while the other weighs downwards towards doubt and mere earthly enjoyment, have become famous:

Zwei Seelen wohnen, ach! in meiner Brust,
Die eine will sich von der andern trennen;
Die eine hält in derber Liebeslust
Sich an die Welt mit klammernden Organen;
Die andre hebt gewaltsam sich vom Dust
Zu den Gefilden hoher Ahnen⁸.

Two souls, alas! within my breast abide,
The one to quit the other ever burning.
This, in a lusty passion of delight,
Cleaves to the world with organs tightly clinging.
Fain from the dust would that its strenuous flight
To realms of loftier sires be winging⁹.

Faust calls up and enters into a dialogue with the Earth Spirit who «weaves God's living garments»¹⁰, meaning the material world as derivative from the ideal world

⁸ Goethe, *Faust*, first part 1808, in *Werke*, Tempel-Klassiker, ed. P. Stapf, Berlin and Darmstadt 1967, II.1036.

⁹ Translated by Albert G. Latham, Everyman's Library, London 1908, p. 55.

¹⁰ *Ibidem* 31. So schaff ich am sausenden Webstuhl der Zeit, Und wirke der Gottheit lebendiges Kleid (*ed. cit.* II.947)

of Platonic philosophy. Simultaneously, however, he doubts that man can ever attain knowledge and suspects Mephisto's view of a senseless and aimless world to be true. He is torn between Platonism and scepticism, just as Goethe's complex tragedy wavers between these positions, allowing both religious and ironic readings.

A Romantic case of an inner conflict between Platonism and Pyrrhonism was John Keats. On the one hand he wrote «golden-tongued Romance» and inebriated himself with physical beauty – leading the mind back to truth, virtue, and its spiritual origins in the sense of Platonic *kalokagathia* as in 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' (spring 1819): «Beauty is truth, truth beauty». And in his long letter on the 'Valley of Soul-Making' (also spring 1819) he had recourse to Platonic dialectics to justify the soul's descent from the world spirit to the material world, there to gain individuality before rejoining the unity or 'henosis' of the world spirit: thesis, antithesis, synthesis. On the other hand he wrote such sceptical poems as 'On Sitting Down to Read King Lear Once Again' (MS 1818), albeit ending on the hope that Shakespearean existential doubt will not have the last word and that he will rise again on «new Phoenix wings». It is typical of that Keatsian inner conflict that (in the winter of 1819) he simultaneously wrote *The Fall of Hyperion*, with its dialectical view of history (the good but ugly Titan Hyperion, the evil and ugly Olympian Zeus, the good and beautiful Apollo), as well as *The Cap and Bells*, modelled on Byron's satirical and decidedly anti-Platonic epic *Don Juan*. We are tempted to speculate that the unfinished state of both *Hyperion* poems was due to Keats's ever-disturbing doubt.

The case of Percy Shelley is even more disconcerting. Nurtured in enlightened French materialist philosophy, Holbach and Helvétius, the young Oxford student wrote his 'Necessity of Atheism' in provocation of all theology, and his last, unfinished work, *The Triumph of Life* (1822), discredited all metaphysical theodicy. On the other hand, he was a neo-pagan Gnostic Platonist like Blake and, as such, he fictionalized himself in his ride with the sceptic Byron in *Julian and Maddalo*. Julian-Shelley – naming himself after the heretical Roman Emperor Julian the Apostate – here contrasts an anti-Christian Platonist philosophy against Maddalo-Byron with the insinuation that the lack of a saving, positive belief drives man to madness – exemplified in the poem's madman episode which also pointedly references Byron's imputed madness. Byron, who reproaches Shelley with talking utopia, introduces him to a maniac in a mental asylum – a man allegedly turned mad with such «vain [...] aspiring theories»¹¹, only to prove himself wrong. What Byron dismisses as a mere Platonist «utopia», or wishful thinking, turns out to be the contrary: a safeguard against madness and despair. The maniac had been driven insane with disappointed love, for want of such a positive theory to support him, though a self-delusion. Both the central position of the maniac's long speech of unrelieved despair and the poem's open end show that Shelley himself was infected by Byron's Negative Romanticism. Maddalo-Byron and the maniac appear as Julian-Shelley's doppelganger – radical manifestations of the dark reverse side; the doubt accompanying his Positive Romanticism.

¹¹ Shelley, *Julian and Maddalo*, MS 1818, posth. 1824, line 201. In: *Poetical Works*, ed. T. Hutchinson, Oxford Standard Authors, London 1970, p. 194.

When we compare Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, with its Platonic view of a historical dialectic, to his sceptical poem 'Lift not the painted veil', this split becomes clear. In the former, the lifting of the veil of Maya reveals the truth of salvation and an immortal spiritual world below temporary material illusion, whereas in the latter it benevolently conceals the contrary truth, one that Joseph Conrad was later to call «The horror»: the negative epiphany of an ultimate 'horror vacui'¹². This is most prominent in Shelley's *The Triumph of Life*, dominated by his depression after the death of his children William and Clara as well as his sense of approaching death. Using Dante's terza rima, with its religious connotations of the Holy Trinity, his vision describes an anti-Petrarchan *trionfo* that leads all belief in visions and expectations to ruin under the guidance of a Platonic optimist, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a Platonist and madman who had, like Wordsworth, propagated the error that «Nature never did betray The heart that loved her»¹³.

Blake, Shelley, Wordsworth, and Keats may be basically classified as Platonists tending towards scepticism at critical periods of their lives. Heinrich von Kleist, Byron, Heinrich Heine, Alfred de Musset, Giacomo Leopardi, and, later, Emily and Branwell Brontë were basically Pyrrhonists – anti-Platonic sceptics tending towards (or rather yearning for) belief in a world beyond, a nostalgia that has become known by the German term of «romantische Sehnsucht». They were Negative Romantics rather than anti-Romantics, Romantic Disillusionists, would-be believers and must-be realists. The episode in *Julian and Maddalo* where Byron is brought to admit the support that even a utopian and mistaken belief holds out to man finds a parallel in the Egeria stanzas in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. Egeria, the legendary nymph beloved by the legendary Roman King Numa Pompilius, was a mythical creature of the fancy conceived by a mortal and real man in search of immortal and ideal beauty. Whether this mortal imagined her nympholeptically in his terrestrial despair or euhemeristically deified a charming woman of this world, Egeria is no more than “a beautiful thought [...] softly bodied forth”¹⁴, unmasking the Positive Romantic myth (or mendacious pretence) of an eternal world beyond, divine inspiration, and prophet-poetry. She is a *princesse lointaine*, though a mere vanishing vision, and symbol of a world of everlasting love beyond, as taught by Christianity. Only in man's temporarily redeeming fantasies can she be immortal and remain unwrinkled despite the passing years, like the face of her cave-guarded spring. Only love could, thus, spare man's soul for a short time – “the dull satiety which all destroys”¹⁵. But as things are, this paradise is an unattainable ideal and its celestial fruit is forbidden. Belief is like an opium dream providing ephemeral happiness but lapsing into misery when the happy illusion ends, much as the withdrawal symptoms from opium described in Coleridge's poem 'The Pains of Sleep' (MS 1803) and De Quincey's chapter

¹² Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 1902. In: Collected Edition of the Works, London: Dent 1967, p. 156.

¹³ Wordsworth, *Tintern Abbey*, lines 122–23. In: *Poetical Works*, ed. cit. 164.

¹⁴ Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, 1812–18, IV.115.9. In: *Complete Poetical Works*, ed. J.J. McGann, Oxford 1980–93, II.164.

¹⁵ *Ibidem* IV.119.8, ed. cit. II.164.

‘The Pains of Opium’ in *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821):

Oh Love! no habitant of earth thou art –
 An unseen seraph, we believe in thee,
 A faith whose martyrs are the broken heart,
 But never yet hath seen, nor e’er shall see
 The naked eye, thy form, as it should be;
 The mind hath made thee, as it peopled heaven,
 Even with its own desiring phantasy,
 And to a thought such shape and image given,
 As haunts the unquench’d soul – parch’d – wearied – wrung – and riven¹⁶.

This is what Byron’s admirer Charles Baudelaire meant when, in *Les paradis artificiels* (1860), he provokingly suggested that we should see heaven through the “arse of a bottle”, “ne contemplez plus le ciel que par le cul de la bouteille”¹⁷. Doubting the existence of a real paradise, we create our own artificial ones to comfort ourselves with the temporary illusion of salvation via alcohol and drugs. This is what the last German Romantic idealist philosopher, Karl Marx, meant when he declared that religion is the opium of the people, although Marx remained a Positive Romantic in secularizing the dialectical synthesis of paradise as classless society¹⁸.

Byron’s changing – or at least ambivalent – views of the sea also show his tension between would-be believer and must-be realist. The ocean is an old symbol of eternity where the church, with its ship symbolism (*navis-nave*), carries us back to our true, everlasting home in the beyond. In stormy weather, the sailors tied themselves to the ship’s masts in an act of ‘re-ligatio’ – the etymon of ‘religio’. The ocean, which created man according to the oceanic theory of the earth, will ultimately swallow him again. The dialectical biblical story of Jonah, whom the sea releases again after his shipwreck, was open to doubt as a pious myth created by man’s wishful thinking. Childe Harold is a “pilgrim” on that ocean, but the aim of his “pilgrimage” is nowhere specific. He is a pre-Baudelairean flâneur rather than a Christian pilgrim. On the one hand, the ocean elicits a feeling of awe and consolatory belief in a soteriology that takes him back to his home in a beyond that reunites all fragments:

Thou glorious mirror, where the Almighty’s form
 Glasses itself in tempests; in all time, –

¹⁶ *Ibidem* IV.121.1–9, *ed. cit.* II.164.

¹⁷ Baudelaire, *Les paradis artificiels, Le vin*, 1860. In: *Œuvres complètes*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, ed. Y.-G. Le Dantec – Claude Pichois, Paris 1961, 324. This is in connection with Baudelaire’s praise of the sceptic E.T.A. Hoffmann, a major influence on Edgar Allan Poe’s *Tales of Mystery and Imagination* (1838–45) as translated by Baudelaire.

¹⁸ Marx, *Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie*, Einleitung. In: *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*, 1844, pp. 71–72.

Calm or convuls'd – in breeze, or gale, or storm,
 Icing the pole, or in the torrid clime
 Dark-heaving; – boundless, endless, and sublime
 The image of Eternity – the throne
 Of the Invisible [...] ¹⁹

On the other hand, however, the ocean reminds us of the bleak reality of its indifference and cruel destructiveness, which complements the ruin that man creates on the earth with the ruin of man himself, where

[...] like a drop of rain,
 He sinks into thy depths with bubbling groan,
 Without a grave, unknell'd, uncoffin'd, and unknown ²⁰.

Under the latter, sceptical, disillusioning aspect, the all-devouring ocean loses its Platonic symbolism pointing to a beyond and leaves nothing but the feeling of desertion that Martin Heidegger was later to call man's thrownness: *Geworfenheit*. Heinrich Heine took up Byron's ambivalent ocean imagery in numerous poems such as "Es ragt im Meer der Runenstein", where the speaker stares out into the ocean yearning for an answer to the world's riddles and finds nothing but aimless whistling and howling.

Belief in the Platonic-Christian dialectic of life, death, and return to a higher life – as in the circuitous journey of Ulysses, the story of Jonah, or the life of Jesus – simply will not come despite being devoutly beseeched. The sun rises and sets and rises again, as in Heine's rather *Don-Juan*-like lyric on a maiden mourning by the shore of the ocean whom the speaker consoles without reference to a better world beyond that the ocean scenery would suggest:

Das Fräulein stand am Meere
 Und seufzte lang und bang,
 Es rührte sie so sehre
 Der Sonnenuntergang.

Upon the shore, a maiden
 Sighs with a troubled frown;
 She seems so sorrow-laden
 To see the sun go down.

Mein Fräulein! sein Sie munter,
 Das ist ein altes Stück;
 Hier vorne geht sie unter
 Und kehrt von hinten zurück ²¹.

Don't let the old thing grieve you,
 Look up and smile, my dear;
 For though in front he may leave you,
 He'll rise again in the rear ²².

¹⁹ Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, 1812–18, IV.183.1–7. In: *Complete Poetical Works*, ed. cit., II.185.

²⁰ *Ibidem* IV.179.7–9, ed. cit. II.184.

²¹ Heine, *Das Fräulein*, MS ca 1830. In: *Sämtliche Schriften*, ed. K. Briegleb, Munich 1975–76, IV. 327.

²² Translated by Louis Untermeyer, *Poems of Heinrich Heine*, New York 1916, p. 219.

The Platonic-Christian dialectic remains incomplete in default of a synthesis after thesis and antithesis, and is replaced with an absurd circle of thesis and antithesis only. This is contentious Byronic Pyrrhonism. Later, Friedrich Nietzsche, who carried an edition of Byron in his pocket, was to call this the “the eternal return of the same”.

A very early challenge to the Preromantic Platonist Revival was the Gothic, a special genre of Romantic Disillusionism created by the agnostic Horace Walpole, whom Byron admired. With its scepticism as to a world created and guarded by a benevolent Providence and man’s free will to act morally and rationally, the Gothic formed part of the aforesaid dark underside of Platonic Romanticism. Whereas Positive Platonic Romanticism claimed inspiration by the world spirit from the real world of ideas or heaven above, the Gothic turned its eye below – to dark recesses and subterranean caverns where irresistible passions such as lust, hatred, and revenge range freely. These locations symbolize the human unconscious that Preromantic philosophers, physicians, and literati began to explore a century before Freud, who defined the *id* as the chaotic and oneiric repository of all impulses that interfere with and impede our waking lives, debilitating our reason. Even Coleridge’s exceptional Christian Gothic denies man’s free will to act that Platonism taught – witness ‘The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner’ (1798). From Walpole’s *Castle of Otranto* (1765) onwards, Gothic romances only refer with aggressive irony to Providence and a morally ordered world, as their pretended homilectic stands in blatant contrast to the plot, as also, for instance, does Charlotte Dacre’s *Zofloya* (1806). Or, alternatively, they simply omit all references to what Kant called “the sky above us and the moral law in us”. This technique of aggressive omission is apparent in Byron’s ‘Lines Inscribed upon a Cup Formed from a Skull’ (1808), which inverts death to a joke – replacing *hic expectat resurrectionem mortuorum* with *ergo bibamus* – as well as in Heine’s elegiac poem on the transfer of Byron’s body by sea from Greece to England, entitled ‘Childe Harold’ (1827). The lyric was set to music by Franz Schubert, the composer of the Pyrrhonic-Romantic *Die Winterreise* (1827) with its absurd circles. The speaker sees a black bark carrying the body of the late poet with uncovered face and dead eyes staring searchingly, yet vainly, for the light of heaven. He can imagine a sick nymph wailing from the depths, but in reality there is no sound except that of the waves of the indifferent ocean washing against the bark – not even a dirge is sung or a prayer spoken by the body’s mute attendants. The ocean denies its expected symbolic message and the world beyond remains wishful thinking:

Eine starke, schwarze Barke	A black and sturdy funeral bark
Segelt trauervoll dahin.	Sails sorrowfully in the gloom.
Die verummten und verstumten	The body’s guardians, masked
Leichenhüter sitzen drin.	Sit silently by the boom.
Toter Dichter, stille liegt er,	The dead poet, he lies so still,
Mit entblößtem Angesicht;	His face altogether revealed,

Seine blauen Augen schauen Immer noch zum Himmelslicht.	His blue eyes, gazing outward, Reflecting heaven's shield.
Aus der Tiefe klingt, als rief Eine kranke Nixenbraut, Und die Wellen, sie zerschellen	Out of the depth came sounds Like some deep-water bride, And the waves against the hull are
An dem Kahn, wie Klagelaut ²³ .	Like lamentations of the tide ²⁴ .

This is a perfect image of Romantics split between Platonism and Pyrrhonism, staring at the sky for dialectical salvation yet suspecting that Platonic-Judaeo-Christian belief in a *post mortem* dialectical return to a world beyond might be mere wishful thinking.

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²³ Heine, *Romanzen, Childe Harold*, MS 1827, IV.315.

²⁴ Modified translation from Howard F. Isham, *Image of the Sea: Oceanic Consciousness in the Romantic Century*, New York and Frankfurt am Main 2004, p. 132–33.

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Summary

The author identifies two main lines in the European history of ideas since Antiquity: Platonism and Pyrrhonism (scepticism). He employs these philosophical categories in the widest sense of the word – they should be understood as distinct “worldviews”. The paper tries to establish the significance of these intellectual attitudes for romantic poetry. It turns out that romantic poets usually do not identify themselves completely with one worldview only.

Biography/ Biographie

Rolf Lessenich (1940–2019) – wurde am 19.06.1940 in Köln geboren. Nach dem Studium der Anglistik, Romanistik und Theologie an den Universitäten Köln, Bonn und Oxford, das er mit dem Staatsexamen abschloss, folgte 1965 die Promotion mit einer Arbeit zu *Dichtungsgeschmack und althebräische Bibelpoesie im 18. Jahrhundert: Zur Geschichte der englischen Literaturkritik* (Böhlau 1967), die später in bearbeiteter Form und auf Englisch unter dem Titel *Elements of Pulpit Oratory in Eighteenth-Century England (1660–1800)* (Böhlau 1972) erschien. 1976 habilitierte er sich mit einer Arbeit zu *Lord Byron and the Nature of Man* (Böhlau 1978) und war danach als Oberassistent in Bonn und als Lehrstuhlvertreter an der Universität Würzburg tätig. Seit 1982 war Rolf Lessenich Professor für Englische Philologie an der Universität Bonn und blieb auch nach seinem Eintritt in den Ruhestand im Jahre 2007 in Lehre und Forschung aktiv. Zu seinen Publikationen gehören drei weitere Monographien: *Aspects of English Preromanticism* (Böhlau 1989), *Neoclassical Satire and the Romantic School (1780–1830)* (Bonn UP/v&r unipress 2012) und *Romantic Disillusionism and the Sceptical Tradition* (Bonn UP/v&r unipress 2017), sowie rund 90 wissenschaftliche Artikel, die in so renommierten Publikationsforen wie *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, *The Oxford Book of Victorian Poetry*, *The Cambridge Companion to the Eighteenth-Century Novel* und *The Handbook of British Romanticism* erschienen. An der *Bonner Enzyklopädie der Globalität* (Springer 2017) war er mit vier Artikeln (zwei davon in Koautorschaft) beteiligt: „Tradition“, „Ästhetik“, „Streit“ und „Humanität“.