

Alf Lombard - a Mythical Figure

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In a portrait I made of Alf Lombard in 1996 on the occasion of his passing, I described the great linguist as a three-headed creature for whom I chose the mythological name of "Friend-Master-Father", as he was my father's age. In the name of our friendship (he had asked me to call him Alf), I had become the appointed supplier of choice for the library of his Lund Institute as well as for his personal book collection, having managed over time to develop what Alf would call "le don de réaliser l'irréalisable", in an attempt to satisfy his desire to acquire absolutely every book in his domain of interest.

Being a great friend, he helped me obtain a scholarship from Lund University in 1965 to work with Bertil Malberg, one of his former students, with whom he was not on the friendliest of terms. During the day, I would work on my doctoral thesis at the Institute of Phonetics coordinated by Bertil Malberg (where I would also have coffee with various members at 4 in the afternoon), while in the evening - every evening - I would call on Alf Lombard at his institute. During our conversations, he sometimes opened a can of sardines from a Romance country, with or without capers added, but wonderfully delicious all the same. My friend Alf also showed me around the castles in Scania, so beautifully described by Selma Lagerlof. He used to delight me with a wealth of information about these castles that he had learned from the famous Swedish encyclopaedias.

He would rejoice at my successes like a father would, as I was going to find out later when I had the opportunity to read the letters he wrote to his great friend, Al. Rosetti. He would scold me for not having published my doctoral dissertation. He was extremely happy when my daughter was born and, being an experienced parent, he told me that, although my research work could suffer or be delayed for a while due to my new status, I would be amply compensated for any setback by the very existence of my child.

He instilled in me a passion for research. One of the things I admired most about him was the philological attention he paid to detail. Every evening he had a list of questions about Romanian ready for me, for he was in love with the Romanian language. And he was also in love with Romania, I might add. This is why I was particularly pleased when, having read an article I wrote on Lund that he deemed excellent, Alf exclaimed: “vous avez compris ce pays!” I had done something to make Sweden, his country, better known in Romania.

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