



Jean Bollack in English, a preview of a foreword to The Art of Reading, Part II

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March 31, 2016 By Gregory Nagy listed under By Gregory Nagy

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This posting of 2016.03.31 is Part II of what I started in the posting of 2016.03.09, which was Part I. In these postings, I preview the text of a foreword I am putting together for a 2016 book containing twenty-seven chapters based on articles and essays by Jean Bollack, *The Art of Reading: from Homer to Paul Celan*, translated into English by Catherine Porter and Susan Tarrow.

[\[Essay continues here...\]](#)



Jean Bollack, 2011 (Image by Menerbes, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons)

Ch.3. “Odysseus among the Philologists” (Bollack 1997c)

§3A. Partly because of its social prestige, as Bollack argues, the field of classical philology “has never produced a theory of meaning.” Small wonder, then, as he further argues, that there is no theory of meaning to be found in the prestigious subfield of Homeric philology. This subfield, like the overall field, may claim to be a “science,” but it lacks the “epistemological grounding” that would and should have long ago “scaled down its pretensions.” The debates that persist in the absence of such grounding keep things in the air, so that the Homeric Question for Homerists needs to remain always a question.

§3B. The one big question for Homerists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries focused on the genesis of Homeric poetry, and those experts who styled themselves as “analysts” tended to hold sway. As Bollack notes, “the Analysts were well ensconced at the top of the university hierarchy,” especially in Germany. Ironically and at times even sarcastically, Bollack traces the “successes” of Analysts like Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff in dissecting supposedly earlier and later editions, as it were, of the text that we know as the Homeric *Odyssey*. By contrast, those who styled themselves as “unitarians” were often “on the fringe, considered mere aesthetes.” What the Unitarians were thinking was not “science.”

§3C. Having found fault with classicists who seek to explain Homer by looking for the genesis of Homeric poetry, Bollack still has some words of praise for models of oral poetics as developed by Milman Parry and Albert Lord in their studies of Homeric poetry, describing their methodology as “new and certainly more accurate” than that of the Analysts. But even in this case, Bollack claims, those who follow Parry and Lord are still looking for the genesis of Homeric poetry. He complains that the publications of “such theorists or proponents of oral poetry as G. S. Kirk” do not take us much further beyond the results achieved by the Analysts. Bollack pursues this complaint by arguing with a book of Kirk (1962), though it could be objected that this book is a far cry from the methodology developed by Parry and Lord.

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§3D. Invoking his own *hermeneutics*, Bollack steers clear of both the Analysts and Unitarians as he defines them, taking as a case in point the mythological construct of Scylla and Charybdis as signaled at the beginning *Odyssey* 12. As Bollack argues, Scylla and Charybdis cannot be assimilated into a single strait: they are two consecutive straits. When philologists place Scylla and Charybdis into one strait, “the whole relationship between a world that is rising and a chasm that plunges downward is eliminated.” Bollack goes on to say: “error consists in producing a meaning that the text deflects.” He strives to save the traveler *Odysseus* from such errors.

Ch.4. “Reflections on the Practice of Philology” (Bollack 1997d)

§4A. Facing the challenges of philology as a “science,” Bollack returns to his concept of *hermeneutics* as he developed it from the start. How do we get at the truth of what an author says in a text when the transmission of that text has taken us so far away from the original historical context? How do we disentangle what is said by authors from what the successive editors and interpreters of these authors conjecture is being said? Invoking the names of three great humanists who worked on projects of emending the texts of three great authors, Bollack observes: “most readers are unaware that they are reading Marullus in *Lucretius*, Usener in *Epicurus*, Diels in *Heraclitus*.” Although he admires each one of these humanists for their masterful conjectures in the project of emending the text, Bollack still worries: “the text,” he says, “defends itself poorly.”

§4B. To get at the truth behind the textual transmission of any author, Bollack demands of himself a thorough investigation of every historical factor that went into that transmission. The *hermeneutics* of Bollack are demanding to the point of approaching impossible standards. But there is hope: the success of his methodology depends on a continuation into the future. In fact, his near-absolutism in his hermeneutic requirements requires an infinite future.

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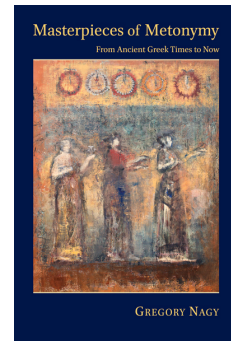
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