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

Classical Inquiries

About

Classical Inquiries (CI) is an online, rapid-publication project of Harvard's Center for Hellenic Studies, devoted to sharing some of the latest thinking on the ancient world with researchers and the general public.

While articles archived in DASH represent the original *Classical Inquiries* posts, *CI* is intended to be an evolving project, providing a platform for public dialogue between authors and readers. Please visit http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.eresource:Classical_Inquiries for the latest version of this article, which may include corrections, updates, or comments and author responses.

Additionally, many of the studies published in *CI* will be incorporated into future CHS publications. Please visit http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.eresource:CHS.Online_Publishing for a complete and continually expanding list of open access publications by CHS.

Citing Articles from *Classical Inquiries*

To cite an article from *Classical Inquiries*, use the author's name, the date, the title of the article, and the following persistent identifier:
http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.eresource:Classical_Inquiries.

For example:

> Nagy, G. 2019.01.31. "Homo Ludens at Play with the Songs of Sappho: Experiments in Comparative Reception Theory, Part Four." *Classical Inquiries*. http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.eresource:Classical_Inquiries.

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

March 10, 2016 By Gregory Nagy listed under By Gregory Nagy Comments off Edit This

Jean Bollack was born in Strasbourg on the 15th of March, 1923, and he died in Paris on the 4th of December, 2012. In what follows, 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. [full article here]

Introduction

Jean Bollack was born in Strasbourg on the 15th of March, 1923, and he died in Paris on the 4th of December, 2012. For a brief biography, I refer to the article "In Memoriam: Jean Bollack," written by André Laks and translated by Leonard Muellner, published in Kleos@CHS.

An online bibliography has been published by a French team.

In what follows, 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; the publisher is The Center for Hellenic Studies (volume 73 in the Hellenic Studies series) and the distributor is Harvard University Press. This part of my foreword covers chapters 1–2.

Ch.1. "Learning to Read" (Bollack 1997a)

§1A. In this chapter, we see my friend Jean Bollack as an elderly man looking back at a youthful phase of his formation as a Classicist. Here he is, twenty years old, studying at the University of Basel in Switzerland, where he finds "sanctuary," as he says, during the terrible years of World War II. Earlier, he studied at a German-speaking Protestant Gymnasium in Basel, complementing the French-speaking background of his Alsatian French-Jewish family.

§1B. Our thoughts turn to a nostalgic photograph taken in June 2009 by the granddaughter of Jean Bollack, Judith Deschamps. This photograph, with the kind permission of the Bollack family, graces the cover of Bollack's English-language book The Art of Reading: from Homer to Paul Celan—as also the cover of this posting for 2016.03.10. We see pictured here the old man revisiting Basel and gazing in the direction of the city's famed Kunstmuseum, which is only a few hundreds of meters away from the old Humanistisches Gymnasium at the Münsterplatz. Friedrich Nietzsche had once taught in that building, then called Pädagogium, or the Burg. When Bollack writes in "Learning to read" that the city of Basel in Switzerland was where he "survived" during World War II, he means it literally. He found in Switzerland a place of refuge from the anti-Semitic horrors that were ongoing throughout Germany.

§1C. In particular, the University of Basel was for young Bollack a place of refuge metaphorically, since the form of German education that still survived back then in that stronghold of learning had by then been "lost" in Germany, as Bollack himself ruefully observes in "Learning to Read." His observation centers on the idea of *German philology*, as he describes it , and such philology, he says, continued to "retain its appeal" for him throughout his life. It was by practicing this kind of philology that Bollack first learned, he says, that the need to *establish the text* is as essential as the need to *establish the meaning of the text*. For Bollack, the *reading* of a text is a *reactualizing* of the text. But he adds that, as a young student, he had not yet learned to observe, as he did later, the "breaks" in texts, which "allow for a freedom of reading."

§1D. Reminiscing about the young Bollack in the essay "Learning to read," the old Bollack says "we" as often as he says "I." The rhetoric of this interchangeability is most effective. It is as if Bollack were speaking for a whole generation of Classicists, not only for himself. My favorite moment in the whole essay is when he says: "We were feeling our way, and we made progress empirically and intuitively."

§1E. This kind of approach, for Bollack, is German philology at its best. And, from the start, philology is for him "the science of philology," competing with the "natural sciences."

§1F. Bollack admires in particular the application of philology to Homeric poetry. For him, Homeric criticism is ideally a "virtuoso activity." That said, he adds that he had sided, from the very start, with the "unitarians" in their approach to Homer, not with the "analysts."

§1G. All the same, the professor at Universität Basel who receives the most praise from Bollack was more of an "analyst" than a "unitarian" in Homeric studies. He was Peter Von der Mühll, a Swiss German philologist who published in 1952 a critical commentary (Kritisches Hypomnema) on the Homeric Iliad. In class, as Bollack reminisces, Von der Mühll would often admit to not fully understanding what a text really means. That was a far cry, Bollack adds wryly, from what he was to experience later on as a student in Paris.

§1H. The transition from Basel to Paris happens abruptly in "Learning to read." Skipping from one breath to the next, Bollack says it all at once: "I had always thought that, as soon as it became feasible, I would continue my studies in Paris, and I lost no time moving there after the Liberation." The intellectual scene in post-Liberation Paris is then described vividly but somewhat elliptically. The reader will experience some difficulties, I predict, in sorting out what happened when, but the landmarks in Bollack's eventual academic interests already loom large. In fact, some of these landmarks are already foreshadowed in the Basel narrative.

§1I. The towering figure of Empedocles emerges early on. From the start, Bollack links the fragments of texts attributed to this pre-Socratic thinker with the "indirect tradition, which had given us these fragments." At this point, Bollack begins to explore the importance of what is commonly called the *doxography* relating to thinkers like Empedocles,". . . paving the way for an intellectual historiography."

§1J. In the postwar years, Bollack says, experts who studied pre-Socratic thinkers like Empedocles and Parmenides "thought that they could lead readers into direct communication with an archaic way of thinking, and make them understand the heroic language of an origin, beyond any scientific methods, or even in opposition to them." Bollack continues: what really "shielded" him from such an "unscientific" trend in pre-Socratic studies was his decision to work "on ancient interpretations of fragments and on the opinions of philosophers—doxography." In the wording I have just quoted, he finally gives his own working definition of *doxography* after having already led up to the concept at an earlier point (as I comment at §1I).

§1K. Bollack makes it clear, already at this early stage of his intellectual autobiography, that he had to learn by himself a methodology for analyzing the thinking of philosophers in terms of the attested doxography. And he refers to his self-taught methodology short-hand as *hermeneutics*. Back then, in the student days of Bollack, "the principles of hermeneutics were neither considered nor taught." This term *hermeneutics*, so vitally important for Bollack throughout his life, will recur many times and in many ways in The Art of Reading.

§1L. For the writer of this foreword, the words of Bollack hit home in a personal way when he says: "In most cases, readers, whatever their level of interest, latched on to a text constituted by others, pre-formed, as it were, by a scientific method that was rejected as unverifiable, so that they were no longer able to overcome their dependence or even to recognize it." Here my old self in the present is prompted to think back to a remote time in my own personal past when my young self was reading for the first time the texts of the Homeric Iliad and Odyssey. In my initial quest to find and to analyze the formulaic system that had shaped the diction as recorded in the Homeric textual tradition, I had not yet understood the importance of first making sure to understand the history of that textual tradition. As Bollack puts it (and as I note in §1C), the need to *establish the text* is as essential as the need to *establish the meaning of the text*.

§1M. The self-taught *hermeneutics* of Bollack had a rocky start in postwar Paris, and the reception in the world of German philology as he learned it was not necessarily all that fertile either. Looking back at it all, Bollack could not really identify with either the French or the German worlds of Classics. Here is how he says it, in his own oblique way, speaking first of the French milieu and then of the German: "At the time, one could quickly take the measure of this academic world to which I falsely ascribed a structure that it may have aspired to but had not yet acquired (and perhaps never did). I built up a quite artificial continuity with my earlier years in academe, rebelling against one reality in favor of another. Including among the

things I lacked the posture of distanciation that I had adopted earlier, I tried to make that negation operate as a positive factor; I used as a point of reference an absent system with which I had not really identified either. I do not think this double dissociation bothered me. It taught me to see differences, to tolerate them, to resist and reject taboos."

§1N. And here we come to a third and most decisive phase in the intellectual life of Bollack: he finds a new home in an academic circle that he himself founded, at the University of Lille. Again I quote from his own oblique wording: "Official doctrine maintained that science was not good for students. In Lille, I tried as hard as I could to organize a somewhat marginal research space alongside the formal education system. With Heinz Wismann, we got the students together in the attics and basements of the university, so to speak, and I continued this practice with Philippe Rousseau, then with Pierre Judet de La Combe and André Laks." (For more on the "Lille" circle and on the research center at Lille, see Judet de La Combe and Wismann 2009 in my Bibliography.)

Ch.2. "Reading the Philologists" (Bollack 1997b)

§2A. Bollack continues where he left off in "Learning to read." We return to what he calls philologische Wissenschaft, *philological science*. This science, we are now told, is not necessarily German, but it certainly is not French, either. It is rather the science that Bollack himself has taught himself. And the essential word is once again *hermeneutics*. And now we begin to see that the ideal form of hermeneutics is for Bollack a totalizing and perhaps unattainable form of philology: to understand the text in terms of arguments about the text, we must "compare all prior arguments."

§2B. In many ways, this essay "Reading the Philologists" is a prelude to the agenda that heat up in the essay that follows this one, "Odysseus among the philologists." There we will return to the most prestigious of all philological quests, which he has already described (see §1F) as the "virtuoso activity" of studying Homer.

§2C. To understand philology, you have to look at the "social environment" of the philologists themselves—usually associated with their "national origin." A challenging case in point is that ultimate German philologist Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff—and his philological reception in France.

§2D. Bollack here introduces—only fleetingly, for the time being—two shining examples of his own philology, centering on the Oedipus Tyrannus of Sophocles and on the poetry of Paul Celan.

Bibliography

Bollack, J. 1996. "Durchgänge." Zeitenwechsel. Germanistische Literaturwissenschaft vor und nach 1945 (ed. W. Barner and C. Koenig) 387–403. Frankfurt. This text is an earlier version of Bollack 1997a.

Bollack, J. 1997. La Grèce de personne: les mots sous le mythe. Paris.

Bollack, J. 1997a. "Apprendre à lire." In: Bollack 1997:9–21.

Bollack, J. 1997b. "Lire les philologues." In: Bollack 1997:25–28.

Bollack, J. 1997c. "Ulysse chez les philologues." In: Bollack 1997:29–59.

Bollack, J. 1997d. "Réflexions sur la pratique." In: Bollack 1997:93–103.

Bollack, J. 1997e. "Lire le mythe." In: Bollack 1997:131–136.

Judet de La Combe, P., and Wismann, H., eds. 2009. "Liminaire." La lecture insistante: autour de Jean Bollack. Colloque de Cerisy (July 11–18), 19–32. Paris.

Tags: Jean Bollack, The Art of Reading

Comments are closed.

« Where it all comes together for me: a sacred space of the goddess Hērā

Penelope's great web: the violent interruption »