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

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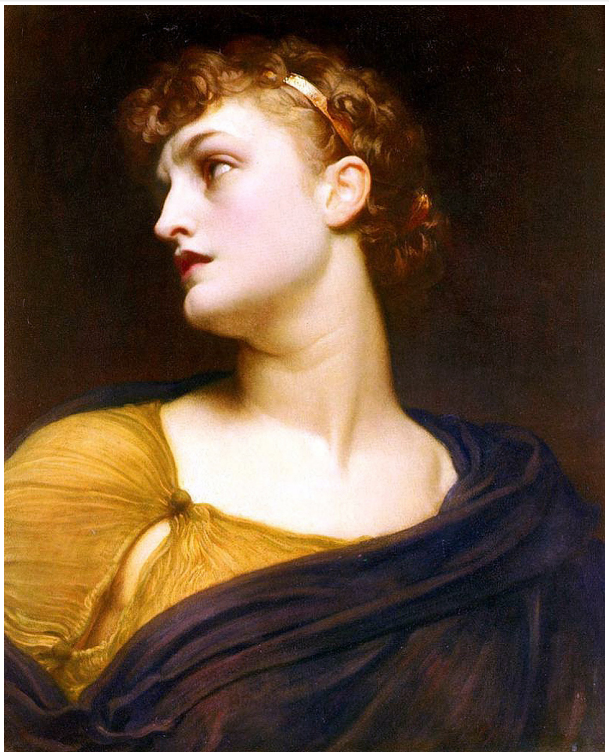
Jean Bollack in English, a preview of a foreword to The Art of Reading, Part IV

April 14, 2016 By Gregory Nagy listed under By Gregory Nagy Comments off Edit This

This posting of 2016.04.14 is Part IV of what I started in the postings of 2016.03.09, 2016.03.30, 2016.04.07, which were Parts I and II and III. 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…]



Chapter 10 of Bollack's The Art of Reading explores "The Construction of Meaning and Sophocles' Antigone"
Image:"Antigone," 1882, by Frederic Leighton [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

Ch.7. "An Anthropological Fiction" (Bollack 2012a)

§7A. Bilingual and bicultural as he was in German and French, Jean Bollack preferred to read Sigmund Freud in the original German. The work of Freud that English-speakers know as Moses and Monotheism and that Bollack knew by its original title, Der Mann Moses und die monotheistische Religion (1939), is the focus of this essay concerning a case of "anthropological fiction"—which for Freud was at the same time a case of psychoanalytical history. That case was the role of Moses as reflected in the Hebrew Bible. This role, in terms of an insight elaborated by Freud, was a kind of reaction to the role of an Egyptian pharaoh named Amenhotep IV (for the Greeks, Amenophis IV), who ruled in the eighteenth Dynasty, in the late fourteenth century BCE, and who in one single decisive moment of world history was given the new name Akhenaten, expressing a monotheistic devotion to a solar god named Aten. Such a historical moment, Freud argued, led to a monotheistic role for Moses as well—a role reconstructed by way of a psychoanalytical insight into a story. At first, as Bollack retells Freud's telling of the reconstructed story, the Egyptian idea of monotheism "gained ground on its own"; but then "it was picked up by a man who was not a king." That man was Moses, who, according to Freud, "behaved as if he were the pharaoh himself."

§7B. The essay, graced as it is with interspersed renderings of Freud's elegant German prose in Bollack's correspondingly elegant French, shows that the Freudian "fiction" about Moses will remain merely that, a "fiction"—unless we can somehow find a way to reconstruct historically an Egyptian origin for Moses. Such a reconstruction has now been made possible, as Bollack points out, by the pioneering argumentation of the Egyptologist Jan Assmann in his book Moses the Egyptian (1997). Drawing on the testimony of sources like the Egyptian historian Manetho, who lived in the third century BCE, Assmann argues persuasively for traces of Egyptian cultural patterning in Mosaic ideology.

§7C. But where exactly is the "anthropology" in the "fiction" developed by Freud in telling the "psychoanalytical" story of Moses the monotheist? As Bollack shows, Freud was influenced by "Cambridge School" anthropologists like Sir James Frazer. For example, in positing an ideological construct concerning the murder of Moses by his own people, Freud refers to Frazer's The Dying God (1911) as a source for comparative research on lore about primal killings of leaders.

§7D. The essay draws to a close with some startling observations about the agenda of the book Moses and Monotheism as Freud's own special way of confronting anti-Semitism as he saw it.

Ch.8. "Reading Drama" (Bollack 1997f)

§8A. For a casual observer, the dating established for Epicurus, whose lifetime extended from the late fourth century BCE into the early third, seems to put this philosopher into a historical time frame that arrives too late—as if the dating were some kind of careless mistake. Perhaps surprisingly, the era of Epicurus postdates the glory days of classical Greek drama, which of course goes back to the second half of the fifth century. I say "surprisingly" because, when we read Jean Bollack in the act of reading drama, our first impression is that his readings are based on Epicurean thinking—as if the life and times of Epicurus came before and not after the golden age of tragic playwrights like Sophocles and Euripides. For Bollack, there is something strikingly foundational about Epicurus that helps us understand the essence of classical drama. When Bollack is reading drama, Epicurus is for him particularly good to think with, since this philosopher had discovered "a lost freedom that was almost archaic and highly utopian," while the likes of Sophocles and Euripides "felt a similar desire for intellectual sovereignty."

§8B. This essay of Bollack was originally composed at a time when he and his wife Mayotte experienced the actual staging, in theater, of translations that the two of them had made together of three classical tragedies from the original Greek into French. First there was the Oedipus Tyrannus of Sophocles (1985), then the Iphigeneia in Aulis of Euripides (1990), and then the Andromache, again by Euripides (1994). What this pair of translators experienced, in seeing the texts of the tragedies being turned into performance—or, better, being turned back into performance—was that same sense of "intellectual sovereignty" that thinkers like Epicurus had been seeking in their own special ways.

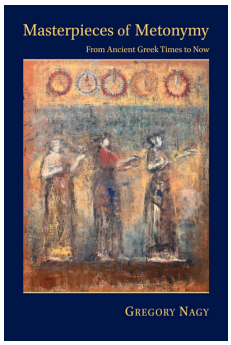
§8C. Bollack concedes that the success of the theatrical experiences he describes depended in each case on fidelity to the text—a fidelity made possible by the director of the tragedy that was being performed on stage. For the Oedipus Tyrannus, it was Alain Milianti (La Salamandre, Lille, and Théâtre de l'Odéon, Paris); for the Iphigeneia in Aulis, it was Ariane Mnouchkine (Théâtre du Soleil); and for the Andromache, it was Jacques Lassalle (Athens, Avignon Festival). If the director manages to remain faithful to the exactness of the translation, Bollack argues, what is achieved is a recreated reality that is "trans-historical." In other words, "the very timelessness of theatrical performance annihilates historical distance."

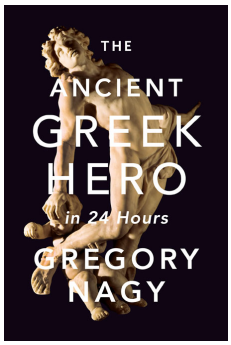
Ch.9. "An Act of Cultural Restoration: The Status Accorded to the Classical Tragedians by the Decree of Lycurgus" (Bollack 1994)

§9A. In the third quarter of the fourth century BCE, the statesman Lycurgus initiated reforms in the performance traditions of State Theater in the city-state of Athens, legislating an official "State Script" for the tragedies of three poets and three poets only: Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. I first used the term "State Script" in a book listed in the bibliography here as Nagy 1996 (pp. 174–175), in a context where I was citing the essay that I am introducing here, Bollack 1994. In this essay, Bollack interprets in some detail a brief text that provides the only evidence we have for the existence of the legislation to which he refers as the Decree of Lycurgus.

§9B. The ancient text that tells about this Decree comes from The Lives of the Ten Orators, attributed to Plutarch—though there is no proof of authorship. I quote here not only the relevant passage but also a passage that precedes it. The two passages together take up the space of one small paragraph:

> εἰσήνεγκε δὲ καὶ νόμους, τὸν μὲν περὶ τῶν κωμῳδῶν, ἀγῶνα τοῖς Χύτροις ἐπιτελεῖν ἐφάμιλλον ἐν τῷ θεάτρῳ καὶ τὸν νικήσαντα εἰς ἄστυ καταλέγεσθαι, πρότερον οὐκ ἐξόν, ἀναλαμβάνων τὸν ἀγῶνα ἐκλελοιπότα· τὸν δέ, ὡς χαλκᾶς εἰκόνας ἀναθεῖναι τῶν ποιητῶν, Αἰσχύλου Σοφοκλέους Εὐριπίδου, τὰς τραγῳδίας αὐτῶν ἐν κοινῷ γραψαμένους φυλάττειν καὶ τὸν τῆς πόλεως γραμματέα παραναγινώσκειν τοῖς ὑποκρινομένοις· οὐκ ἐξεῖναι γὰρ αὐτὰς ὑποκρίνεσθαι.
>
> He [= Lycurgus] introduced various pieces of legislation. One of them concerned the performers of comedies. He instituted a competition [in comedy] for the festival of the Khutroi. It [the competition] was held in the Theater, and the winner was to be enrolled among those who have freedom of the city, whereas previously it [= such enrollment] was not possible. He [= Lycurgus] was reinstituting the competition after it had lapsed. Another [piece of legislation that he instituted] was to set up bronze statues of the poets Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides and to transcribe their tragedies and keep them under control in common possession, and that the recorder [grammateus] of the city was to read





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> them as a model [paranagignōskein] to those acting [the tragedies], since, otherwise, it was not possible to act them [= the tragedies].
>
> "Plutarch" Lives of the Ten Orators 841f

§9C. The translation that I just gave here is my own. The interpretations, as reflected in this translation, are for the most part in agreement with the interpretations reflected in the translation given in the essay by Bollack as recast at Ch.9 in the present book, though there are a few slight differences. In my translation, I interpret ἐν κοινῷ γραψαμένους φυλάττειν as meaning 'to transcribe and keep under control in common possession', where I link ἐν κοινῷ 'in common possession' directly with φυλάττειν 'to keep' and not with γραψαμένους 'to transcribe and …'. The expression ἐν κοινῷ 'in common possession' is the opposite of ἰδίᾳ 'in private possession' (such an opposition between 'in common possession' and 'in private possession' is overt in, for example, Demosthenes, Against Leptines 24). So, the texts of the tragedies have now become a matter of public record, and that is why they become the responsibility of the public recorder: in interpreting τὸν τῆς πόλεως γραμματέα as 'the recorder of the city', I follow Bollack, who compares Thucydides 7.10. Accordingly, I interpret παραναγινώσκειν to mean 'read as a model', comparing the use of this same word in Aeschines, On the False Embassy (135), where the orator calls on his audience to listen to a reading ἐκ τῶν δημοσίων γραμμάτων 'from the public texts'. And why do the actors who acted the tragedies have to listen to such a public reading by the public recorder? The compressed wording of the original Greek gives this answer: οὐκ ἐξεῖναι γὰρ αὐτὰς ὑποκρίνεσθαι 'since, otherwise, it was not possible to act them [= the tragedies]'. (For the usage of γάρ in the sense of 'since, otherwise', see Denniston 1954:62–63.) In other words, as I understand it, the actors otherwise would not have been permitted to act those tragedies. I see a parallel in the expression that we encountered earlier in the Greek of the same paragraph, πρότερον οὐκ ἐξόν, meaning 'whereas previously it [=enrollment] was not possible', where the wording that I translate as 'was not possible' is to be understood in the sense of 'was not permitted'.

§9D. Bollack in his essay also entertains and then rejects an alternative interpretation, according to which the texts of the tragedians had already become so corrupted in the era of Lycurgus that it was no longer possible for them to be performed unless the actors consulted the State Script. In terms of this alternative interpretation, the translation 'it was not possible' is not to be understood as 'it was not permitted'. But this alternative interpretation, as I already noted, is in the end rejected. For Bollack, any attempt to distinguish the text of the original composition from the text meant for performance results in the creation of a false dichotomy. The text was always meant for performance:

> The texts of past performances of fifth-century Greek tragedy were collected by the city as the true basis of its political existence; the past had a central presence thanks to the text and its public preservation, even as regular performances updated the past, in the framework of a theatrical restoration of a political (or cultural) nature.

Ch.10 "From Philology to Theater: The Construction of Meaning and Sophocles' Antigone" (Bollack 2001)

§10A. The Antigone of Sophocles becomes a starting point here for a debate that juxtaposes the *hermeneutics* of Bollack with the approaches of near-contemporaries like Jacques Lacan (1986). Bollack has picked a worthy opponent, and he starts with a fitting subject for debate: it has to do with the meaning of atē in the Antigone. This word, which in tragedy can refer both to personal ruin as an effect and to the cause of such ruin, brings out in both Lacan and Bollack a set of different interpretations that say perhaps more about them than about Sophocles himself. Bollack is clearly interested more in the effects of atē, not about its causes, whereas he thinks that Lacan's analysis of the causes "is entirely predetermined by the cultural, intellectual, and philosophical history of the nineteenth century."

§10B. The debate extends further. In this essay, Bollack is more explicit than elsewhere about the genealogy of his own *hermeneutics*. He singles out Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) as a primary source of intellectual impetus, adding that the decidedly "literary" hermeneutics of this thinker tended to get occluded in the French intellectual scene of Bollack's own era by a rival "philosophical" hermeneutics derived primarily from Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) as mediated by Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002) in his book Wahrheit und Methode (1960)—or, to put it more accurately, in the French version, Vérité et méthode (1976; complete edition 1996). As Bollack implies, the reception of Heidegger in France was thus not just one step removed from Heidegger, by way of Gadamer: for many, it was two steps removed, since few francophone intellectuals were able to understand German well enough to make do without the French Gadamer.

§10C. It is with his philological insights that Bollack seeks to appreciate the theatrical effectiveness of the Antigone. He analyzes this drama as a masterpiece of craftsmanship in wording and even in syntax, so that the myth of Antigone can be viewed as a creation made possible by that craftsmanship, not by the process of mythmaking in and of itself. It should be added, however, that the Seven Against Thebes of Aeschylus already shows a myth of Antigone in the making.

Ch.11 "Accursed from Birth" (Bollack 1995)

§11A. Unlike the myth of Antigone, which is in the process of being created in the drama of Sophocles (and already in a drama of Aeschylus, the Seven Against Thebes), the myth of Oedipus in the drama Oedipus Tyrannus by Sophocles is already a fully-formed myth that makes the drama possible in the first place. Such is the argument of Bollack in this essay. And, in the course of making his argument, he undertakes a particularly keen and incisive analysis of the drama in terms of its plot.

§11B. The plot here is all a matter of time: "the past is illuminated by what it has produced." So, it is pointless to ask whether Oedipus is guilty of killing his father and having sex with his mother: rather, his guilt emerges in the course of time—in the time it takes to proceed from the beginning to the end of the drama: "with Oedipus, the power that has been building up since the beginning turns against itself, taking the shape of brilliant success to achieve its own destruction." This drama, "in which the catastrophe becomes clear in the course of a single day," produces what Bollack calls "a homologous past." And, as the drama progresses, "it makes that past comprehensible."

§11C. The pollution that drives the plot of the Oedipus Tyrannus, according to Bollack, is not only the incest or the parricide: it is the regicide. Never mind the witticism, uttered sometime at the expense of the French, that they never really got over their own regicide. The insight of our francophone thinker here cuts even deeper. The regicide in the Oedipus Tyrannus is the curse of sterility:

> The lack of descendants is part of the curse. Laius, an infanticide, has to expose his own son, anticipating the parricide: he has killed his own paternal self. When Oedipus commits murder, he echoes his father's action. Thus the execration of the king's assassin is proclaimed in absentia, the accused having been eliminated by his victim.

Ch.12. "Two Phases of Recognition in Sophocles' Electra" (Bollack 2012b)

§12A. Electra hates her mother but has always loved her father. So, she refuses to be her mother's daughter, defying a primary convention of symbolic filiation, which is, that the daughter is to the mother as the son is to the father. As a character who desires to be the avenger of Agamemnon her father, killed by Clytemnestra her mother, Electra becomes the rival of Orestes as the son of Agamemnon, whose primary function it should be to take over the role of the avenger. In the drama of Sophocles named after Electra, the daughter of Agamemnon together with his son participate in a recognition scene where their roles are sorted out (lines 1232–1287). But Bollack argues that this sorting out of roles is at the expense of Electra, in that her character as an avenger is nullified in the process. And the nullification is accentuated by the fact that the form of this recognition scene is not recitation, as we might have accepted, but song. That is to say, the two actors who are assigned the roles of Electra and Orestes are performing their lines here (to repeat, 1232–1287) in a song that has rhythm and melody. This song, then, as a form, is in sharp contrast with the alternative form that we know as recitative, the form of which is a meter that is not sung. That alternative form would be the iambic trimeter.

§12B. There is more to be said about this remarkable recognition scene in the Electra of Sophocles. As Bollack shows, the interaction between the sister and the brother is metatheatrical. In the process of bringing about a change in the role and even in the character of Electra, Orestes is behaving—or, better, acting—like a director of a drama (a book by Batchelder 1994 has elaborated on such an exercise in metatheater). Also, although the rhythm and the melody of the singing performed by the two actors in this recognition scene creates the sense of a higher register of emotion by contrast with the recited iambic trimeters that are ordinarily performed by actors, the mood of this scene is emotionally uneven, since the character of Orestes, by contrast with Electra, sings lines that tend to be less emotional in content and closer to iambic trimeter in form, as if he were speaking while she was singing.

§12C. The sung form of this recognition scene in the Electra of Sophocles can be described as a "duet" of sorts. And Bollack understands that such "duets" are attested also in the dramas of Euripides. But can we infer, then, that the Electra of Sophocles was composed after the Electra of Euripides? Bollack declines to engage in such speculation, preferring an explanation that leaves room for the possibility that the form of these "duets" comes from a tradition that was already well-known to the audiences of Sophocles and Euripides.

Ch.13: "Reading the Cosmogonies" (Bollack 1997g)

§13A. For Bollack, who adheres methodologically to the text of any given author as the primary empirical given, even if that text is mediated by doxographical traditions that intervene, the vast diversity of content that we find in texts of cosmogonies originating from thinkers like Parmenides (6th and 5th centuries BCE) and Heraclitus (6th and 5th centuries BCE) and Democritus (5th and 4th centuries BCE), leads to a generalizing inference: all philosophers, each and every one of them, can make their own cosmogonies.

§13B. An anthropological understanding of cosmogonies, by contrast, would lead to a different though comparably generalizing inference: as a social institution, a cosmogony articulates the cosmos or social order of the society that it represents, and this is done by way of picturing the cosmos or natural order of things as if it were the same thing as the social order. Such a cosmogony, however, would be older that the newer and now personalized cosmogonies of the philosophers, who have for the most part freed themselves from ideological dependence on their societies. So the cosmogonies of the philosophers became independent of the older and more traditional cosmogonies that represented social order in the city-states.

§13C. Bollack adds that the personalized cosmogonies of the philosophers could vary in content from "a closed, unique world," like that of Parmenides, to a "world open to the limitless," like that of the atomists in general.

Ch.14. "Empedocles: A Single Project, Two Theologies" (Bollack 2005)

§14A. Here in Ch.14 Bollack returns to what he signaled already in Ch.6, namely, the complementarity of the Purifications of Empedocles with another celebrated poem of this thinker, the Peri phuseōs—a title

sometimes known as On Nature but better rendered as The Origins. In his reading, Bollack shows that the two poems, although they originate from a single authorial mind, convey two different systems of thinking, two theologies, as it were, and that the distinctness of the two systems is actually highlighted in a context where one poem, The Origins, refers to the other poem, the Purifications.

§14B. Whereas The Origins, in Bollack's formulation, is an esoteric text, the Purifications is exoteric. Thus, by means of "a verbal re-composition," the discourse of Empedocles passes from "the construction of a world in the text" to "an intentionally cultural or political application." And "there is nature on the one hand, human history on the other."

Ch.15. "The Parmenidean Cosmology of Parmenides" (Bollack 1990)

§15A. This essay continues where Bollack left off at Ch.13. Here in Ch.15, he concentrates again on the cosmic vision of Parmenides. But, this time, the perspective widens to include cosmology alongside cosmogony. And the cosmology of Parmenides, Bollack complains, is based on an ontology that philosophers today tend to neglect. Here Bollack also ventures a more general opinion about what he sees as a widespread pattern of neglect. Such neglect, he argues, stems from an attitude that he detects in the work of many interpreters who have published their views about the cosmology of Parmenides and about the relevant doxography. He summarizes in this way that attitude: "what is not understood by the interpreter is presumed not to have been understood by the author." To signal his deep conviction that Parmenides understood perfectly well the cosmology that he was describing, Bollack calls this cosmology "Parmenidean."

§15B. There is, however, a major problem in coming to terms with the cosmology of Parmenides: the author's fragments and the relevant doxography are in fact difficult to understand. In seeking to achieve a holistic understanding of the cosmology, Bollack applies his *hermeneutics*, as already described in Ch.1, to a systematic reassessment of both the fragments and the doxography. In the process, Bollack defends the testimony of Aetius (28 A 37 D–K) as "a solid, detailed, and structured summary," which "allows us to rediscover and retrace with precision the phases in the constitution of the world, with the ultimate outcome being a complete theoretical elucidation." He adds that the relevant fragments of Parmenides concerning matter, as cited by Simplicius, can be "clarified" in the context of a doxographic fragment from Theophrastus (46 A D–K). By way of these and other such clarifications, what Bollack describes as "the lost achievement" of Parmenides in formulating his cosmology can be reconstructed and thus brought back to life.

Ch.16. "Expressing Differences" (Bollack 1997h)

§16A. After his frontal assault in Ch.15 on interpreters who blame their lack of understanding an author on the author, Bollack steps back for a moment to reflect, offering a brief manifesto here in Ch.16 on the *hermeneutics* that he applies to the likes of Parmenides. If the methodology of his hermeneutics is to be valued as a critical tool, it must be *historical* in its orientation.

§16B. Accordingly, Bollack takes exception to a mode of research that concentrates on the argument of the moment and loses sight of the bigger picture, as it were. What results, he insists, is gross reductionism. Giving examples, he comments sarcastically, "Antigone is the family, Creon the State, Heraclitus the river." He follows up with another sarcastic comment, which will lead into the essay following this one: "Heraclitus said almost nothing of what he has been made to say from Plato on: nothing about fire or flow."

Ch.17. "The Heraclitean Logos" (Bollack 1997i)

§17A. The thinking of Heraclitus (6th/5th century), as Bollack argues, "does not focus on the presence of Being," in the sense of Heidegger's idea of Being, "but on the universe of meaning," and that meaning is a function of language, of the logos. That is why, Bollack continues, we should not try to look for an overarching system of thought in the aphorisms of Heraclitus: "Heraclitus did not have his own system." Further, "the unity of his approach did not lie in any positive content but rather in his critical analysis of cosmological theories, nourished by assertions that were current in the learned circles of his day."

§17B. Heraclitus, says Bollack, "speaks of a reference provided by language; he never tires of talking about situations that show how the people around him miss the point of analysis and fail to grasp the structure of the language that they use and that impinges on their behavior."

Ch.18. "Reading a Reference" (Bollack 1997j)

§18A. The author revisits here briefly his work on Empedocles, whose thinking has already been foregrounded in this book on multiple occasions (§1I–J, §6, §14). Bollack notes that his own work on the Purifications and The Origins of Empedocles has refuted some old interpretations of the thinking of Empedocles—interpretations to which Freud had once upon a time referred in shaping his theories about "the death principle."

§18B. Reading this old reference made by Freud to old interpretations of Empedocles leads Bollack to reflect on other such references, this time relating to the Oedipus Tyrannus and the Antigone of Sophocles. In the case of the second of these two tragedies, the author who makes the reference is not Freud but Lacan, and here Bollack returns to a relevant debate that he started to develop in another essay (§10A).

Ch.19. "The Scientistic Model: Freud and Empedocles" (Bollack 1997k)

§19A. We are not yet done with Empedocles—or with Freud on Empedocles. Bollack will now take a closer look at references made by Freud to the thinking of Empedocles. In particular, he will now focus on that ancient Greek philosopher's vision of Philia or 'Love' and Neikos or 'Strife'. In this context, Bollack will have to confront—just as Freud had to confront—"a theory of universal animation," described as "a pan-psychism that strongly influenced positivist or scientistic descriptions of pre-Socratic thought at the beginning of the century."

§19B. Bollack here has the advantage of hindsight, since the perspective of phenomenology eventually led to "a more ontological position." Still, his critique of Freud here is illuminating. At one point, he makes this striking observation: "by firmly linking the death impulse to life, Freud has in a sense drawn closer to Empedocles, for whom Strife was inseparable from the creative movements of life."

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