Forum

Paul Celan and Yvan Goll

To the Editor:

I read with interest and dismay Yves Bonnefoy's essay "Why Paul Celan Took Alarm" (125.1 [2010]: 204–12). While I do not wish to add to Barbara Wiedemann's weighty, 925-page documentation of the "Goll affair" (*Paul Celan—Die Goll-Affäre*), which discusses Claire Goll's accusations that Paul Celan plagiarized the work of her deceased husband, Yvan Goll, I would like to correct a few misstatements in the essay and its introduction that devalue Yvan Goll and his work. Goll was blameless in the affair, having died before it began. By pointing out these inaccuracies, I hope to shed light on this poet and recalibrate the lens through which we see his vast but relatively unknown body of work.

In John Felstiner's introduction to the Bonnefoy essay, Felstiner writes that Goll, "allied with surrealism, had translated Joyce's *Ulysses* into German and dealt in themes of loneliness and Jewish wandering" (204). Goll knew Joyce, and he collaborated with Joyce, Beckett, and several others in translating "Anna Livia Plurabelle" into French, but he did not translate *Ulysses* into German. This can be confirmed by the omission of any Goll translation of *Ulysses* in Andreas Kramer and Robert Vilain's *Yvan Goll: A Bibliography of the Primary Works* (2006). In addition, the Swiss-German publisher Rhein-Verlag conducted a contest to find the first German translator of *Ulysses*, and after Georg Goyert won the contest, Rhein-Verlag, with whom Goll was associated, published Goyert's translation of *Ulysses* in 1927, following it with a trade edition in 1930.

Felstiner writes in his introduction, "One afternoon in 1949 when Celan was visiting Bonnefoy, an Alsatian Jewish writer unknown to them [Goll] showed up unannounced at the door. . . . In November of that year, Celan visited Goll, who was dying in a Paris hospital. Goll

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took to Celan and his poetry. He began writing again in German and asked Celan to translate his French poetry" (204). On this point, Bonnefoy relates in his essay that "if there had been any borrowing it would have been done by Goll: Paul read his own poems to Goll . . . when he visited the hospital where the old man was dying but also writing again in German, influenced by his new friend" (208).

In fact, Goll had begun to write poems in German during the spring of 1948, after his return to France on 4 June 1947 from his wartime exile in New York. This was a year before he met Celan in an impromptu visit to Bonnefoy in 1949. In a letter written on 23 March 1948, Goll shared his excitement at writing again in German with Alfred Döblin, the editor of the monthly journal *Das goldene Tor*, to whom he submitted several of his new German poems: "After a twenty-year departure I have returned to the German language, with that devotion and delight in renewal, almost with trepidation. Surrealism has gone through me and deposited its salts. Yet it is as if this dreamweed plant were for me a new birth." Five of the poems Goll sent to Döblin appeared in the May 1948 issue of *Das goldene Tor* under the pseudonym Tristan Thor. They were also published posthumously in 1951 in his collection of poems *Das Traumkraut*.

If Celan and Goll first met in 1949, then clearly it was not Goll's new acquaintance, the twenty-eight-year-old Celan, who inspired Goll to write again in German. Rather, it was "dieses Traumkraut" ("this dreamweed"), which appeared to him after he had been diagnosed with leukemia in 1945, in New York, that beckoned him to compose his anguished poems in German in the spring of 1948.

After meeting Goll at Bonnefoy's home, Celan arranged to call on the Golls in Paris one Sunday afternoon, 6 November 1949, at their home in the Hôtel Palais d'Orsay, bringing Claire a gift of eight red roses. Celan describes that visit (which Goll noted in his diary) in a 12 November letter to Erica Lillegg: "Last Sunday I visited Iwan Goll. A true poet. A *Mensch*. The first whom I meet in Paris. Earlier he wrote in German, now chiefly in French. (He is Alsatian.) His last volume 'Élegie d'Ihpétong' suive de 'Masques de Cendre.' Illustrated with four original lithographs by Pablo Picasso. . . . Iwan Goll knows all the greats of our time. Rilke. Joyce. Picasso. All. And with that he is modest. And deathly ill: pernicious anemia, blood decomposition."

On 13 December 1949 Goll entered the American Hospital in Neuilly, where he remained, undergoing an appendectomy and great physical suffering, until his death on 27 February 1950. Celan accompanied Claire Goll to the hospital on 14 December and tried to give blood to Yvan, but, not having the correct blood type, he was rejected. This "old man," Yvan Goll, died when he was fifty-eight years old.

I respect Yves Bonnefoy's defense of his close friend Paul Celan's "psychic travail," his search to understand why Celan could "never shake off the memory of the slander" (207, 208). In positing that "[n]o plagiarism is possible in poetry," Bonnefoy himself parries the main thrust of Claire Goll's attacks on Celan's work (209). Can we not stop broadcasting the Goll affair and return to the writing, the poetry, of both men?

Yvan Goll's path through a life of suffering and his recording of that journey among the best poets, painters, musicians, and artists of his day were different from Celan's but no less worthy than his of respect. It is important to recognize that the fallout from the Goll affair—the (perhaps unintended) slights and inaccuracies concerning Goll—has kept the distinctive and varied work of this soulful poet in obscurity, particularly in the English-speaking world.

Nan Watkins
Western Carolina University

Reply:

In response to Nan Watkins's remarks, I wish to clarify several points.

I never said or thought that Yvan Goll began to write again in German after having met Paul Celan. It is only that Goll's German poems from this period could (hypothetically) have

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been influenced by the ones that Paul was then writing and that he read to Goll.

I never said or implied that Goll accused his new friend of plagiarism. He was dead when Claire, his wife, made this accusation.

My essay, moreover, is not a study of the relation between these two poets but a reflection on the very different, more general question of plagiarism in poetry.

Yvan Goll was not unknown to me when he visited me in 1949. I had *Le nouvel Orphée* (1923) in my library. I just didn't know anything about his recent life.

Yves Bonnefoy
Paris

The Uses of Philology

To the Editor:

I've thought to myself on several occasions that it is a shame most academic journals do not set space aside for readers' letters. Perhaps few readers think to write a letter. The average reader of an academic journal—I prefer to think of myself as a scavenger—is an academic, so the appropriate response to an article would be to compose one's own and thereby demonstrate through detailed analysis where the article under consideration is deficient and supplement it with a superior reading. When said article is published a year or two later, people may even remember what the original article was about.

I write this letter to *PMLA* because it is everything an article ought not to be: hasty, immediate, a gut response, ill-conceived, angry, rash, and perhaps poorly argued. After reading the three articles and introduction in the cluster "Philology Matters" (125.2 [2010]: 283–336), I was left irritated and bewildered. I was irritated with how often philology has been rediscovered of late, even though philological methods (word study, historical linguistics, and textual criticism, to name a few) have been going strong and progressing in the work of numerous critics, many of whom might never identify themselves as philologists. Jerome McGann, Susan Stewart, Anne Carson, Virginia Jackson, and N. Katherine Hayles spring to mind. McGann in particular has been at the forefront of theorizing new ways to relate textual criticism and editorial theory to literary interpretation (see esp. *The Textual Condition* and *Radiant Textuality*) and has been pulling his hair out over why this relation has yet to catch on more broadly (*The Scholar's Art* and *The Point Is to Change It*).

I'm bewildered over why these "rediscoveries" of philology are dead set on looking backward. The critics I mention above represent the foresight of philology and philological methods (e.g., their relevance to the so-called new media, their use of the materiality of texts to reconsider conceptions of genre), whereas the Romance philologists Michelle R. Warren trots out in her introduction, Erich Auerbach and Ernst Robert Curtius (though, curiously, not Leo Spitzer), represent philological hindsight. Even the more recent critics Warren invokes, Edward Said and Édouard Glissant, understand philology retrospectively, not as a means to develop novel modes of investigation and interpretation but as a way to bolster what they (and by a certain logic we) are already doing.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the thematic link Warren provides for the articles in the cluster: "the ways that they excavate and activate silence" (286). I had the privilege of sitting in on the dissertation defense of a friend and colleague of mine, Michael Kicey, who expressed the problem with excavations of silence more eloquently than I ever could. If I understood him correctly—and, as my letter's scatterbrained prose suggests, I may not have—the "gotcha" approach to discursive silences, be they in a literary text or in criticism, is fundamentally wrongheaded. "[T]o reconstruct what has been lost," as Warren says (284), is indeed prime philological territory, but the additional tendency to supplement those silences with rank conjecture simply reproduces the critical blindness for which old-school philology comes under fire. Additionally, to point to a silence with a cheap *Aha!* is not productive. These silences are almost never grappled with as silences, as irrevocably lost, as

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