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## A Latin Lover in Ancient Rome

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CHAPTER 3

TWO PORTRAITS  
OF THE LADY

Image-repertoire burns underneath like an incompletely extinguished peat fire; it catches again; what was renounced reappears; out of the hasty grave suddenly breaks a long cry.

—Barthes, *Discourse*, 108–9



FOR CENTURIES, AT LEAST since the second century after Christ (and probably before that), readers of Propertius thought they were being granted a glimpse into the poet-lover's exhilarating and turbulent affair with a courtesan (in today's version, a very high-class hooker) whom Apuleius had identified as one Hostia (a name which, by an odd circumstance that feminists might delight in, means "sacrificial victim"). For these readers the first three volumes of the Propertian corpus (plus two poems in his fourth book) contained a somewhat disjointed, if randomly chronological account, as plausible as it was intriguing, of the beginning, the zenith and the end of that affair. They read Propertius' poems, in short, as if they had been intended to comprise a work that was in part a fragment of autobiography and in part a romance, a novel. For them, Cynthia was a real woman who had really tortured Propertius into something like greatness (one thinks here, perhaps, of the wonders Maud Gonne accomplished with the erotic psyche of Yeats). Whatever other charms those poems possessed were, for these centuries of readers, overmatched by the anguished sincerity, the intensity, the unbearable reality they found in the poet-lover's encounter with the truth and fearful beauty of Love (one thinks here, perhaps, of the young Housman as he ponders the mess of Propertius' manuscripts

even as he struggles with that other mess, the one that Moses Jackson, the object of Housman's own unrequited love, had left behind him as he made his way to India and to matrimony).

In such readings, what was central to the poems, what made them cohere and resonate, was Cynthia's (Hostia's) power over the poet on whom she bestowed the erotic identity that, as he himself admitted, fueled both his genius and the poems that it produced. It was this *content* that mattered. It was this *content* that provided the *form* (the illusion of chronological verisimilitude) that the poetry had to take on to be credible as autobiographical representation. Which means that what the poet *intended* (what other choice, in this reading, had he?) was to leave a record, however impressionistic, of how it was, of what had happened to him. It was what had happened to him that dictated the content (his memories of his feelings) that his poetry would have; and that content in turn dictated both the intentions of his poetry and the form that would have to pattern it.

These readings tend to all but ignore what Propertius may have thought or felt about the Augustan settlement, and if they remembered or touched on this aspect of his poetry at all, they converted him into another loyal denizen of the stable that comprised Augustus' court poets (Vergil, Horace, Tibullus, Ovid). That the sincere and powerful patriotism he was thought to share with his fellow poets could be in conflict with his still more powerful (and sincere) erotic obsession (both as poet and as lover, as poet-lover or lover-poet) was a notion that seldom complicated this view of the poet and his poems. Propertius' steadfast refusals to participate in the manufacture of encomiums of the regime were not felt to cast doubt on what seemed his devotion to the man who was in the process of becoming an emperor (and a god). It was sufficient, in these readings, to call attention to the gradual dwindling of Cynthia-Hostia from his third volume and to her violent expulsion from his life and his poetry in its closing poem, then to emphasize his enthusiastic application of himself, in his fourth book, to the task of immortalizing the foundations of the myth of Rome, its monuments, its institutions, its divinely ordered destiny. In constructing this shift—but it is more of a swerve—from lover of an amoral woman to passionate antiquarian, explicator of primordial Rome's humble origins and their connections with its modern imperial splendors, these readers for the most part shied away from the second half of the opening poem of Book 4, where a mysterious astrologer barges his way into the poem and warns

the poet that he must not abandon his real strength, the production of love poetry, in order to take up a style of poetry (patriotic effusions) that he is entirely unsuited to. Instead, they concentrated their scrutiny on trying to explain the sudden explosion of Cynthia-Hostia into the middle of the poet's final volume. Just after its midpoint in its sixth poem where the poet is devoting himself to praising the divine force (Apollo's) that brought about the defeat of Antony and Cleopatra, saved Rome from itself, and handed it over to the young man (Octavian) who was soon to become the emperor Augustus, Cynthia, all unannounced, makes her sensational comeback.

A similar willingness to credit the conversion of Propertius from compulsive slave of love to spokesman for the new status quo marks a style of reading him that replaces the confessional poet with a version of him that also evades the possible ambiguities of his patriotism by taking for granted his absorption into the ranks of the Augustan image makers. Beginning roughly at the middle of the twentieth century vigorous doubts started to confront the reliability of what had earlier seemed the solid facts of ancient literary biography. It came to be generally recognized that our paltry information about the lives and careers of the Roman poets were as dubious as they were scanty. This growing sense of uncertainty fostered another kind of skepticism—readers of Roman poetry began to think that poets who had seemed to be writing about themselves, from their own experience, were better imagined as inventing both their literary identities and the experiences those identities recounted, taking their poetic personae and what they said and thought and did not from life but from the books that they had inherited from their predecessors.

As these feelings of discomfort with the autobiographical basis of 'personal poetry' grew, the focus and the expectations of readers of this poetry (not only of elegy but also of lyric and of satire) shifted from the content of the poems and the intentions of the poets to questions about the underlying structures of the poems, about the rules that governed the poetic genres that the poets had chosen to write in, about the formal and stylistic norms that a given genre demanded, about the relations between a given poem and the various literary sources that it was constructed from (its intertextualities). Like lyric poetry, like satire, Roman love elegy ceased to be the representation of a poet's (real-life) experience and became an object to be studied, to be decoded, a piece of evidence that could be adduced to formulate new laws of literary production. The reading of these 'texts' (formerly 'poems') became in

short a kind of scientific investigation into the nature of this area (first-person speakers pretending to voice individual experience) of the phenomenon of literature. From here it was but a step, once this species of formalism had triumphed and the ontological preeminence of genre had been securely established, to begin to treat 'personal poetry,' along with all other varieties of literature, as materials for the investigation of cultural practices. Roman love elegy, like other literary genres, became a branch of anthropology in addition to having been transformed into a branch of linguistics.

Which means that Propertius (and his colleagues in making poetry out of the erotic imperatives) became, essentially, a repository of examples and of evidence for the nature and structure of his chosen poetic genre, as well as for the structures, the sign-systems, of Augustan ideology (that is, the Roman individual's imaginary relationship with the real conditions of his existence, as this relationship was designed by Augustus and his chief advisors). What his intentions may have been (why, for instance, he chose the genre he did in preference to other possible genres); what kinds of pleasure, intellectual as well as aesthetic, he was attempting to provide his contemporaries with; what his political attitudes might have been—all these concerns became all but irrelevant by virtue of the quest for the kinds of certainty that formalism hungers for and the kinds of scientific rigor that the social sciences aspire to. Common readers and belle-lettristes alike then had to go elsewhere for their entertainment and sustenance (to the movies, perhaps, but the movies, alas, have also become the property of the new formalism): Propertius and his fellow elegists were no longer available to them. Coterminous with the death of the author, the death of pleasure ensured that no one could or would be enjoying Propertius, at least not in the near future. He, along with his Cynthia, had become a cipher in the landscape of Signs.<sup>1</sup>

## THE END OF THE AFFAIR

Suppose a lover of poetry wants more from his poems than the formal principles and the theories that might be thought to generate them? Suppose she finds some solace in the taste and smell of fiction. Where

1. Among the most influential versions of Roman love elegy in recent years are Greene (1998), Miller, Veyne, Wyke, and Kennedy (1993); see Fantham's meticulous survey of current views.

should he go to discover some alternative to this style of reading? Maybe, in our need, we should ask the help of Roland Barthes, who atoned for murdering the author by reviving for us the various pleasures of the text. And where would Propertian pleasure be likely to be recovered? Where else but where he himself discovered its origin? Who is she that all the swains do her commend? Let's look at where it all began by looking at where it all ended.

In the final two poems of Book 3, having been overwhelmed by the latest and last straw, an exasperated and exhausted lover-poet finally summons up the courage to, as the vivid saying goes, dump his beloved (capricious Cynthia, more than fickle Cynthia).

falsa est ista tuae, mulier, fiducia formae  
olim oculis nimium facta superba meis.

Woman, the reliance you placed on your beauty has proved to be unfounded—it was my gaze—your reflection in my adoring eyes—that rendered you arrogant. (3.24.1–2)

So begins a litany of bitter reproaches that spills over from 3.24 into 3.25 (if these are not in fact a single poem) and that will culminate in an explosion of curses (he revels in a premonition of Cynthia's final days when she is old and ugly and alone) that rival Horace's similar vituperations in their impotent misogyny. So shrill is his tone here (he is obviously incapable of the devastating calm that marks Rhet Butler's incomparable dismissal of Scarlett, "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn") that one sometimes wonders if it is not *she* who has given *him* his walking papers. In any case, mention of *his* powerful gaze triggers in our memory the very first lines of Propertius' very first poem to Cynthia in his virgin volume:

Cynthia prima suis miserum me cepit ocellis,  
contactum nullis ante cupidinibus.

Cynthia it was who first seized me with *her* gaze [*suis ocellis*]—me, wretched me, untainted until then by strong carnal longings.

At the outset of his undoing, his enslavement by desire, it was Cynthia's look that proved powerful over him (a signal instance of the "ravished

ravisher”<sup>2</sup>). But now, in this latest (and apparently last) revision of their ‘story,’ it was the regard that Propertius cast upon her in which her real strength lay. (Newman, in a brief comment on these poems, glides over their complexities, 326.) Far from her having made him the person he became (a genuine lover-poet), it was he who transformed her from mere woman to legendary beauty. He regrets that this prolonged and faithful infatuation endured for five years (*quinque tibi potui servire fideliter annos*, 3.24.23) and produced, in the alembic of his deluded perception of her matchless loveliness, the poems that created both her fame and her megalomania. In one version of the tale, she transformed him from an erotic novice into a connoisseur of passion, from an aspiring poetaster (see 1.7.21, *humilis poeta*) into a supreme craftsman with a resounding message. In the other version of the tale (which the poet claims to be definitive), blinded by his own febrile imaginings, he bestowed on her eternal prominence etched in deathless verse—a gift of which she was entirely undeserving. So, either she was brilliant, powerful, irresistible or she was a two-bit whore, expert perhaps in a few sexual specialties, who somehow conned him into thinking she was his soul mate. Which version is true (or, as Latin wisely allows us to say, which is *verius*)?

One might give Propertius the benefit of the doubt and decide that his final utterance on the subject smacks of something like the truth. Unfortunately, our general impression of him, gradually assembled from these three (or four) volumes (1, 2A, 2B, 3), may well give us pause as we read the “dear Cynthia” letter. He is sincere here, or tries to be, but he is also a moody, querulous fellow, not a little given to small fits of hysteria. We have noticed, in perusing the volumes which this poem closes, that his interest in Cynthia seems somewhat to have abated, to have become increasingly conflicted, and that the ambiguities and neurotic uncertainties that always and already underlay this passion have grown ever more visible. But his increasing anxieties and increasing effort to distract himself from them do not necessarily mean that, in trying to say “goodbye to all that,” his prime motive is to be found in his disenchantment with her. Perhaps she was not always a mediocre imposter whom his poetic talents and his erotic hankerings gilded with unreal grandeur. Maybe he was genuinely in love with a woman whose wit and passion and “infinite variety” had more than earned her his humble submission,

2. See Barthes, *Discourse*, 188-89; for an ingenious postmodern perspective on the significance of Cynthia’s gaze, see O’Neill.

his unqualified devotion, his entire abjection. Propertius' lover-poet, the 'erotic subject' he imagines as the speaker of these poems (3.24, 25), is trying to tell the truth of the whole affair, but he ends by revealing only the complexity of that truth. Try as he may to discard Cynthia, he cannot (as he well knows) do that without erasing much, even most, of his best poetry. To grasp the indestructibility of his love of Cynthia his frequent protestations of undying love (e.g., *semper tua dicar imago*, 1.19.11, "even in hell I will be called the shade that belongs to you alone"; 1.12.19, 1.14.32, 1.15.25f., 1.26B.57f., 2.6.42, 2.9.42, 2.20.17f.) are less crucial than his confession that Cynthia is both the source and the purpose of his poetic genius:

quaeritis unde mihi totiens scribantur amores,  
unde meus veniat mollis in ora liber?  
non haec Calliope, non haec mihi cantat Apollo:  
ingenium nobis ipsa puella facit.

Dear readers, you ask me how it is that I am constantly writing these love poems, why it is that this tender volume issues from my mouth? It is not Calliope, nor Apollo, who sings me these songs. The girl herself makes of me a genius. (2.1.1–4)

So, in 2.30B, where he suavely responds to the *duri senes*, the puritanical geezers who, appealing to outmoded moral codes (*antiquis legibus*), object to his erotic poetry, Propertius imagines himself and Cynthia whisked off to a utopian spot where poetry holds sway. There, in that paradisiacal place, the Muses sing of Jupiter's delicious adulteries (*dulcia furta*, 28). Thus, divinely vindicated and safe from censure, he asks a question that Ovid, when charged with a similar misdemeanor (by a similar *durus senex*, Augustus), will later borrow and embroider (see chapter 5, *passim*):

quod si nemo exstat qui vicerit Alitis arma,  
communis culpa cur reus unus agor?

If no one exists who can withstand the weapons of the winged god, why is it that I alone am accused of a crime that is ubiquitous? (2.30B. 31–32)

He then goes on to assure Cynthia that the Muses will not eject her from that sacred spot because she happens not to be a virgin since the Muses,



he hints, have themselves tasted love. Indeed, they will invite her to join them in their holy dances while Bacchus takes his place among them at the very moment when Propertius is crowned with the triumphal ivy that great poets claim as their right. This victory he owes to Cynthia alone: *nam sine te nostrum non valet ingenium*, 2.30B.40, “for without you my talent is worthless, my genius is powerless without you.”

It is all very well then for Propertius to summarily dismiss Cynthia from his life, from his poetry. But she has defined his identity as a human being (that is, as an eccentric Roman male), and she has, moreover, provided him with the materials and the incentive without which his distinctive poetics and poetry would not have come into existence. He may want, he may attempt, to exorcise his demonic (and rapturous) inspiration. The question is, can he, does he?

### A CURIOUS HOROSCOPE

At first blush, a reading of the opening poem of Propertius’ final volume suggests that his lover-poet could and did rid himself of his treacherous beloved. In 4.1 the poet proclaims his new poetic project and the new poetic identity through which that project will find its consummation. In this poem he (Propertius or his speaker, as you choose) presents himself as a sort of cicerone who is guiding a nameless tourist (his present reader) through the sights of Augustan Rome:

hoc quodcumque vides, hospes, qua maxima Roma est,  
ante Phrygem Aenean collis et herba fuit.

Stranger, whatever you look upon from this vantage was, before the coming of Phrygian Aeneas, naught but a grassy knoll. (4.1.1–2)

So, on the Palatine hill, the place where now stand Augustus’ palace and the temple of Apollo, long ago, in ancient days, King Evander, immortalized by Vergil, grazed his cattle. The poet continues expatiating on the theme of Rome’s humble agrarian origins, carefully contrasting them with the splendors that now meet the tourist’s astonished gaze. Those were simpler times, and one feels not a little nostalgia for their innocence and pristine virtues and values—indeed, nowadays little is left of Rome, the Rome of her founding fathers, but the name itself.

Today's Roman citizen might not credit the story that a wolf had been the wet nurse of Romulus and Remus, whose blood now flows in the body of every Roman:

nil patrium nisi nomen habet Romanus alumnus:  
sanguinis altricem non putet esse lupam.

The only thing a Roman has from his city's past is his name. He would believe that a wolf was the wet-nurse of his race. (4.1.37–38)

(The word *lupa*, wolf, is also slang for prostitute, so it's doubly hard to accept the notion that one's own existence, let alone that of one's city, could depend, however remotely, on a woman, Lupa, who once purveyed her wares where modern buildings now shimmer.) Be that as it may, it was Divine Destiny that sent Aeneas and his father and son and household gods to Italy: here the poet condenses, for the benefit of his foreign acquaintance, who may not have read it, the opening of the *Aeneid*. He then alludes obliquely (by now the *hospes* has doubtless lost the thread of the story) to representative Roman heroes (Decius, Brutus) and to Venus' gift of divine weapons to *Caesar* (Aeneas and Augustus are here conflated) and to mysterious but accurate prophecies of Rome's greatness. Having baffled his tourist victim (not to mention his commentators<sup>3</sup>), the poet-guide now turns back to that ambiguous wolf whose dubious ministrations had just bothered the *Romanus alumnus* and which the Vergilian sublimities had for a moment effaced. She returns now in glory:

optima nutricum nostris lupa Martia rebus,  
qualia creverunt moenia lacte tuo.

Best of nurses, thou Wolf of Mars, for our Republic, how expansive have our walls become, fed upon your milk! ([“Republic” is from Lee's translation].) (4.1.55–56)

Exultantly, the poet proclaims his new intention: to lay out in order, to arrange (*disponere*) those walls in fervent verses (*pio versu*), despite the fact that he is ill-equipped for the task he contemplates: *ei mihi, quod nostro parvus in ore sonus*, “woe is me—so small my voice for such

3. See Camps on *rura pianda Remo*, 50.

a mighty sound” (58; here he perhaps has in mind Horace’s handsome compliment to Vergil, *Satires* 1.4.43–44, *cui mens diviniore atque os / magna sonaturum*, “he has a more than human mind and a mouth destined to sing of mighty matters”).

Nevertheless, Propertius is determined to give it his best shot. He wants to bring honor to his birthplace. He wants, like Vergil, to outdo the antique (and venerable) founders of the Roman poetic tradition (Ennius, in particular, with his hayseed garland, *hirsute corona*, 61) by introducing Alexandrian (more precisely, Callimachean) matter and manner into Roman literary production: in this new volume, that wish, that intention, means working to represent the antique origins of Rome in the polished modernist styles that Catullus and his contemporaries began to devise and that Vergil and Horace have brought to near perfection. Such an achievement would make Umbria, the place Propertius came from, proud of him:

mi folia ex hedera porrige, Bacche, tua,  
ut nostris tumefacta superbiat Umbria libris,  
Umbria Romani patria Callimachi.

Bacchus, provide me with some of your ivy so that Umbria may burst with the pride of my books—Umbria, the native land of the Roman Callimachus. (62–64)

He wants Umbria to be proud of his books (the earlier ones doubtless as well as this new patriotic volume, for he had claimed Callimachus as a model for shaping his lover-poet even before his present claim of the Alexandrian as the model for his new role as exquisite antiquarian). He wants Umbria to think of itself henceforth as the native land of the Roman Callimachus. Note that Propertius is divided here in his nationality, signing himself as the *alumnus* of both Umbria and of Rome (the significance of this statement of dual citizenship is clarified by a glance back at the closing poems of Book 1). But it is to Rome that he makes his final appeal (we may have observed that by this time in his oration the bewildered tourist seems to have abandoned the inspired [or crazy] poet, and gone off to find a new tour guide or to purchase himself a guidebook).

Roma, fave, tibi surgit opus, date candida, cives,  
omina et inceptis dextera cantet avis.

Wish me well, O Rome, it is for you this work begins! Give me good omens, my fellow citizens! And may the prophetic bird chant propitiously as I set out upon my labors! (67–68)

The poet then offers a preview of what those labors will entail: “I shall sing of rituals and festivals and the olden names of Roman places, and to elucidate these emblems of patriotism will be the goal to which my sweating horse must hasten.” He formally addresses Rome and all its citizens, but his real audience in this poem (and, it would appear, in the poems that follow it in this entire volume) is the Augustan establishment, the *princeps* himself; his wife Livia; Agrippa, his right-hand man; and the various advisers and officials who have helped make the Augustan settlement a reality. It is to these eminences that he announces his change of heart (the one that Maecenas, an eminence no longer, or no longer named, had begged him to make); it is to them that he pledges himself, intent now upon turning a new leaf and finding a new life. It is to them that he promises, with decorous and resonant prayers and with clear-voiced vows, to hunt out and to propagate the meanings of old Rome made new again by its savior and his helpers.

But then a strange thing happens. Either a new poem begins, without prelude or warning, or the poet’s guided tour suffers the abrupt and violent intrusion of an importunate astrologer (Horos, by name, as in ‘horoscope’), who appears from nowhere, grabs the newly patriotic bard, and chides him for his rash career move. “Why are you rushing off to reveal the working of Fate [*dicere fata*], unsuited though your own destiny has shaped you for the oracular role?” Horos, as he makes clear at the end of his speech to Propertius, has learned the poet’s real poetic mission by casting his horoscope (147–50), and he feels compelled to intervene in the poet’s unwise and rash decision to switch poetic genres. Having pompously displayed his astrological credentials by recounting his signal success in forecasting the futures of several individuals (89–102), having reminded his victim of the essential nature of astrology, Horos then provides Propertius with a muddled picture of the various and crucial roles played by prophecy (which he slyly conflates with astrology) in the Trojan War. When he has finished defending his profession (which he knows meets with no little skepticism from intellectuals like Propertius) and has demonstrated his own expertise as a practitioner of it, the astrologer moves in for the kill:

hactenus historiae: nunc ad tua devehar astra.  
 incipe te lacrimis aequus adesse novis.

But enough of anecdotal proofs. I am now impelled to treat of the stars that govern your particular case. Steady yourself, prepare to face up to a new onslaught of wrath and weeping. (119–20)

To ensure that his pigeon understands that he is dealing with the genuine article, Horos rightly identifies Propertius' birthplace, Umbria, which he describes with a touch of charming lyric verve and which, he claims, the poet's own *ingenium* (that word again!) had made "more famous" (121–26). He also flatters the poet with a tactful mention of his distinguished ancestry (*notis penatibus*), and then he further tries to ingratiate himself by recalling that the poet lost his father when he was still quite young and at roughly the same time suffered a decline in his family fortunes when he was divested of much of the abundant farmland that was his patrimony (127–30). Soon after that, continues Horos, as soon as his boyhood was over and his young manhood began with the assumption of the toga,

tum tibi pauca suo de carmine dictat Apollo  
 et vetat insano verba tonare Foro.

Apollo started to share with you some of his songs, and he forbade you to scream your head off, playing at being a lawyer or politician, in the nutty hubbub of the Forum. (133–34)

Thus, the god saves him, as later Ovid would be saved, from the tedium of an ordinary life devoted to climbing toward a mediocre success as a public servant.

The poet must have been astounded to hear his personal story so accurately (and sympathetically) recounted (unless, of course, he had the wit to realize that Horos, following his usual operating procedure, had done his homework before making his move). His prey thus softened up, Horos can say what he came to say, can deliver the urgent warning that has caused him to seek Propertius out:

at tu finge elegos, fallax opus: haec tua castra!  
 scribat ut exemplo cetera turba tuo.

militiam Veneris blandis patiere sub armis,  
 et Veneris pueris utilis hostis eris.  
 nam tibi victrices quascumque labore parasti,  
 eludit palmas una puella tuas.

Just keep on writing those elegies of yours. A slippery sort of job, to be sure, but that's your true *métier*, that's your genuine bivouac. Do what you do best, and you'll see a crowd of young poets eager to follow in your footsteps. You'll keep on performing your military service employing the seductive weaponry of Venus, and Venus will continue to let her cupids use you for target practice. Of course, whatever medals you end up with in your campaigns [as lover, as poet, as lover-poet], one girl will continue to ridicule them. (135–40)

There she is again: *una puella*. It always was and it always will be—Cynthia. He had said it once and for all way back at 1.12.19–20:

mi neque amare aliam neque ab hac desistere fas est:  
 Cynthia prima fuit, Cythia finis erit.

For me, it is prescribed, as if by holy writ: it is impossible to love another, it is impossible ever to abandon her. Cynthia was first, and Cynthia will be last.

At the close of his previous volume the lover-poet had claimed, with all the bitterness his heart was capable of, to be rid of her, and he reveled in the thought of her, alone, in despair, in the wretchedness of full anility. That's what he said then, as he was preparing to escape from Eros (in the tried and true Greco-Roman way, by forcing himself back into sanity), as he was girding up his loins to join the ranks of the efficient propagandists for the *princeps* and his regime (their motto, similar to P. T. Barnum's: "Say it loud, say it often"). But now the astrologer suggests that it may be time to reconsider:

et bene cum fixum mento decusseris uncum,  
 nil erit hoc; rostro te premet ansa tuo.

If you manage to shake her hook from your chin, it will do you no good. Her gaff will catch you up by your bloody snout. (141–42)

His manner of talking about the impossibility of the poet's escaping from Cynthia is ugly, almost sadistic, in its image of desperation, helplessness, mutilation. So, now as before, he will dance to her tune. Day and night, he will come and go at her caprice, and he will burst into tears when she tells him to. And he can lock her up, he can station a thousand goons to guard against her sneaking out from the place he has imprisoned her: she will find a way to slip out through a crack in the wall whenever some rival has managed to entice her away from him. Horos closes his reading of the poet's horoscope with a final warning, not about his career or his love life, for he has definitively explained how fate has dealt with Propertius as lover-poet. As a *sanctus amator*, a lover made all but inviolate by his love, Propertius need not worry, says Horos, about death by water or on the battlefield (where he is unlikely ever to be found), but he must be vigilant when Cancer is rising. (We have no idea what this means; perhaps Horos is warning him of the sicknesses that are prevalent when Rome's summer heat is at its fiercest.) The threat is as vague and portentous as the astrologer can make it. A touch of ominous verisimilitude concludes the session and thus confirms its claims to validity.

This poem is, as most of its commentators in some degree acknowledge, a peculiar way to open this new volume and its new poetic project, for it is a programmatic poem that carefully self-destructs.<sup>4</sup> From now on, says the poet, I am going to write patriotic poetry. Then, without warning, without a hint of self-contradiction, the poet lets a ventriloquist's dummy utterly overturn what he has just said: No, I am in fact condemned to write not "what the age demands," but (again, forever) about my humiliating relationship with the venomous bitch whom I recently banished from my poetry and my life.

## A REVENANT

Then what does he do? He offers us five poems in a row, four of which (2, 3, 4, 6) deal with some aspect of Roman cult or origins

4. See Sullivan's brilliant account, 137–47; for different views of the poem and of Horos's function in it, see DeBrohun, 105–13; Janan, 102–3; for Guenther, 363–64, he performs a "mock recusatio" that in no way subverts the new "commitment to national poetry."

or lifestyle. One of them (5) provides an incisive and vehement meditation, an inside look at, the erotic machinery that a thriving madam manipulates; this poem, in the precision of its minute particulars, recalls, but without its charm or neutral gaze, Lucian's *Dialogues of the Courtesans* and its witty anatomy of the world of the brothel. After a significant hiatus (7 and 8), Propertius returns to his stated purpose for Book 4 and writes three more poems (9, 10, 11) about crucial elements of Roman ideology: the Hercules poem on the Ara Maxima; a poem about the *spolia opima* (and the meaning of triumphant Roman militarism); and the poem on (and spoken by) Cornelia, in which the essence of virtuous Roman womanhood is painstakingly defined.<sup>5</sup> Why is it that this Roman sequence is broken (just after its midpoint, the elaborate celebration, in 4.6, of Rome's victory over Antony and Cleopatra)? What point was Propertius trying to make when he departed so emphatically from his blueprint?<sup>6</sup> These questions about poems 7 and 8 have bothered the commentators of Book 4 no less than those which surround the inconsistencies of its opening poem.

It is a shock, just after the super-patriotic strains of the Actium poem, to find that Cynthia has smashed her way back into the volume that was supposed to exclude her, and she functions here as a superbly ironic example of the return of the repressed:

sunt aliquid manes: letum non omnia finit,  
 luridaque evictos effugit umbra rogos.  
 Cynthia namque meo visa est incumbere fulcro. . . .

So there *are* ghosts after all! And death is not the end of everything, and  
 sallow specters triumph over the funeral fires that had consumed them.  
 For Cynthia appeared, leaning on my bed. (7.1–3)

Common folk believe in ghosts, modern intellectuals like the poet do not. Nevertheless, Cynthia appeared to him (or seemed to) as he lay in his bed just as he was nodding off to sleep. The bones of Cynthia had only recently (*nuper*) been buried at the side of a loud thoroughfare, and she comes to him now while sleep hangs over him, delaying its full effect because he can't take his mind off "the funeral of Love" (*ab*

5. For an ironic reading of her monologue, see Johnson 1997; for the style and substance of Book 4 as a whole, see Welch, 11–18, 166–70, and Hutchinson, 16–21.

6. See Nethercut's excellent observations, 1968.



*exequiis amoris*, 5) and was bewailing the cold kingdom of his lonely bed (*et quererer lecti frigida regna mei*). So, unless he was sleeping and he thought himself awake, this really was Cynthia, or her ghost, come back to haunt him.

At first glance, she looks much as she did in life. Her hair is styled as it was when her corpse was laid out on the pyre, and she wears now the dress she wore then, but the flames have singed it badly, and the beryl ring she had on her finger has been eaten away by the fire. More gruesomely, the waters of Lethe have discolored her lips. So, though she is still recognizable, death has markedly altered her beauty. These dire changes might perhaps have made the poet doubtful as to whether this was his Cynthia or not, but all uncertainty vanishes when she opens her ruined mouth:

spirantisque animos et vocem misit: at illi  
pollicibus fragiles increpuere manus.

The rage and the voice the specter released against me were those of the living, breathing woman as I had known her—still, her hands seemed likely to snap and crumble and her fingers creaked as she gesticulated to emphasize what she had to say. (11–12)

Despite the traces of her beauty, the vestiges of flesh and skin and hair that cling to her ghastly presence, his beloved, as we will be chillingly reminded at the poem's close, is a skeleton.<sup>7</sup>

### A DIGRESSION: CYNTHIA'S LOOKS

**B**efore we listen to what the skeleton has to say, let's take a moment to consider the effect the ruined beauty of the revenant might be thought to have on the sleepless poet (and perhaps on us). Roy Gibson, in his elegant and very useful discussion of Roman love elegy (2005), has this to say about Cynthia's beauty: "Some details . . . of Cynthia's looks are concentrated in the second and third poems of Book 2, enough at least to build a picture of a tall woman with blond hair, long hands, a snow-white complexion and striking eyes. . . . But these are generic

7. For a subtle overview of the poem, see Hutchinson, 170–72.

looks proper to goddesses and heroines (such as Dido in the *Aeneid*), and elsewhere in poetry. Propertius, like other elegiac poets, is mostly content with general and unspecific references to hair, eyes and looks” (165). This is, at best, something of a half-truth. The other elegists are indeed vague about the loveliness of their beloveds. But 2.2 is rather more elaborate than Gibson’s remarks represent it to be. Following “Red-gold hair, long hands, big build” (Lee’s delightful translation of *fulva coma est longaeque manus, et maxima toto / corpore*, 5–6) comes a clause that augments these physical traits with luminous clarity: *et incedit Iove digna soror*, “she moves like Juno, fit sibling of Jove himself.” This comparison of Cynthia’s movement to that of Juno is playful hyperbole, to be sure—if we think of it as part of a sort of seduction poem, it is as guileful as it is charming—but it transforms the flattering clichés (if they are in fact clichés) that Gibson focuses on into something radiant, an impressionistic analogy that teases the imagination and invites the reader to shape this dream girl to his/her own taste. Furthermore, the four opening verses of the poem that precede this description of Cynthia are part of the mythologizing frame that is designed to distinguish this human paragon from all other earthly women:

liber eram et vacuo meditabar vivere lecto,  
 at me composita pace fefellit Amor.  
 cur haec in terris facies humana moratur?  
 Juppiter, ignosco pristina furta tua.

I was at liberty and planning to live my life  
 In a companionless bed, but Love,  
 Having signed a truce with me, pulled a fast one.  
 Why does such mortal beauty remain on earth?  
 Jupiter, I forgive you all your antique peccadillos. (1–4)

The poet, in an unusually reflective mood, was lying in his otherwise empty bed, toying with the notion of beginning to live something like a celibate life. But the Love God betrays this momentary truce in erotic warfare. There flashes before the poet’s eyes an image of the woman he has been planning, tentatively, to break with. He responds to this image with an astonished cry: “How is it possible that merely human beauty remains earthbound?” That testament to her incomparable good looks leads him to a silly (and rather blasphemous) comment, “Jupiter, I can now pardon you for all your early thefts” (that is, adulteries). Jupiter’s

countless seductions (or rapes), which might bother anyone trying to make sense of a god whom the philosophers and the theoreticians of the Augustan regime had attempted to cleanse of the filth that poets since Homer, not to mention ignorant worshipers, had immersed him in, can be condoned when they are glimpsed from the perspective that has crystallized in the mind of Propertius as he lies there in his bed, struck by the truth and irresistible power of Cynthia's inhuman loveliness. If the highest god has been swept away (on myriad occasions) by looks that are beyond description, what was a poor mortal to do when confronted with Cynthia, a woman worthy of Jove's attentions?

Having firmly established Cynthia's claim to being rightfully classed among the divinely beautiful, Propertius sends packing Juno and Pallas and even Venus herself, the three goddesses whose naked glories that famous shepherd on Mount Ida (Paris) had once appraised (*cedite iam, divae, quas pastor viderat olim / Idais tunicas ponere verticibus*, 13–14). It is a rash claim, this, that heaven's beauties have been bested by the lover-poet's lady. To ward off celestial ill will from her, he closes this brief poem with an apotropaic prayer:

hanc utinam faciem noli mutare senectus,  
etsi Cumaeae saecula vatis agat.

I pray that old age leaves her loveliness unchanged, even if she should live to be as old as the Cumaean Sibyl. (15–16)

This is a far cry from what Propertius will be saying at the close of Book 3. This theme of Cynthia's more-than-human beauty, her divine beauty, returns with exquisite emphasis in 2.28B. In 2.28A Cynthia is represented as being in the grasp of what appears to be a fatal sickness. The poet prays to Jupiter and Juno to save her from death. He wonders if Venus, angered at being compared with Cynthia, has had some hand in bringing on the doom that now threatens her, or is it Juno or Pallas whom she has somehow offended (the trio from 2.2 once again here united)? But here the poet has in mind not his blasphemy in that poem, but Cynthia's own folly:

semper, formosae, non nostis parcere verbis.  
hoc tibi lingua nocens, hoc tibi forma dedit.

Beautiful ladies, you never know when to hold your tongues, and your

rash talk and your good looks alike destroy you. (2.28.13–14)

Nevertheless, dangerous though the boasts and beauty may be to such ladies, when they die they meet with a kinder fate. Io, Ino, Andromeda, Callisto—all these heroines were transformed into divinities of one sort or another. Thus, if Cynthia cannot escape her present peril, she can take comfort in the sure knowledge that she will find herself (we should remember this when the skeleton starts talking) well compensated for her sufferings in life:

et tibi Maeonias omnis heroides inter  
 primus erit nulla non tribuente locus.

You will be ranked first among all the legendary women whom Homer sang, not one of them dissenting in the awarding of that honor. (29–30)

At least the equal of the goddesses and superior to the superior women of legend, Cynthia's beauty is incomparable, incontestable.

Cynthia's illness continues to worry the poet in 2.28B. Magic remedies have been of no avail. He wants to die with her if die she must. He begs Jupiter to save her. And then, she begins to rally. In response to this change in her condition, he beseeches Persephone and her husband not to withdraw their mercy. He pleads with them to continue to spare Cynthia because

sunt apud infernos tot milia formosarum:  
 pulchra sit in superis, si licet, una locus.

There are among the dead so many thousands of beautiful ladies—please, if it be lawful, let there be one of these left here above ground. (49–50)

Propertius then offers a few random examples of these super-lovelies (Antiope, Tyro, Europa, and shameful Pasiphae), lumps together as a class all the beauties of Troy and Greece, and suddenly shifts from the old world to the new:

et quaecumque erat in numero Romana puella,  
 occidit: has omnis ignis amara habet.

And every Roman girl who belongs in this category has expired, the gluttonous fire has devoured them all. (55–56)

Every divinity, every beautiful mortal, Greek or Roman—Cynthia has bested them all and wins, hands down, beauty's highest crown. We may not believe this (she, in Propertius' fiction of his erotic subject's travails, may not have believed it), but he wants us to believe that he believes it (when his lover-poet writes it). Here, as in 2.3, where he elaborates on Cynthia's intellectual and artistic gifts as well as on her physical perfection, he provides his representations of his response to her manifold and supreme beauties and charms with all the wealth that myth and legend and poetry can provide. In 2.3 we are told that this miracle of pulchritude has, can only have, its source in the divine:

haec tibi contulerunt caelestia munera divi,  
     haec tibi ne matrem forte dedisse putes.  
 non non humani partus sunt talia dona,  
     ista decem menses non peperere bona.

In case you think a mortal mother bestowed these gifts on you, think again: this beauty was conferred on you by the gods. No, no—such gifts as these no earthly birth conferred, ten months of pregnancy did not bring forth these blessings. (25–28)

It is not easy to ignore the sweetly mocking rhyme of *dona/bona* here. Then (I follow here the line-ordering of Sterke, 29, 32, 31, 30 [see Goold, 126]) the poet reasserts her supremacy among Roman women and the attraction she may have for God himself:

gloria Romanis una es tu nata puellis:  
     post Helenam haec terris forma secunda redit.  
 nec semper nobiscum humana cubilia vises,  
     Romana accumbes prima puella Iovi.

You were born to be the single glory among Roman girls. This matchless loveliness returns to earth, after Helen's vanishing, for the first time. So, you will not always be coming to our mortal beds, no, you will be the first Roman girl to sleep with Jupiter. (29–32)

Propertius is not surprised, he admits, to see young Roman men ignited by Cynthia since he knows all the troubles that Helen caused for the Trojans and the Greeks and knows, too, how vain were the huge sacrifices that their obsession with her entailed. From these epic hyperboles he then passes to the visual arts. Any painter seeking to put the great painters of the past in the shade need only take the poet's beloved (here, *domina*) as his model. If the painter then exhibits her finished portrait in the East or the West, he will set the world (East and West and everything in between) on fire. These thoughts (and the accumulated weight of his hyperboles) are as much as he can endure. If another more powerful love should ever possess him (*aut mihi, si quis / acrior, ut moriar, venerit alter amor*, 45–46), only death could assuage the torment of that unbearable bliss.

Gibson (2005) had prefaced his remarks on Cynthia's looks by saying: "... the lover's primary concern is for himself and not for his beloved. . . . To approach elegy with the expectation of finding powerful character portraits of beautiful and tempestuous women is to invite disappointment. The focus is instead on how the woman affects the male lover" (165). To this last sentence one can only answer with a hearty, Precisely so. But this lover-poet's response to her, his passion for her (obsessive, neurotic, unquenchable) does not come from nowhere. Some of his matter and manner (and some of his Cynthia) do indeed come from poetry. Perhaps little or none come from life-experiences. But much of it, maybe most, has its roots in Propertius' imaginative recreation of what it is like to be so desperately in love with such a woman, which means that it, his vivid and memorable fictional response to this fictional woman, depends on the precision and power of the relationship between them that he invents for them: that invention has its origins in erotic poetry written previously to his own (and erotic poetry contemporary with his); from his own observations of the world around him (especially as it is in the grip of the fashion of the erotic imperative); from his own capacity (ironic, intellectual) for narrative and for a variety of stylistic experiments suited to rendering that narrative. Cynthia is a powerful collage of erotic possibilities (not excluding perhaps the poet's own experience): to abuse Aristotle's enduring distinction, she is not what *has* happened to a lover like the one that Propertius makes the speaker of his poems; she is rather the sort of amazing lady who *could* happen to that fictional lover, or to any other men bold enough or foolish enough to risk hooking up with her—she who is as "mad, bad,

and dangerous to know” as she is “beautiful and tempestuous.”

But crucial to reading Cynthia rightly (or ‘writerly’) is this observable fact: she is nothing like Delia or Nemesis or Marathus, nothing like Lesbia or Juventius, or, most especially, nothing like Corinna. Her presence in the first two (three) volumes (Book 1 and Books 2A and 2B) is as ubiquitous as it is fascinating. She does not get to talk much (until the final book), but we *feel* how beautiful and tempestuous she is from the extensive, tormented, witty, desperate, chaotic moments in which we see and hear how the lover-poet tries to handle his dealings with her, how he is attempting to hold onto both her and his sanity (or what is left of it). We *know* how beautiful she is, in a way we can never know how Lesbia or Corinna looked, by Propertius’ unsuccessful efforts to find exaggeration wild enough (think of Shakespeare’s strenuous technique of *inventio* in his sonnets) to barely encompass that dazzling sublimity. And we *know* how tempestuous she is as we listen to her lover-poet ransack the lexicon and leave syntax in shreds as he tries to discover how to begin to say how wonderful, how fiendish, and how *mutabile* she is. But her tempestuousity concerns us less at the moment (it will presently be in full view) than the grandeur of her beauty and the misery of its ruin.

#### WHAT THE SKELETON HAS TO SAY

Some of that beauty all but masks the skull that has accosted the lover-poet just before (or maybe just after) he falls asleep (again, it is uncertain whether she is an apparition or a nightmare, and that uncertainty renders her manifestation all the more uncanny). Cynthia thinks Propertius is asleep, and she berates him bitterly, apparently ignorant of the tearful insomnia she intruded upon, for banishing her from his thoughts so soon after her funeral. In case he has already forgotten her, she reminds him of the numerous times the two of them coupled in various locations. She calls these unions *furta* (a frequent word signifying stolen fornications), which means that her favors to him were purloined from another (nameless) lover. These encounters she also designates as *nocturnis dolis* (nocturnal deceits). She had to sneak out of wherever she was living at any given time, clambering down a rope, out of her boudoir, down to his embrace. Sometimes, often, they ended up “doing it

in the road” (*saepe Venus trivio commissa est*, 2.3.19), wrapped in a blanket. Apparently he has let these vanished joys slip from his memory:

foederis heu taciti, cuius fallacia verba  
non audituri diripuere Noti.

Alas for the hidden compact we had with one another—its words, mere words, the South Wind has snatched and scattered. (21–22)

“Alas,” Cynthia tragically intones (remember, she is well-versed in both reading poetry and writing it).<sup>8</sup> Having reminded Propertius of his betrayal of her and of all the good times they shared, she passes on to more recent history, namely, to her miserable death and worse exequies, and mostly she blames him for the horror and squalor that marked them. He was, as far as she can remember, not there at her deathbed to call out her name and thus grant her one more day of life; he had not provided her corpse with watchers to drive away evil spirits or body-snatching witches; he had not even seen to it that a proper pillow supported her head as her corpse was being borne off to its funeral pyre; he had not donned a black toga when he took his place in her funeral cortege; he had not accompanied her other intimates beyond the gates of the city walls to the spot where her cremation took place; so, ingrate that he was (*ingrate* is what she calls him, 31), he had not been there to pray for winds to whip up the flames of her pyre into maximum efficacy. Nor, of course, had he purchased precious nard to sweeten the flames that consumed her—no, he had not even bothered to bring a few cheap hyacinths to strew, with shards from a broken wine jar, on her pyre.

That’s what she claims. But as we will presently see, she is not unwilling to shave the truth to make her point. Cynthia has come upon the poet at his most vulnerable (sleepless, grieving, maybe a little guilty, but not of all the crimes she charges him with). If she is a real ghost, she knows very well how to play upon his peculiar cluster of low self-esteem, narcissism, and masochistic leanings. If she is merely a nightmare, she represents in his dreamwork his grief for her and his anger at losing her, emotions that are masked and displaced by feelings of guilt: the nightmare skeleton voices against him his own self-accusation which, in his waking hours, he admits to only dimly if at all.

Immediately following Cynthia’s complaints about the lax treatment

8. For Cynthia’s admirable cultural attainments, see Hemelrijk, 79–80.



she received from her last breath to the burial of her bones, the poet is confronted with even more serious charges. Cynthia wants his faithful slave, Lygdamus, put to the severest torture. He had, she claims, handed her the fatal goblet, whose wine was laced with the poison that another slave, Nomas, had prepared for it. The instant the wine touched her lips she guessed what was happening to her and who had made it happen. She does not directly name the person who had bribed Lygdamus to do her in, but her candidate for the instigator of her murder quickly emerges:

quae modo per vilis inspecta est publica noctes,  
haec nunc aurata cyclade signat humum.

She who was recently on public display at night, trading cheap thrills for cash, she now trails the dust with the golden hem of her gown. (38–39)

This monster, this brazen dime-a-dozen slut, has taken over the establishment that Cynthia, until only yesterday, had shared with her lover-poet. Now the dear slaves who were utterly faithful to her (a *kind* mistress) suffer insult, humiliation, and actual physical abuse from this dreadful interloper. The bitch has even melted down a golden bust of Cynthia to provide herself (the poet's new 'wife') with a fitting dowry.

Something is not quite right here. As it is unlikely that the poet was as negligent in attending to her cremation as Cynthia asserts, so it seems doubtful that Chloris (whose name finally appears at 72) is quite the villainess or exerts quite the force over the poet that Cynthia, in her postmortem paranoia, believes to be the case. For one thing, the poet represents himself as a miserable creature, grieving and chaste, alone there in his narrow bed; for another, Cynthia's suspicions about the cause of her death and her suppositions as to its aftermath in the household she vacated by dying may be entirely delusional. These are the sorts of conclusions that the living Cynthia might jump to, the sort of misperceptions that a newly dead ghost, in her confusion, might be capable of. More important, this is the kind of voice that her lover-poet, in his dreamwork, might endow his guilty memory of Cynthia with: vivid, devious, powerful, incomprehensible, enthralling.

Quite suddenly, Cynthia's mood swings from accusatory to rational. She now displays calm acceptance and offers wise explanations:

non tamen insector, quamvis mereare, Properti:

longa mea in libris regna fuere tuis.  
 iuro ego Fatorum nulli revocabile carmen,  
 tergeminusque canis sic mihi molle sonet,  
 me servasse fidem. si fallo, vipera nostris  
 sibilet in tumulis et super ossa cubet.

For all that, I don't intend to continue my prosecution of you, much though you deserve it. I swear to you, by the song of the Fates that none can unsing (if I lie may the three-headed dog growl at me as I pass him by)—I swear that I have kept the faith with you. If I deceive you in saying this, let snakes hiss in the mound where my bones are gathered, let them make their nest there. (49–54)

*Me servasse fidem.* “I was faithful to you (in my fashion).” Cynthia has made that claim before (so, of course, has Propertius). It is a claim that lying lovers tend to make. We know (he knows) from other poems (and we relearn it from the poem that follows this one) that she has a long habit (five years of it) of cheating on him. Had she not been so disposed, the poet's three (or four) previous volumes would have been considerably less intriguing than they are. But now, at a very opportune time (when he is stupid with grief and perhaps a little guilty—perhaps he has tried to cheer himself up a bit with Chloris), Cynthia is eager to set the record straight, and she is in a revisionary and conciliatory mood.<sup>9</sup>

But why, against all the evidence contained in the previous volumes, should her lover-poet believe her, and why should we? For the simple reason that she did not end up, she claims, being confined in the afterlife with the famous bad women (Clytemnestra and Pasiphae, to name only two of them), but was instead assigned a place in that zone of Elysium, the abode of the blessed dead, where Andromeda and Hypermetra (to name only two of them, a nice symmetry) relate to their sisters-in-virtue the steadfastness they showed in the perils they overcame in the name of love, thus earning their places both in legend and among the blessed. Cynthia is right there in their midst where she belongs. But she cannot, of course, join with them in telling *her* story—she must suppress all mention of the many carnal crimes of her lover-poet (*celo perfidiae crimina multa tuae*, 70) and of her long-suffering toleration of his infidelities. This enduring loyalty, preserved even in the underworld, is the final proof

9. See the intriguing observations by Dufallo, 167–71.

of her version of their affair. Her love was immutable and pure, his was flawed, wavering, perhaps even spurious.

Cynthia has stated her case, and she has delivered her verdict (she is plaintiff, lawyer, judge, and jury). It only remains now (for she must be returning to the delightful place in the underworld that is now her home) to request that Propertius see to it that her old nurse (73) Parthenie is not uncomfortable in her last years (Parthenie, with its flavor of 'virginal,' is a funny name for someone who was probably less Cynthia's nurse than her madam, her procuress, one whose fees, Cynthia claims, Propertius never found exorbitant). Cynthia also requests that Latris, another funny name since it means, literally, 'slave,' never be required to act as hairdresser to the vile poisoner Chloris (whose name, opportunely, hints of 'green, fresh, blooming,' perfect for her replacement, 'fresh flesh').

Then comes a sudden, unexpected, extraordinary request. Cynthia wants Propertius to burn all of his poems that relate to her. Her reason? *Laudes desine habere meas*, literally, "cease to have my praises," 78. A crabbed utterance that seems to mean something like "I don't want you to continue enjoying the reputation for artistry you gained by writing testaments to my beauty," which would have as its subtext, "Without me you would not be a famous poet, I made you what you are. And I am now unmaking you." After the poet has consigned all his signature poems to the flames, he is, she commands in careful, measured language, to tidy up her final resting place, and there, on the banks of the Anio, he is to set up a column which is to be inscribed with an epitaph which she dictates to him, one that wayfarers, as they depart Rome, may take in at a glance as they hasten past her bones:

HIC TIBURTINA IACET AUREA CYNTHIA TERRA.

ACCESSIT RIPAE LAUS, ANIENE, TUAE

Here lies, in Tiburtine soil, Golden Cynthia. To your banks, O Anio, glory accrues. (85–86)

She may not be thinking very clearly here. Is she saying that she is so famously 'golden' that she will forever be remembered even if the only durable evidence of her greatness, Propertius' poems about her, have gone up in smoke as she demanded? Perhaps her lucky landing among the good women of Elysium has gone to her head.

Or perhaps the skewed logic of dreamwork makes such questions

beside the point. In her last words to Propertius she attempts to confirm her reality, her veracity, by remarking that she has come to him (a nod to Vergil whom she may have read) through the *piis portis* (“the gates of truth,” Richardson’s plausible rendering of this odd phrase, 461). Like other true dreams, Cynthia is allowed to wander about as she chooses, but at dawn she must go back to the bank of Lethe where Charon waits to row her back to the Elysian shores (as if he hadn’t enough to do with new arrivals without having to worry about the comings and goings of ghosts). These statements, like her earlier description of the contrasting abodes of Bad and Good Ladies, show a peculiar ignorance of the traditions of the poetic underworld and do not give us much reason for believing what she says, here and elsewhere in her speech. No matter, she must be off, but not before she tells Propertius one last thing:

nunc te possideant aliae: mox sola tenebo.  
mecom eris, et mixtis ossibus ossa teram.

Let other ladies have you now. Soon you’ll be mine alone. You will be with me down there, and our bones will be mingled together and I’ll grind mine against yours. (93–94)

This is the skeleton’s version of eternal love, their two skeletons fornicating till the end of time. It looks as if Cynthia has forgotten that she is supposed to be found happily ensconced among the heroines of True (Married) Love. Instead, her vision of their (his and her) future felicity is the nightmare of an undying Eros. She lets him go for the time being because very soon she will have him all to herself in erotic hell.

But there is a final surprise in the lover-poet’s closing frame to this portrait of his deathless dominatrix. After securing his condemnation in the court of love, she vanishes, *inter complexus excidit umbra meos*, “Her ghost slipped away from my embrace,” 96. We might have expected him to recoil from this ghastly apparition, but whether waking or sleeping, he reaches out to hug her to his chest. Even when she appears to him as a grim skeleton, only slightly hidden under the remnants of her beauty, even when she apprises him of what awaits him after his death, he finds her, as ever, as many readers have found her, beguiling, mysterious, irresistible.

## A TRIO, A TAVERN BRAWL (BITCH FIGHT!)

When Cynthia's skeleton-ghost vanishes, it seems as though the poet wakes from his delicious nightmare (or rouses himself from her visitation) ready to return to his patriotic *devoirs*. After a brief, opaque statement in which he alludes to a squabble in some low dive, one which somehow involved him, even though he did not participate in it, he drops the story of the mysterious altercation and launches into what promises to be a properly Callimachean investigation into the nature and meaning of a venerable Latin religious ritual. In Lanuvium, a town south of Rome, stood a shrine of Juno Sospita (the Preserver). Here, in a cave, lived a snake that was annually visited by young women who offered it sacred cakes. If a young woman's offering was acceptable to the serpent (which it was, if the young woman was a virgin), her community could expect a good harvest; if not, not. The poet's explanation of the ritual (its origins, its connections with Juno) turns out to be perfunctory to the point of being slovenly and incompetent.

No matter. We quickly learn that mention of Lanuvium was not in fact part of the poet's patriotic program; it was rather an introduction to a lengthy anecdote about Cynthia and the part she ended up playing in the tavern brawl with which the poem opens and which turns out to be almost the culmination of the story that is the real subject of 4.8. Cynthia, it seems, had been on her way to Lanuvium (not, certainly, to offer a cake to the snake); instead, we find her furiously whipping the horse that draws her carriage, racing hell for leather along the Appian Way, while her companion (it is doubtless *his* carriage and it is he who should be grasping the reins) lolls back on his silken seat, fondling his pedigree dogs, a rich kid, smooth and gleaming from a recent wax job. Cynthia's pretext for this journey (the excuse she offered Propertius for her absence) was her need to worship at Juno's shrine on this holy day (the poet sees no need to speculate on the reason for her unusual haste—probably she just likes driving fast). Why, moreover, the young gentleman is accompanying her on this pilgrimage to Lanuvium is left in doubt. One gathers he is her newest boy toy, and, more to the point, he is her new (surprisingly youthful) sugar daddy. Propertius jealously opines that, at the rate he is squandering his fortune, he'll end up eating filthy food at a school for gladiators as soon as he gets his full beard and needs to shave. So, Cynthia's motive for her visit to Lanuvium is probably not so much piety as business or lust or lust combined with business.

Perhaps she wants to get Boy Toy into the sack as quickly as she can (before he changes his mind? because she can barely keep her hands off him? The poet chooses not to consider her intention closely). Whatever her reasons, she has lied to the poet—worse, she has apparently jilted him (if only temporarily, but it has happened before, and doubtless will again).

The poet refuses to take this treachery lying down—or rather, he will take it lying down, in his own fashion:

cum fieret nostro totiens iniuria lecto,  
mutato volui castra movere toro.

Since my bed has been dishonored so many times, I decided to enlist in another army and pitch my tent in another camp. (27–28)

He gets out the Roman equivalent of his little black book (which he has retained, for all his protestations of fidelity to Cynthia). There's Phyllis, of course, whose stomping grounds are near Diana's temple on the Aventine. Sober, she's kind of a bore, but with a few drinks in her, a barrel of fun. And then there's Teia, who hangs out in the Tarpeian Groves; very lovely and, in her cups, more than one guy can handle.

his ego constitui noctem lenire vocatis,  
et Venere ignota furta novare mea.

I decided to send for these to help me make it through the night and to expand my erotic repertoire with some untried experiments—in short, I thought I'd try a threeway. (33–34)

Here *furta* means “joys stolen from Cynthia”; elsewhere, when it is Cynthia he is stealing them with, the joys are those that belong to someone else, her current ‘protector,’ for instance: what matters to him is that these encounters break some code or other, for otherwise they lack the seasoning he likes. When the girls arrive and the poet is comfortably sandwiched between them, the party begins in earnest. Few passages in Latin poetry can match, in verve and charming details, its representation of pagan fun. Lygdamus (whom dead Cynthia wanted tortured and sold) is mixing the excellent wine and decanting it into elegant wine cups; an Egyptian piper and an Egyptian girl on the castanets provide the music; there are plentiful roses, ready to have their petals strewn about

the happy scene; and there is a dwarf, Magnus, dancing energetically to the Egyptian music.

In the midst of this infectious merriment occur three bad omens. The lamps, just lit and full of oil, begin to gutter, then the table collapses, and, as Propertius is trying his luck at dice (a lucky 'Venus' throw' would presage him a good time with his ladies), he tosses instead the dreaded 'Dog-throw.'

cantabant surdo, nudabant pectora caeco,  
Lanuvium ad portas, ei mihi, solus eram.

They were singing to a deaf man, to a blind man they bared their breasts,  
I was not there with them, I stood in spirit—wretch that I was—alone at  
the gates of Lanuvium. (47–48)

Line 47 sounds almost as if it had been written by St. Augustine. Propertius' attempt to get back at Cynthia, to take his mind off her faithlessness by amusing himself with these beguiling substitutes, has failed utterly. Isolated, unnerved, existing only in his mind which is totally fixed on nothing but Cynthia, he has been transported to where she had sped away from him, to escape him, to betray him. He is beside himself, is both himself and not himself. This situation is not an entirely new one for him, she has unseled him before: *aut cur sim toto corpore nullus ego*, "why am I, in my whole body, nothing" (1.5.22); *non sum ego qui fueram*, "I am not what I had been" (1.12.11); *non ego sed tenuis vapulat umbra mea*, "not I but my frail ghost is being flogged" (2.12.20). Cynthia gave him his identity, and Cynthia can take it away. Without her, his existence is voided.

But that strange and anxious solitude is suddenly shattered. There is a noise of the front door bursting open, there are dim voices in the hall. Then Cynthia smashes her way out into the garden (*non operosa comis, sed furibunda decens*, 52, "her hair a mess, but lovely in her fury," in Lee's incomparable rendering). The poet, temporarily safe from her anger, vividly describes the epic disruptions of her whirlwind entrance (she certainly knows where he is, but decides to keep his punishment for last, the better to savor it): He dropped his wine cup and his wine-stained lips turned pale.

fulminat illa oculis et quantum femina saevit,  
spectaculum capta nec minus urbe fuit.

Her eyes flashed with lightning bolts, she threw a tantrum as only a woman knows how—my love nest looked like a captured town. (55–56)

Cynthia digs her claws into Phyllis' face, while the terrified Teia screams "Fire! Fire!" At this point, wakened by the uproar, people rush out into the street with torches and the whole neighborhood trembles. The two whores flee to a nearby tavern with Cynthia in hot pursuit. She tears at their hair, rips off their clothes, then races back to the house of her cheating man, clutching her victorious trophies. And she proceeds to slap the poet silly, bite his neck, and pound on his eyes. Worn out by these exertions, she catches her breath and then turns her attentions to poor Lygdamus whom she spots cowering behind the adulterous couch. He begs his master to intercede on his behalf, to no avail: *Lygdame, nil potui: tecum ego captus eram*, "I was in no position to help you, I was her prisoner, just like you," 70.

When she has finished with Lygdamus, she pauses before resuming her efforts to punish the guilty poet who takes advantage of this moment to beg for a truce. He kneels before her, his hands raised in supplication, but she will barely allow him to touch her feet, let alone her knees (*supplicibus palmis tum demum ad foedera veni / cum vix tangendos praebuit illa pedes*, 71–72). Exhausted at last, or moved perhaps by what she takes to be his abject sincerity, Cynthia, as merciful a victor as one could hope to encounter, decides to forgive him—on condition. She demands that he desist from the practice of cruising for new acquaintances at Pompey's portico or at gladiatorial shows, to stop ogling ladies in the upper section of the Theater, or to catch their eye as they peer out at him from their litters. And, of course, she requires him to cast Lygdamus into chains and send him off forthwith to the auction block. These are the terms she lays down, and he submits to them instantly,

indixit leges: respondi ego, 'legibus utar.'  
riserat imperio facta superba dato.

She stated her conditions. I replied, "I will abide by them." Magnificent by virtue of the power she had reasserted over me, she laughed in my face. (81–82)

Then, like the priestess of the Religion of Love that she is, she fumigates Love's temple, sprinkling pure water over every spot the vile whores had polluted with their filth and infections. She then commands that all the



lanterns be refilled with new oil, and three times she anoints the poet's head with cleansing sulphur. Then,

atque ita mutato per singula pallia lecto,  
respondi, et toto solvimus arma toro.

When all the sheets on the couch had been changed, I reaffirmed my agreement to her condition (with an erection), and we solemnized the treaty by screwing our way over every inch of the newly cleansed love-bed (literally, "we lay down our weapons all over the entire bed"). (87–88)

It is here, in what is arguably Propertius' masterpiece, that we catch our last glimpse of Cynthia.<sup>10</sup> The speeding Amazon charioteer (and cheating beloved) who opens this poem fits neatly with the female Odysseus, ferocious instrument of justice, who all but closes it. This creature, recognizably the Cynthia we have met with throughout the poet's earlier volumes, yet here allowed to reveal herself in all her passion and glory, differs only on the surface from the less self-assured, much more subdued ghost we encountered in the previous poem, a shadow of the living Cynthia we find here, vindictive, triumphant, never more desirable or more beautiful than she is when she goes berserk with self-righteous jealousy. The ghost has been tamed by death perhaps, or, more likely, she has been temporarily weakened by it. But under the whining and the prevarications and the grand renunciations lurks the old arrogance, the old determination to manipulate and to dominate: to have things her way. When the ghost announces that she has plans for Propertius once he arrives in hell, she asserts her mastery over him even as she does when, in the next poem, she forgives the man she has just beaten to a pulp, decides to have mercy on him, to treat his derelictions with a clemency worthy of Caesar, and thus shows her greatness of soul. This ghost of Cynthia, Cynthia juxtaposed with and folded into the living Cynthia at her most theatrical and most formidable, these final Cynthias crown our accumulated impressions of her, the ones that have been gathered in our minds (and in our nerves) from the first poem of Book 1 through the last poem of Book 3. She becomes here, consummately, uniquely herself.<sup>11</sup>

10. The best introduction to the poem is that provided by Hutchinson, 189–91.

11. The Cynthias of these two poems are marginalized in different ways by both

## ONE IN A MILLION

No other ancient poet wrote anything like her, and it would not be until Chaucer or Richardson, Thackeray or Flaubert or Tolstoy or Proust or Nabokov, that anyone could write another figure of the erotic female to rival her. These writers would be employing wider canvases than Propertius' and more sophisticated psychological codes than were available to him; they had the novel to play with, whereas Propertius had a form, a pattern, a genre that let him let us see what his 'erotic subject' was tormented by and blessed with only at scattered moments, in random snapshots, until, in Book 4, totally by surprise, when we could least expect it, he thrust into view two portraits of the lady that permitted us finally to see her steadily, clearly, vividly. When that composite image has fixed itself in our mind, we can begin to understand what we had more feebly guessed before: why it is that this "woman affects her male lover" with such irresistible force, in such unforgettable ways; how Cynthia, the poet's version of the *femme fatale* of his Rome, could crystallize in the mind and heart of the lover-poet that Propertius imagined to pair with her and so, his imagination fired by the two of them, be able to write what amounts to a Roman version of *A Lover's Discourse, Fragments*.

When Propertius came to Rome, a young man from the provinces, Gallus and his Lycoris were the embodiment of erotic fashion, at the zenith of their brief splendor, both in papyrus scrolls and in life. They were, the pair of them, the incarnation of the erotic imperative, and the naïve young man, whatever else he made of these exciting novelties that the metropolis offered to his attention, may well have found them (the people and the books that seemed to mirror them) beyond fascinating. As would be the case with Ovid a little while later, Propertius quickly ceased to have any interest in the career that his mother (and doubtless his older male relatives) had in mind for him. He found the legal profession as tiresome as he found other kinds of public service that might procure him a pigeonhole in Rome's newly reinvented bureaucracy. He had a flair for verse, he had a taste for leisure and wine and womanizing. He was hardly surprised when he found his several interests merging and realized that he was experimenting with the possibility of becoming a

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DeBrohun, 146–47, 151–57, and Janan, 102–12, 118–27; Warden offers a very useful insight into how the two poems illumine one another.

poet, somewhat in the manner of the era's most dashing poet, the author of the *Amores*, Gallus. This version of his early years is speculative, to be sure, but it is perhaps no more fragile a guess than those provided by other versions: 1) in which Propertius falls in love with a flesh-and-blood Cynthia and becomes a poet solely in order to write about their 'love,' 2) in which his poetic ambitions for one reason or another—none of them obvious—fasten on love elegy, and his Cynthia is essentially a metaliterary symbol of his poetic activity, of his *écriture*.<sup>12</sup>

After publishing his first volume, the so-called *Monobiblos*, he continues to refine his personal poetics and the poems that exemplify it, but as his oeuvre develops it takes a turn that might at first have surprised him. We lack here any decent chronological evidence, a problem which 'the damage to the text,' only exaggerates,<sup>13</sup> so it is hard to say anything very meaningful about the causes and effects of this swerve in his poetic production; but we do know that two important events occurred sometime not very long after the appearance of his first volume. First, Gallus died, probably a suicide after his having managed to greatly displease the princeps. Second, one of the princeps' most powerful advisers (or handlers), Maecenas, himself something of a poet and a connoisseur of poetry, begins to suggest to Propertius that he think of turning his talents to patriotic verse (of the sort that Gertrude Stein would one day label "patriarchal poetry"). With the living model for his poetry deceased (under unpleasant circumstances) and with an attempt to shift the direction of his poetry now threatening to distract him from his original inspiration, the nature of his material begins to alter and his attitude toward it begins to grow complicated. These tensions dismantle the harmonies that had been achieved in the first volume. The poet is forced to reorder his fiction of himself as 'amorous subject'; he must ponder and reinvent his perspective vis-à-vis his Gallan inspiration. That perspective becomes increasingly ironic toward itself and the enterprise it was shaped to serve. What it initially took as sincere, ideal, romantic, transcendent it now views as problematic, in need of deeper scrutiny. At the same time, far from feeling the call to abandon the erotic imperative in order to take up the banner of the new ideology that Maecenas and his colleagues are devising and espousing, the poet feels more than ever called upon to defend it. That imperative is, after all, the origin of

12. For a bold, fascinating sketch of the beginnings of this poetic career, see MacKay.

13. See Richardson, 10

the poetic vocation he had chosen (or that had chosen him), it inspires the idea of poetry, of love, of poetic and of human identity, that have nourished the production of his verses.

These reformulations of Propertius' poetic project and of his poetic (and existential) identity inform and manifest themselves in what is now Book 2, which was (probably) originally separate volumes, 2A and 2B.<sup>14</sup> Cynthia is therefore now forced to share the limelight with other concerns in Books 2A and 2B, and our sense of the lover-poet's distraction from her, what seems a lessening of his obsession with her, is increased by the mishaps that overtook the transmission of the text of these volumes (and effected their conflation into a single volume). Nevertheless, Cynthia remains the chief focus of these volumes. In Book 1's twenty-three poems (counting 1.18 as two poems), she is directly addressed nineteen times, and in two poems where she is not named (2.1, *vita* and 14.9, 17, 19, *illa*) it is she to whom the poet is clearly alluding. In Books 2A and 2B, out of thirty-four poems she is mentioned in fourteen poems and she is addressed by name fourteen times; the incidence of indeterminate reference to the poet's 'amorous object' (twenty-five of them) is much higher than was the case in the previous volume, but a substantial number of these (*mea vita, mea lux, pulcherrima cura, domina, cara puella*), in particular the magnificent *cinis hic docta puella fuit* ("this dust was once a learned girl," 2.11.6) clearly move in Cynthia's orbit. In Book 3's twenty-five poems, though Propertius gives her a vivid speech in 6, her name appears only in three poems, at or near the end of the volume (21, 24, 25), in which he is busy celebrating his permanent break with her. Nevertheless, unnamed though she is, she is the subject or addressee of nine poems (5, 7, 6, 10, 11, 15, 16, 19, 20), and one concludes from this that the rumor of the poet's disinterest in her, even before he condemns her to outer darkness in his final poem of this volume, is considerably exaggerated.<sup>15</sup> She remains, until the moment he curses and abandons her, the core of his poetry, the reality, exquisite and terrifying, that has called his poetic identity into existence and has sustained it, constantly, cruelly, wonderfully.

14. For the complications that surround these intractable difficulties, see Butrica, 199, 208; Heyworth, *passim*; Murgia; Lyne (1998).

15. See, for example, Richardson, 11.

## WHAT CYNTHIA MEANS

Without her—he has said it again and again—without her, no poems, no poetic identity. Who or what was she then? It's the fashion nowadays to say that she is a metaphor for love elegy itself, or, beyond that, a sort of signifier of the erotic or amorous sign-system that governs the literary repository of vocabulary, images, themes from which the genre of love elegy draws its sustenance.<sup>16</sup> In feminist versions of this metaliterary style of reading love elegy, Cynthia or any other amour (including perhaps Juventius and Maranthus) becomes a metaliterary mirror in which male narcissism may preen, prance, and strut; before which it may glory in and worship its phallogentric aggression, its dominance (over anything it feels like penetrating), a vainglorious dandy performing his victory dance despite his habit of whining and his attempting to gain our sympathy by mimicking the rejected lover who suffered death—he, the humiliated votary of *Vagina Dentata*: in Housman's definitive description of such abjection, "The brisk, fond lackey to fetch and carry, / The sick, true-hearted slave." This construction of Cynthia represents a useful and perhaps inevitable displacement of the older, romantic readings in which a very real-life woman drives an autobiographical Propertius to distraction, then to his poetry notebooks.<sup>17</sup>

The version I offer here is not inspired by the desire to find some sort of middle ground between these two positions, but it does allow each of them a grain of truth. Propertius, as I read him, takes his materials both from life (though perhaps not much from his own life) and from books, especially those by the Roman poets who came just before him and who had been reflecting and revisiting in their poems the erotic imperative that they had inherited from Greece; that had begun to come into fashion just before they were born; and that would continue to exert its influence, in life and literature, for some decades after their heyday. Viewed from this perspective, Cynthia as poetic metaphor is an amalgam of the Roman erotic imperative both as it was lived by various Romans at the middle of the last century BCE and as it was written (recorded and reimagined) by Roman poets of the decades in

16. The crucial proponents of this perspective are Kennedy, 1993, and Veyne.

17. For the essential formulations of this powerful strategy of interpretation, see Wyke's invaluable collection of her essays on this crucial topic.

question, who presented themselves in their poems not just as poets but also as lover-poets. With this formulation in mind, Cynthia reveals herself as a worthy successor of Volumnia-Cytheris-Lycoris (woman, actress, poetical erotic object): that is to say, she *stands for* a real woman who really was engaged in the activities proper to the erotic imperative and, at the same time, she *is*, not stands for but *is*, (like) Gallus' Lycoris, a creature of fiction, one of whose functions is to symbolize Propertius' particular poetic enterprise (his obsession with the nature of the erotic imperative, his anatomy of love elegy and its codes and their cultural contexts). Cynthia, then, as a way of dramatizing the process of the erotic imperative, is a complex hybrid, part fact (because she signs the manner in which some real lovers are really engaged in 'being in love' or really following the current fashion for 'falling and being in love'), and she is also part fiction (because, even if some traces of his real-life encounters maybe tinge the poet's psyche and his poems, she is, mostly, a product of his imagination).

If that were all she is (means), the task of peeling away her layers would be at an end. But she is more complex still. As an emblem of the erotic imperative, she stands for much more than the services that a highly skilled (and highly paid) sex-worker can provide for her customers.<sup>18</sup> The gifts she bestows (or withholds) are very much carnal in nature, but they are not merely carnal. If she proffers her trick or her long-time companion delights that he cannot expect to get at home from his wife or his slaves, she is no less lavish in her willingness to awaken in him emotional energies, psychological pleasures, and expanses of imagination that are as vivid as—and sometimes more vivid than—the bodily thrills that accompany them. She (or such women as she symbolizes) cannot fabricate for him a new identity, but she can help liberate him from the codes, the sign-systems, the ideologies, that he was born into and that have, until she got hold of him, prescribed for him not just who he thought he was and thought he ought to be but also what he valued and chose and did. This freedom allows him and indeed encourages him to assume a new identity, one that requires him to fashion for himself a new set of ethical norms, ones that provide his existence, his daily life, his sense of himself and the world, with new directions, new meanings, new purposes. Whether as an ideal or an illusion or a bit of both, she is the catalyst of a new style of self-fashioning.

Propertius may have taken up, for reasons which must remain mys-

18. For a thorough examination of this aspect of Cynthia, see James, 71–107.

terious to us, the genre of love elegy *faute de mieux*. He seems to have felt entirely unsuited to epic (as he never tires of telling us); he was apparently not much interested in drama, whether comic or tragic; and was not stupid enough to try writing satire (which might have been a very possible choice for him) once he saw what Horace had sublimely accomplished in that vein.<sup>19</sup> However he may have found his way into love elegy, once he got inside it, he let it possess and feed his imagination. He discovered that it gestured to a realm of thought and feeling, of forms and feelings, that transcended mere lust (which seemed to be its core, however fancy the euphemisms that had collected around it) and that also outpaced mere pleasure or the mere masculine yearning to dominate everything it encountered. Love elegy offered to a young Roman from Umbria and to his coevals an alternate style of living, another way of being oneself. In a society that was just recovering itself from its spiritual and cultural ruins, one in which the emerging ideology offered mostly patched-up facsimiles of antique Roman virtues (Cato the Elder's ideology of hypermasculinity and unselfish self-sacrifice to the State) that were all but useless to and severely incompatible with the new world order and its Hellenizing, cosmopolitan, monarchy—in such a society the values that informed the erotic imperative seemed more than attractive. When the new regime began to express its displeasure with the erotic imperative and the poetry that celebrated it, Propertius was faced with a complex choice, and his Book 2B and his Book 3, as we are about to see in the next chapter, reflect, ponder, and question the tensions that choice brought with it.

Cynthia provides Propertius with various blessings: 1) thrills and pleasures, both carnal and emotional-mental; 2) the possibility of a new (un-Roman) identity that *free*s him from a cluster of codes that he finds oppressive and unattractive and unreal (because, the more he imagines his Cynthia, he becomes, through Cynthia, everything a Roman male must not become: he becomes willing, and more than willing, to be mastered and humiliated); 3) poetic forms and feelings that suit his genius and that guarantee him the freedom to refuse genres that he dislikes, that encroach upon his freedom; 4) freedom itself, an ethical or existential freedom that derives from his poetic freedom and from the sexual/gender freedom that his passion, whether real or fictive, has endowed him with: the freedom to do with his mind and his genius as

19. For a brilliant discussion of the nature of the 'conflict' between Propertius and Horace, see Ferri, 15–33.

he pleases is linked to and derives from, both in life and in books, his freedom to do with his indocile body as he pleases.<sup>20</sup>

Propertius' is a complex but coherent consciousness that is bent on a passionate and honest exploration of itself and of the context of its making, of its self-remakings (the growth, so to speak, of a poet's mind). At the end of Book 3 he may give Cynthia the gate; but when, at the beginning of Book 4, his horoscope tells him he has made a mistake in trying to rid himself of her, if we have been listening carefully to him in Books 1–3, we are not much surprised by this pronouncement, which amounts to a palinode inside a palinode. So, when Cynthia bursts into the middle of what was supposed to be a volume devoted to patriotic forms and patriotic feelings, when she scares her lover-poet out of his wits and roughs him up and then has her way with him, both her macabre visitation and her brutal interruption of his swinging bachelor soiree seem, on reflection, anything but astonishing. Propertius cannot get rid of Cynthia because she is his worse and better half, she is his fate and his salvation, she is his Id and Super-Ego. She is the source and the shape of his poetic identity.

20. For Cynthia as allegory for poetry, see Miller, 63–66; for a subtle exploration of Cynthia's polyvalences, see Gold, 87–93.