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## A Latin Lover in Ancient Rome

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CHAPTER 4

PROPERTIUS  
AND THE POETICS OF  
DISGREGATION

. . . Or to disuse me of the queasy pain  
Of being loved or loving . . .  
—Donne, “The Calm”

Yet this is my singularity: my libido is entirely enclosed. I inhabit no other space but the amorous duel: not an atom outside, hence not an atom of gregarity: I am crazy, not because I am original (a crude ruse of conformity), but because I am severed from all society.

—Barthes, *Discourse*, 121



IN HIS FIRST BOOK of poetry, the *Monobiblos*, Propertius concerns himself only tangentially with political matters. At the outset of his career he is, rather like a new dog in the neighborhood, mostly interested in marking off his territory. He accomplishes this task by defining himself with the help of four foil figures, four other Roman males of his generation whose temperaments, pursuits, and lifestyles he sharply contrasts with his own. In his first volume, the poet busies himself with telling us who he is by telling us who he is not, thus sketching the outlines of the figure who, as we have seen, will obsess him through most of the rest of his career and whose domination over his imagination he will attempt—or pretend to attempt—to throw off. The *Monobiblos* is shaped by the poet’s effort to validate his choice of poetic career and poetic identity by constructing his mask, the one that represents him as a credible erotic subject, from four fragments of negative identity.

The first of these, Tullus, is the addressee of poems 1, 6, 14, and 22.

Tullus was a young patrician with good prospects for satisfying careers both in the army and in politics, the kinds of career Propertius probably could not expect would likewise fall into his lap. Some have thought of Tullus as a well-heeled, well-connected and sympathetic young fellow, more than ready to help a promising young man from the sticks find his footing in the big town. When Tullus' uncle goes off to govern the province of Asia in 30 BCE and takes his nephew along with him (a sort of apprenticeship in the mysteries of high bureaucracy), Tullus kindly invites his less privileged new acquaintance to come with him and share some of the education in soldiering and administering and some of the fun that a tour of duty in the province of Asia holds in store for him. The poet uses this occasion to proclaim his absolute devotion to Cynthia (and, obliquely, to boast of her boundless passion for him). He thanks Tullus for the helping hand, but he fervently affirms his allegiance to a destiny utterly opposed to Tullus':

me sine, quem semper voluit fortuna iacere,  
     hanc animam extremae reddere nequitiae.  
 multi longinquo periere in amore libenter,  
     in quorum numero me quoque terra tegat.  
 non ego sum laudi, non natus idoneus armis;  
     hanc me militiam fata subire volunt.

Fortune has always chosen me to be among the losers in the world's lottery, so let me give myself up to a life of what the world regards as utter degradation. A lot of people before me have gladly perished in longterm love affairs, ones they couldn't extricate themselves from, and I hope to be numbered among them when it's time for me to go to my grave. I was not born for a life in the Roman military; rather, Fate has decreed that I must serve in the army of Love. (1.6.25–30)

Tullus, then, though he seems to have regarded the poet as a kindred spirit, is defined here, as in 1.11 (where his material wealth is contrasted with the poet's proud poverty) as a counter-persona, the poet's complete opposite both as regards their destinies and their value systems and worldviews. It is by virtue of his being the poet's anti-self, of his being everything that Propertius is not, that he is the ideal figure to open and to close the poet's maiden volume of verse (just how important Tullus is in designing the Propertian persona will be clear when we look at how his presence in 3.23, a poem that takes its place just before the end of

Book 3, just before Propertius attempts to say “goodbye to all that,” to Cynthia and to all she represents).

A second addressee, Gallus, also figures in four poems (5, 10, 13, 20), which occur in an almost regular, almost musical sequencing. Gallus apparently imagines himself the poet’s rival for Cynthia’s attentions, but he is by and large rather unlucky with the ladies (perhaps, as we learn in poem 20, because he is as interested in boys as he is in women). Having witnessed, somewhat voyeuristically, Gallus’ style of lovemaking (10.5ff; see also 13.13ff.: for which, see the acute observations of Miller, 183–94), and after congratulating him on his current luck, the poet feels called upon to offer him some friendly and expert advice on how to keep his love object’s affections (Cynthia’s instructions to him as to what to do and not do have been marvelously efficacious). His suggestions center on Gallus’ need to learn to be tactful, considerate, submissive, loyal—to be more like Propertius himself:

et quo sis humilis magis et subiectus amori,  
 hoc magis effectu saepe fruarer bono.  
 is poterit felix una remanere puella,  
 qui numquam vacuo pectore liber erit.

The humbler you are, the more you abase yourself to love, the better the outcome will be. The man who resists the impulse to keep to his own ways (fancy free to pick and choose), that man will find true happiness (at last) with his one and only. (1.10.27–30)

It is generally acknowledged that this Gallus cannot be the Gallus whom we’ve already encountered in earlier chapters, the famous poet, lover of Volumnia/Cytheris/Lycoris and friend of Vergil, that Gallus who was immortalized in *Eclogue* 10 and who, having somehow run afoul of Augustus, committed suicide in Egypt in 26 BCE.<sup>1</sup> But to call this amatively challenged lover Gallus, to name him with the name of the celebrated master of the style of poetry one is oneself beginning to write—what could be the reason for that clumsy misstep or embarrassing forgetfulness?—unless of course it was deliberate; unless this was a young Turk’s way of claiming that he had new wine for new bottles, that the heyday of the poet of the *Amores* and his Lycoris had faded, that it was now Cynthia and Propertius (and not Tibullus and his Delia

1. Janan offers a useful sketch of him, 51–52; see also Janan, 29–31

either) who were about to become the talk of the town. The figure of this Gallus augments the new brilliance of the new lover-poet on the block by his deficiency as lover (and by his passing out of poetic fashion). A tactic as brazen as it was unkind, this—but understudies (think of Eve Harrington of *All About Eve*) are not known for tact or tenderness.<sup>2</sup>

Ponticus, the third addressee (poems 7 and 9), a friend of Ovid's (*Tristia* 4.10.47), is an epic poet who falls helplessly and hopelessly in love, even as Propertius had warned might happen to him; then, caught up in the anguish of that passion, he discovers, as again Propertius told him would be the case, that ladies loathe epics and love both love poetry and the lover-poets who write it (for them). That Ponticus would wish desperately and vainly for the ability to write love poems when he belatedly (*serus Amor*, 1.9.20) became enamored and gravely needed to poetize amorously, was Propertius' accurate prediction. So, while the epic poet suffers acute writer's block, he endures the added indignity of watching the triumph of Propertius:

tum me non humilem mirabere saepe poetam,  
 tunc ego Romanis praeferar ingeniis;  
 nec potuerunt iuvenes nostro reticere sepulcro  
 'Ardoris nostri magne poeta, iaces.'  
 tu cave nostra tuo contemnas carmina fastu:  
 saepe venit magno faenore tardus Amor.

Then you will often be forced to admire me—no longer a second-rater, then I will be prized beyond Rome's best poets. And young men gathered at my grave will burst forth with their praise: "Great poet of our passion, here you lie!" Therefore, take care not to belittle my poetry; when Love delays his coming he often charges excessive interest for the transaction (you risk nemesis in insulting my genre and me, its servant). (1.7.21–26)

This is a quick and effective way of trivializing epical grandeur and, in so doing, of advertising, rather disingenuously, the splendor of the poet's own investigations of the erotic life.

Bassus, who is addressed in 1.4, is another poet and another friend

2. See Bramble, 87; Janan, 36–39; Crowther, 1637–38; Miller, 70–73, 80–85, 251 nn41 and 42; for an especially intriguing analysis of the problem, see Pincus, 171–87.

of Ovid's (*Tristia* 4.10.47), one who specializes in invective and has unpleasant things to say about Cynthia. Propertius advises him that Cynthia's gift for revenge is memorable and suggests he look for other, safer targets.

Viewed, or better, felt, as a whole, these four men conjure up a milieu for the poet, one which is at once his matrix, his workshop, and, in part, his audience. What matters about his relationships with these four figures is not what joins him to them but what distinguishes them from him. He, Propertius, is not distracted by traditional pursuits: making wars and speeches, subduing the natives and governing them. He is not a naïve bearding trying, hit or miss, to get laid. Rather, young though he is, he is already skilled at seduction—or perhaps at being seduced and dominated. He, Propertius, does not waste his time writing epic verse or misogynistic verse; he writes only the kind of poems that women in general and his Cynthia in particular admire (not to mention those curious young men who study his poetry for clues to their own erotic styles). He is, in short, the right man in the right place at the right time. He is worthy of—and worthy to write of—the ravishing, irresistible, and dangerous woman who is addressed, pondered, and praised in most of the remaining poems of Book 1, the creature who more than Tibullus' three rather shadowy beloveds or Ovid's vague pastiche, Corinna, and more even than Catullus' Lesbia, incarnates what is really at stake in the erotic idea and ideal that we glimpse in Latin love elegy.<sup>3</sup>

### MAECENAS INTERVENES

That is the sort of thing, the sort of poetic persona, that we encounter in Propertius' Book 1, a poetic identity composed of a handful of rejected personae and a torrent of loud, passionate assertions of rapturous erotic bedazzlement. This peculiar concoction derives much of its force and vividness from the clarity of its poems' formal patternings and from the elegance of the ordering of the poems. The notorious textual problems that bedevil the poems in Books 2A and 2B are all but absent here, where, despite occasional doubts and setbacks, a cocksure, hectoring, essentially unified voice shouts his luck and mastery to the

3. For a different perspective on the thematic center and the structure of Book 1, see Manuwald, 226–31.

world. That loud self-assurance, that swagger and arrogance (which are as fragile as they are naïve), manifest themselves in the finished structures of the poems, their clear endings and beginnings and, comparatively speaking, their lucidly articulated middles.

That clarity (of self and purpose) and that confidence (in the verisimilitude of the poet's fictive erotic object, and in his fabrication of himself as erotic subject) gradually dwindle in Books 2A and 2B. To account for these alterations, an older style of reading would have recourse to biographical speculation and the dim chronologies that it feeds and is fed by. What did Cynthia do to him, and when and where and how and why did she do it? These questions are as unanswerable as they are irrelevant.

What we know for sure about Books 2A and 2B as we peruse them is the arrival of a new and crucial ingredient in the mix: for the first time and in the first poem of 2A, we encounter Maecenas, the figure who comes to define for us the poet's new milieu and who denotes a change in, a widening and complication of, his audience. With the coming of Maecenas, a topic that had been handled in a slighter and less urgent manner in the poems addressed to Ponticus and Bassus, namely, the nature and function of erotic poetry and the erotic poetic vocation, suddenly take on a new and troubled resonance. The self-sufficiency, the poetic and erotic harmony and autonomy, that Propertius had proclaimed and performed in the dramatic speech acts of Book 1, is now contested. If, as Bakhtin says, each utterance is an answer to a question, one could say that in Book 1, glorying in his youthful energies and his new-found erotic power, Propertius had not heard or had perhaps refused to listen to any questions that might have been asked him about himself or his poetry—its eccentric self-regard, its dismissals, both implicit and explicit, of civic responsibilities. Suddenly, at the outset of Book 2A, there comes a question he cannot ignore.

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.

You ask me, Maecenas, why it is I'm constantly scribbling loves poems, how it is that such tender sentiments issue from my lips. Well, it's not the queen of Muses nor the poetry god himself who dictates these poems

to me. No, it's my girl herself, she alone, who has transformed me into a poetic genius. (2.1.1–4)

We don't know why or when or in what manner Maecenas first asked the question that followed hard upon this first question (namely, when are you turning your hand to court poetry?), but Propertius, who in his first volume was accustomed to ask all the questions and give all the answers, now encounters a question he cannot easily brush aside (though he tries to, though he pretends to). Maecenas wants (Augustan) epics from him? Well, as he said, Cynthia is both his Muse and his *materia*. He can write epics, indeed he could write an *Iliad*, about *her*: whatever the state of her coiffure, whatever she wears or doesn't wear, whether she is plucking her lyre or snoozing (so ubiquitous and efficacious is this poetic crystallization):

seu quidquid fecit sive est quodcumque locuta.  
maxima de nihilo nascitur historia.

In short, whatever she does, whatever she says, a mighty legend comes into existence out of (what may seem to others) a mere nothing. (2.1.16–17)

The poet, then, in an ironically conciliatory mood, ventures that if he had the epic knack (but he doesn't), he wouldn't waste his precious gifts refurbishing various hoary and outworn topics from Greek and Roman legend and history. No, he would hymn the glorious deeds of Augustus, and after that of Maecenas himself:

bellaque resque tui memorarem Caesaris, et tu  
Caesare sub magno cura secunda fores.

I would recount the wars and deeds of your dear Caesar, and you would be, after great Caesar, my focus. (2.1.25–26)

(This sly in-house joke is brazenly reprised at 35–36: the virtues of Maecenas were varied and many but military prowess was hardly among them.) Yet for all the witty bravado that informs this poem, it marks a severe alteration of the poet's program. The moment Maecenas tactfully broaches his questions, Propertius discovers that he is no longer the master of the only game in town. He discovers that he is now (as he

should have known from the outset) a player among other players, and he must learn some new rules, must learn anew to justify what he does and to explain who he is.<sup>4</sup>

The poems of Books 2A and 2B come to us in an unusually and irremediably messy text, perhaps in part because Propertius is now engaged in answering questions, in arguing with Cynthia and the world and himself. The project of proclaiming the unique veracity of the Propertian version of erotic ideology has now given way to the more painful—and more interesting and exciting—task of questioning, of meditating on, the complexities and inconsistencies, the incompatible goods and unintended consequences, that make up erotic experience. This new project, which constitutes a sort of analysis of the varieties of amative stimulus and response, is presented in kaleidoscopic fashion: the poet seems to change his mind and his mood almost randomly. In any case, the know-it-all of Book 1 has all but disappeared by now and has left behind him a more fragmented speaker, one more exposed to and more aware of the vicissitudes of loving and being loved.

### LYNCEUS ADMONISHED (AND ADVISED)

That total impression is at once challenged and confirmed in the long, meandering poem that closes Book 2 (34), where the poet assails another poet, Lynceus, who has tried to steal Cynthia from him.<sup>5</sup> Boucher has made a plausible though by no means certain case for identifying this poetic rival with the poet's contemporary, Varius, who wrote both epic and tragic poetry and became one of the editors of Vergil's epic. Lynceus, it seems, an unusually austere character and one entirely given over to thinking philosophic thoughts and translating them into lofty verses, has somehow made a pass at Cynthia while he was, against his wont, deep in his cups (*errabant multo quod tua verba mero*, 2.34.22). Fond of the grape himself, that is the kind of lapse the poet can overlook, even from someone whose puritan façade never fooled him

4. Greene 2005, 67–68, minimizes the reality of Maecenas' proddings and Propertius' response to them; instead, for her, Maecenas becomes a marker in a poem whose chief feature is a sort of gendered textuality: "a fiction within a creative universe."

5. For this poem's text and its possible unity, see Butrica, 201–4; see also the arguments for its unity by Syndikus, 315, n211, and most recently, by Heyworth, 262–65.

(*sed numquam vitae fallet me ruga severae*, 23). In any case, after Lynceus has blown his own cover and revealed himself as just another ordinary mortal (lover), Propertius welcomes him to the club:

Lynceus ipse meus seros insanit amores!  
solum te nostros laetor adire deos.

At last, my chum Lynceus has gone off his rocker, a late-bloomer in amour. Gladly I welcome him, him above all, into the cult of my gods. (2.34.25–26)

Propertius immediately advises Lynceus to get off his high horse, forget all his philosophical and scientific studies, and busy himself with the lighter genre of love songs, an activity much closer to his mental and emotional condition, that of bemused, distracted apprentice lover. The girls of Rome, whether native born or imported, don't want to listen to rehashed Homer or warmed-over Hesiod. They want to hear about lovers sick with love, and it is writing in this style that has made Propertius, a kid from the provinces, without money or family, the King of Love, the guy whom the girls flock to and love to party with and to adore.

aspice me, cui parva domi fortuna relicta est  
nullus et antiquo Marte triumphus avi,  
ut regem mixtas inter conviva puellas  
hoc ego, quo tibi nunc elevor, ingenio!

Just look at me. Left with only a modest inheritance and with no victorious granddad from ancient wars to point to—look how, at all the parties, I'm treated like a king, surrounded by swarms of girls—and all because of the talent that you're in the habit of ridiculing. (2.34.55–58)

And because he is admired by those readers who matter (girls able and willing to read what's good for them and for him), Propertius is more than content to assume what might seem—from the perspective of the dominant ideology—a demeaning, even decadent, posture:

me iuuet hesternis positum languere corollis,  
quem tetigit iactu certus ad ossa deus.

It's my delight to lazily languish amidst the fading garlands of all of yesterday's parties, I whom the god's unerring arrow has pierced to the marrow. (2.34.59–60)

So much for any epic ambitions he might harbor in some foolish mood, so much for any officials come to badger him into epic production. Sprawled there with the rotting flowers, probably with a bad hangover, he is definitely not an epic poet. Which hardly matters, because, luckily for the age and what it demands, the right poet has popped up at the right time:

Actia Vergilium custodis litora Phoebi,  
Caesaris et foris dicere posse ratis . . .

Vergil is capable of doing justice to the shores of Actium that Apollo protected and to the valiant fleets of Caesar. (2.34.61–62)

Greater than himself, greater than Lynceus, greater than anybody (even Homer?), a true *vates* has arrived: Greater than Homer, though? Yes:

cedite Romani scriptores, cedite Grai!  
nescio quid maius nascitur Iliade.

Give place, you Roman writers, and give place, too, you Greeks, for something incomparable, something greater than the *Iliad*, is coming to its birth. (2.34.65–66)

Vergil is in the process of writing an epic that will end by putting even Homer into the shade. Which is wonderful, to be sure. But he also wrote, on a smaller scale, his agriculture poem, and furthermore, in an even lighter vein, his pastorals, which are crammed with lovers and beloveds. So, even the greatest poet ever, unlike Lynceus, shared the themes that Propertius has made his own (we will see in chapter 5 how Ovid kidnaps this clever ploy and touchdowns with it). Propertius, who here again defends his erotic poetic and defends it even more forcefully than he did in the poems to Ponticus and Bassus in Book 1, closes Book 2B with a thundering *sphragis*, his seal, his mark, his Propertius-Was-Here. He stands proudly (and rightfully) in the (somewhat new yet splendid) tradition of Catullus and Calvus and Gallus (and Vergil). His Cynthia will be immortal if Poetic Fame decides to rank him with his

predecessors, those Latin poets of love who prepared the way for him.

Cynthia quin etiam vivet laudata Properti  
 hos inter si me ponere Fama volet.

How will Cynthia praised by Propertius not live if Fame will deign to place me among them? (2.34.93–94)

This is a testament of triumph, to be sure, but it is marked, just faintly about the edges, with a hint of irritation. If Lynceus is Varius, next in line after Vergil to become Rome's poet laureate, then two representatives of the new regime and its official poet assume the roles of Propertius' newest foil-figures. Though he cleverly tries to convert the more formidable of the two into his ally in the poetry wars, what designs the poem's rhetorical path is the poet's awareness that Lynceus and Vergil and the powers they represent are encroaching on his private artificial paradise and that what he had made the center of his identity and existence is now shifting back to where it in fact always was, to the periphery of Rome's collective consciousness. The negative identity fragments that he challenged and defeated—on paper at least—in his opening volume have returned, in new shapes, from their long repression, at the end of this third volume, 2B.

## THE WORM CONSIDERS TURNING

Book 3 opens not with one but with five programmatic poems, none of them addressed to Maecenas, who will finally turn up in poem 9. Exactly one-fifth of this fourth volume, published probably in 22 BCE, just after Maecenas' mysterious withdrawal from the prince's cabinet, is devoted to that clustering of apologies, excuses, rationalizations, protestations of possession of a minor talent unsuited to the higher grandeurs, to all the plentiful and transparently flippant alibis that mark the two *recusationes* in Book 2A: the one addressed to Maecenas which opens the volume and the other (10), coyly addressed to Augustus himself, which promises eventual assistance in spreading the emperor's message (*bella canam, quando scripta puella mea est*, 8, "I'll hymn your battles when I've finished writing up my girl"). What functions in the orators mostly

as rhetorical legerdemain and in Horace as ironic flourish becomes in these poems, in this avalanche of passive-aggressive fandancing, almost a genre of its own. These poems are, with a single exception, addressed to no one in particular. No mere mortal is asking him, as Maecenas once had asked and will again (though perhaps more faintly in 3.9), why he is frittering away his talent on un-Roman topics. In poem 3.3, however, no less an authority on poetry that Apollo himself will ask the big Callimachean question: Why should this featherweight contemplate wasting his frail gifts on matter much too huge for him? The judgment implicit in this nearly rhetorical question is seconded by Calliope, who commands Propertius to get back to his proper duties, which include inciting his male readers to covet their watchful neighbors' wives successfully: *ut per te clausas sciat excantare puellas, / qui volet austeros arte ferire viros*, 49–50.

But despite the intervention of the poetry god and the muse, Propertius seems, in the opening poems of Book 3, to be seriously reconsidering (or pretending to reconsider) his commitment to poetizing the erotic imperative. At the time Book 3 appears it is still four to five years before the passage of laws that will outlaw several kinds of unpatriotic sexual activities, recommending severe punishments for those who persist in directing the erotic urges of their indocile bodies to unprocreative behaviors or in failing to marry those they should marry, thus refusing to produce new babies for the new, newly restored Roman state. Propertius had written a funny, naughty poem (2.7) a few years back when the idea of stringent marriage laws was first being floated (for which, see Badian's persuasive analysis). In that poem he had boldly proclaimed that Jupiter himself could not part lovers who do not wish to be parted (*quamvis diducere amantis / non queat invitos Juppiter ipse duos*, 3–4). When someone who overhears this blasphemy offers wise correction ('*at magnus Caesar*,' "but Caesar is great"), the poet brushes earthly power aside as easily as he had just done the powers of heaven: *sed magnus Caesar in armis: / devictae gentes nil in amore valent*, 5–6; "Sure, Caesar is great in his wars, but vanquished nations mean nothing where love is concerned." This daring affirmation of the power of love leads him to venture the utterance of a supremely un-Roman speech-act:

unde mihi Parthis natos praebere triumphis?  
nullus de nostro sanguine miles erit.

What reason do I have to furnish sons whose valor will defeat our worst

enemies, those damned Parthians, so forcing them to march in our generals' victory parades? I'm not about to father any soldiers. (2.7.13–14)

Such was the extravagance of his salad days. Now a bit older, maybe a bit wiser, he wonders if perhaps he should discard a fashion that was maybe beginning to wear a little thin, abandon a style of singing that celebrated a lifestyle that was beginning to fray about the edges—and that was, in a few years, very likely to become against the law.

The anxieties and uncertainties of Rome in the early and mid-20s had not ended by the time Propertius composed his next to last volume, and they would all but disappear only in the opening years of the next decade with the celebration of the Secular Games (celebrations performed roughly every hundred years, commemorating the power and endurance of the city of Rome and its citizens; the games were produced with special magnificence and ideological symbolism by Augustus in 17 BCE). However, the chief outlines of the regime when it had found its real stability were already sufficiently clear when Book 3 was made available for dissemination.<sup>6</sup> In this volume Propertius surveys the regime's claims to a steady improvement in its ideology and reshapes his response to continuing hints that he should participate in its ornamentation. The five poems that open Book 3 and the poems that variously echo them (9 to Maecenas, 11 on Cleopatra, 12 to Postumus, 13 on luxury, 14 on Spartan women, 18 on Marcellus, 22 to Tullus) constitute his answer to what the age is ever more insistently beginning to demand of him. Hence, some of the time and space that would once have gone to praising and blaming Cynthia are now devoted to bickering with the brave, new *Zeitgeist* in its emerging perfection.

### A FRIEND SHOULD BEAR HIS FRIEND'S INFIRMITIES

This pattern of the poet's ubiquitous self-defense and his growing sense of the meaning of his separation from the flock, his 'disgregation' (I borrow the term from Antonio La Penna) seems to have endured a sharp reversal in 3.22, the poem to Tullus that almost reads,

6. For a succinct and compelling account of Augustus' situation in the 20s, see Cartledge.

on its surface, as a sort of palinode, one which harbingers the poems, immediately after it, in which Propertius gives Cynthia her final walking papers (or, perhaps, marks the moment when he gets his Dear Propertius missive from her). In any case, in 3.22 we encounter the return of the poet's first and most crucial foil-figure, the one who opened his first volume and closed it. More than Maecenas or 'Lynceus' or Augustus or Vergil, Tullus represents everything Propertius is not and does not want to be. What would happen if Propertius should transevaluate himself and embrace, ardently, the things that make Tullus Tullus? Wouldn't that mean that Propertius had come to a place in the road where he would no longer say "no" or "maybe" to being all Roman all the time, for the rest of his life; when he would finally jettison his erotic identity and would, against all odds, at long last, say "no" to Cynthia and "yes" to Maecenas and "yes" to Augustus?

Back in Book 1 Tullus was about to go off and help his uncle govern the province of Asia. Propertius had declined an invitation to join him there and, in 1.14, had further been at pains to contrast his own modest means with his friend's conspicuous consumption, pointing out, somewhat disingenuously (the poet was very far from being penniless), that he who has love hasn't much need of money:

nam quis divitiis adverso gaudet Amore?  
 nulla mihi tristi praemia sint Venere! . . .  
 quae mihi dum placata aderit, non ulla verebor  
 regna vel Alcinoi munera despiciere.

Is there anybody who really enjoys his money if Love has it in for him? If Venus is pissed at me, why should I worry about getting my share of the booty? . . . But when Cynthia favors me, I will instantly disdain a kingdom or the fabled wealth of Alcinous (1.14.15–16, 23–24)

But in Book 3 some changes have occurred. For one thing, Propertius has found out, definitely, that Love and money are by no means incompatible since it turns out that girls, even Cynthia, tend to be greedy.<sup>7</sup> For another, Tullus has not returned from his Eastern travels. Why he has remained 'out there' after his uncle's job was finished and his own tour of duty has apparently ended is unclear. Perhaps he has just grown used

7. For a description, thorough and imaginative, of the dynamics that govern this aspect of the genre, see James, *passim*.

to, perhaps too fond of, near-oriental pleasures (think of Antony and the ruinous fleshpots he had stumbled on in those humid climes); or perhaps he got involved in lucrative business transactions that required his continued presence. Whatever the reason, Propertius, who in 1.22 had spoken of the unending friendship between Tullus and himself, really wants, he claims, to see him again, back in Rome, where he belongs. Hans-Peter Stahl, who doubts that Propertius is all that desperate to be reunited with his long outworn foil-figure, offers another possibility for Propertius' pleading letter-poem: now more amenable than in the past to making himself useful to important people, Propertius has yielded to the requests of Tullus' family and written a poem to urge the prodigal home (205–9). Which is it then? A sincere, heartfelt plea to a friend whom he much misses? Or a more pedestrian product, an impersonal service rendered to his friend's influential clan?

Or is it a parody of Vergil and of the imperial project in which Vergil's poetry was by now, willy-nilly, inextricably enmeshed? The baroque verbiage of the poem's exordium (this is an oration, after all, a *suasio* shaped by *comparatio*) proliferates its fusion of pompous mythological allusions and elaborate geographical fillers to represent, to evoke, the fascination that may have seduced Tullus into lingering in those storied, glamorous locales:

frigida tam multos placuit tibi Cyzicus annos,  
 Tulle, Propontiaci qua fluit isthmus aqua,  
 Dindymis et sacra fabricata in vite Cybebe,  
 raptorisque tulit quae via Ditis equos?

Have you delighted all these years in cold Cyzicus, there where the isthmus is bathed by the waters of Propontis, where stands that statue of Dindymian Cybele, carved from sacred vinewood, and where winds the road traversed by the horses of the King of Hell? (3.22.1–4)

The ornate style of this question is briefly merged with a slightly plainer style:

si forte iuvant Helles Athamantidos urbes  
 nec desiderio, Tulle, movere meo . . .

But if perhaps you are enthralled by the cities of Athamantid Helle [she, that daughter of King Athamas of Thebes, who was drowned in the Hel-

lespont, which is part of the nexus of my abstruse geographical ornaments] and are in no way touched by my telling you how greatly I miss you. . . . (5–6)

The burden of his letter-poem is *desiderio, Tulle, meo*, “Tullus, I really miss you.” That laconic utterance (whether heartfelt or, as Stahl reads it, rhetorical, impersonal) sets up a second stylistic register which, though sparingly employed in the poem, nevertheless emphasizes, by the extreme contrast it offers, the absurd extravagance of the baroque style—it verges in fact on the rococo—that dominates the poem and undermines the ‘message’ it purports to help deliver.

After the single distich in plain style, the baroque style is immediately resumed and lavishly magnified in the next section of the poem, which quickly swallows itself up in a vortex of violent images of monstrous faces and dangerous places: Atlas, Medusa, Geryon, Antaeus, Hercules, the Argonauts are all jumbled together and spewed out from a bizarre cornucopia of inflated language and chaotic images. This strange passage ends by being, as the poet intended, as unintelligible as it is pompous and grandiloquent—in *se magna ruunt*, or “great edifices collapse on themselves,” as a poet who knew such matters well happily put it. This rotten magnificence ends with its stylistic antithesis:

omnia Romanae cedent miracula terrae:  
natura hic posuit, quidquid ubique fuit.

The Roman world beats all the wonders of the world. Here, in this single spot, Nature has placed all of them from everywhere. (3.22.17–18)

This is Voice of the Father, it is the words and the music of Cato the Elder. *Miracula*—wonders, tourist attractions, miracles, freaks. Myth or strange fact, amazement or monstrosity, that near-eastern, Greeky world and its enticing, decadent culture are a snare and a delusion. Nature, which is to be found at her essential best only in Italy, in an Italy now and forever Romanized (and Augustinized), has wisely situated all good things, right where she has made her real home.

This return to *Romanitas* signals the arrival of the poem’s core, which turns out to be an elegant hybrid created from some of the loftiest sentiments to be found both in Vergil’s *Georgics* and in his *Aeneid*:

armis apta magis tellus quam commoda noxae:

Famam, Roma, tuae non pudet historiae.  
 nam quantum ferro tantum pietate potentes  
 stamus: victrices temperat ira manus. (3.22.20–22)

Guy Lee's translation is hard to beat:

Fitter for war than friend of felony this land.  
 Fame is not ashamed of Roman history,  
 For strong we stand through duty no less than by steel,  
 In victory our anger always stays its hand.

The probity of Rome's wars, sustained as they always are by a force of arms that *pietas* and *clementia* have tempered, confronts Greek violence and the fraudulent splendors of its legends, legends in which dim fact vanishes into brilliant fiction. The Greeks have their myths, the Romans have their history, and all the truths that Anchises tells Aeneas down in the underworld resound in the spare, proud verses that here find themselves memorably rephrased by, of all people, the dandified, elegant aesthete, by the irreverent elegist who has previously disdained them.<sup>8</sup> These verses immediately give way to an *homage*, as concise as it is lovely, to Vergil's *laudes Italiae*, in which suave rhythms mimic the play of water in motion, of Italy's rivers and lakes (the passage ends, as if Propertius had already heard or read a draft of the end of *Aeneid* 12, with a mention of Juturna's pure and patriotic fountain):

hic Anio Tiburine fluis, Clitumnus ab Umbro  
 tramite, et aeternum Marcus umor opus.  
 Albanus lacus et socia Nemorensis ab unda  
 potaque Pollucis nympha salubris equo.

Here flow your waters, Tiburtine Anio, and here wash the waves of Clitumnus, fresh from its Umbrian watercourse, here splashes the water from the venerable Marcian aqueduct, here are the Alban and Nemorensian lakes, and here is nymph Juturna's curative fountain where her brother, godly Pollux, watered his steed. (23–26)

Abruptly, this core of Roman truth makes way for another heavy

8. Newman, 340, is briefly amused "to find the poet assuming the role of *patruus*, elder statesman," but is not sufficiently engaged by this entertainment to probe its complexities.

dose of Greek horror show phantasmagoria—Snakes, Dragons, Thyestes, Althaea, Maenads, pitiful Iphigenia, Io, sadistic Sinus—they're all here, a copious Hellenic nightmare zoo dumped haphazard into the by now unmistakable message of this campy cautionary tale: the Graeculi glory in their monsters, we glory (humbly) in our simple traditions and simple virtues. Come home, Tullus, back to your roots, back to the truth and purity of Italy and Rome.

haec tibi, Tulle, parens, haec est pulcherrima sedes,  
 hic tibi pro digna gente petendus honos,  
 hic tibi ad eloquium cives, hic ampla nepotum  
 spes et venturae coniugis aptus amor.

Back here, Tullus, back here is the land of your birth and your homeland, the most beautiful place on earth. It's here that you should be looking for a public office that's worthy of your clan's glory. Here you will find an audience of free citizens capable of appreciating your eloquence, and here you have waiting for you ample hope of grandsons and a wife whose appropriate love is also right here, ready for your taking. (3.22.39–42)

*Aptus amor*: love as defined by Cato's code. His homeland's love of him (or his for her) is "suitable, convenient, appropriate": it (she) will produce children and grandchildren. That is Roman marriage and Roman Love.

Once again, it's five or so years before the emperor's marriage law, which, in the pipeline for a few years now, will see formal passage. It's in the air, people are probably talking about it, particularly the men and women of Propertius' class and generation who have watched Antony and Gallus as Mad Lovers in action and who have read the poetry that helped shape them and that they in turn helped to shape. But now, ironically, it's Tullus, who should be a prime representative of the Roman Way, who is found to be derelict in his conjugal and procreative duties and who is being urged to take on the venerable and rewarding responsibilities of citizen, husband, and father; who is being lectured on citizenship and morality by—of all people—the feckless whoremonger who has made the theory and practice, and the advertisement of, random and frequent lechery his life's work. And it is this purveyor of fancy, decadent, modernist (that is, neo-neoteric) style who has usurped Cato's own plain style (*rem tene, verba sequentur*), mockingly mingled with its stylistic antipodes, to do it. No wonder readers of the poem have been

hard pressed to come to grips with what seems an astonishing change of heart and mind.

Both those for whom the change of heart and the letter-poem that expresses it are sincere, and for Stahl for whom the change is unreal and the letter written under constraint, have mostly ignored the poem's stylistic loop-the-loop and its wild polarities. They have missed as well its peculiar omission: both its broken tone and the deliberate failure of its rhetoric's logic evade them. The crucial line is: *Famam, Roma, tuae non pudet historiae*, 20: "Fame, Rome, is not ashamed of your history." For rhetorical balance and for logical consistency, it is the history, not the mythology, of Greece—the history of Athens, say, or better of Sparta—that ought to be played off against the history of Rome. Furthermore—in a tactic which would be hardly less crucial to the poem's apparent aim and one which would be considerably more honest—there should be some discussion of Rome's own history rather than this pious and abstract paraphrase of Anchises' version of how the Roman Empire was won and his celebration of the virtues that marked it uniquely. Such a gesture would be particularly appropriate in this circumstance because Tullus may very well remember (and so ought we remember) the observation the poet had made about one moment in Roman history in the ferocious *sphragis* poem that closed his first volume:

qualis et unde genus, qui sint mihi, Tulle, penates  
     quaeris pro nostra semper amicitia.  
 si Perusina tibi patriae sunt nota sepulchra,  
     Italiae duris funera temporibus,  
 cum Romana suos egit discordia civis,  
     (sic mihi praecipue, pulvis Etrusca, dolor,  
 tu proiecta mei perpessa es membra propinqui,  
     tu nullo miseri contegis ossa solo),  
 proxima supposito contingens Umbria campo  
     me genuit terris fertilis uberibus.

You're always asking, Tullus, What's my station,  
 My parentage and where it is I come from?  
 Dear friend, you know perhaps Perugia's tombs,  
 Perugia, where our countrymen reside  
 In graveyards, dead when Italy endured  
 The infamies of Roman fratricide?—  
 Etruscan ground! you are my chiefest grief,

For it is you that keep my cousin's bones,  
 Scattered, unhallowed—there, where Umbria,  
 My fertile mother, gazes down upon you. (1.22.1–10)

This linking of the poet's birthplace, Umbria, with a moment in his history that Octavian/Augustus and his handlers in the 20s would like to see buried deep in the collective unconscious borders on insolence.<sup>9</sup> At the time this closure was written and put into circulation, the regime's ideology was, to be sure, still in the process of being constructed. As Paul Cartledge has reminded us (163 ff.), the evolving principate was by no means secure in the 20s, and Fergus Millar (2002, 321) has even suggested, accurately to my mind, that the term 'Augustan poetry' misrepresents the poetry of the 20s because the Augustan Age, as we term it, was not safely in place until the middle teens, that is to say, about the time that Propertius published Book 4, his fifth and final volume. In that brief, explosive, final poem to Tullus in Book 1, three emotional utterances roil about in the tangled syntax that attempts to shape them: 1) the poet is, proudly, not a Roman patrician like "the friend" who has asked him for his credentials; 2) he is a sort of naturalized citizen, both Roman and Italian-Umbrian; 3) he feels somewhat conflicted, somewhat alien in the city that brought death to his kinsman, for whom and for whose cause he still grieves (and this would mean that he has not forgotten the ugly role that Octavian/Augustus played in the never-ending wrong of Perugia). It is a bitter, defiant way of knotting up a poem about who he is and who he intends to remain, as a human being, as a citizen, and as a poet.

In 3.22, Greek evil is balanced against and overwhelmed by Roman good. This sleight of hand succeeds from the effacement of the dark side of Roman history, especially of recent Roman history, the Social Wars and the civil wars (*cum Romana suos egit discordia civis*), a clustering of internecine crimes that does not exclude the part played in those horrors by Augustus and his circle, a part Augustus is anxious to consign to national amnesia. The poem's rhetoric collapses, on purpose, when the mythologizing legends of Rome's origins and evolution, which were enjoying a splendid transfiguration in *Aeneid* 6, find themselves caught in the distorting mirror that Propertius fashions in that poem. In this reading of 3.22, with its echoes of the final poem in Book 1 and echoes

9. For a discussion of the significance of the poet's attachment to his native place, see Bradley, 239, 243; see also DeBrohun, 105–13.

there of Perugia's horrors, Propertius has not been converted to the new regime and its claims; he has not abandoned what he took to be his own poetic mission, the investigation of the splendors and miseries of love as they were now being experienced and enacted in the divided psyches of the Roman men and women who were likely to be his most attentive readers. And he has not pretended, out of some kind of craven ambition, to have been so altered in mind and heart that he finds himself abandoning the poetic task he has taken on. Instead, he turns the claims of the regime inside out, transforming their demands and their boasts into materials for satires on what threatens the kind of poetry he was born to write, that he had devoted his young life to writing.

### DARTS DIPPED IN ACID

The technique that shapes 3.22, whereby the poet arranges for anti-theticals to collide, recurs in other poems in Book 3. In the body of the elegy for Augustus' heir apparent, Marcellus, a severe Stoicism chants of death's inevitability and, with raw emphasis, of its impartiality:

quid genus aut virtus aut optima profuit illi  
mater, et amplexum Caesaris esse focos?

What good did he get from his high birth or his own virtues or his wonderful mother? Or even from his having been nurtured in the bosom of Caesar's family? (3.18.11–12)

Supremely favored by fortune, power and glory seemed to be his destiny, his right, but then in his twentieth year, he dies:

i nunc, tolle animos et tecum finge triumphos.  
stantiaque in plausum tota theatra iuvent.  
Attalicas supera vestis, atque ostra smaragdis  
gemmea sint Indis: ignibus ista dabis.

Go now, exalt your spirit and let your imagination construct for you triumphal marches and a packed theater giving you a loud, standing ovation. As you daydream, dress yourself in the fanciest clothing you can conjure

up, cover their purple and gold with emeralds from India: all that you'll  
be consigning to the flames of your funeral pyre. (17–20)

That is the voice not of a eulogist but of a satirist (compare it with the voice that informs the grief for Marcellus toward the end of *Aeneid* 6). Caesar's heir (and by extension, Caesar himself) is, finally, a mere mortal:

sed tamen huc omnes, huc primus et ultimus ordo:  
est mala, sed cunctis ista terenda via est.

Despite all such expectations, to this end everyone, high and low, must  
come. It's a bad, hard path, but no one can evade it. (21–22)

Not what one expects to hear, not with the elaborately sardonic detail that Propertius uses to decorate his threnody, not the tone one wants for the funeral of this (or any) young princeling, certainly not what the Prince himself wanted to hear. Beautiful Nireus, brave Achilles, stinking rich Croesus—all of them go down, down, down into darkness. And Marcellus goes with them, it seems.

But suddenly the tone and topos swing in the opposite direction. It turns out there are exceptions to the dreadful rule: Charon is sometimes cheated of his fare in very special circumstances, as is the case here. This body being carried to its funeral pyre is empty of its soul (*hoc animae corpus inane suae*, 32); like the soul of Marcus Claudius Marcellus, conqueror of Syracuse, and that of the great Julius, the soul of Marcellus escapes its mere carnality and, abandoning the road of mortality, it zooms off into the heavens (*ab humana cessit in astra via*, 34). It is a pious thought, as comforting here as the similar piece of imperial propaganda about Julius' catasterism (remember the use Propertius makes of this image in his Actium pastiche<sup>10</sup>). But some of the poet's initial readers are less likely to have been comforted by this observation or the sudden switch in rhetorical logic that permits it than they are to have been amused by its effrontery.<sup>11</sup>

In 3.14, a sly meditation on the relativity of erotic mores and the sexual legislation they give rise to, Propertius pits classical (fifth-

10. For which, see Johnson 1973, 168; Welch, 106–11; Hutchinson, 152–55. For a parallel moment in the Cornelia poem, 4.11, see Johnson 1997, 171.

11. See Nethercut 1970 for excellent readings of 3.22 as well as of 3.13, 3.14, and 3.18.

century BCE) Sparta against modern (Augustan) Rome. He likes the idea of women being required to exercise naked in the same space time as their naked menfolk (*inter luctantis nuda puella viros*, 4) nor is he displeased by what he imagines to be a Doric sexual utopia, one where girls are not locked up away from the men who might interest them, and one where jealous husbands don't cause you trouble (*nec timor aut ulla est clausae tutela puellae, / nec gravis austeri poena cavenda viri*, 23–24); where you are free to say what's on your mind or groin (*nullo praemisso de rebus tute loquaris / ipse tuis*, 25–26). And you don't have to guess at what you're going to be getting, and you won't have to buy her expensive perfume either (*nec Tyriae vestes errantia lumina fallunt, / est neque odoratae cura molesta comae*, 26–27). In Rome, they order things quite differently. It is not so easy for the elegiac lover in his own city to obtain a little of what he fancies as it would be in that quondam Spartan paradise. Once again, there are rumors of the coming marriage and adultery laws, and this incipient, homegrown draconianism is wryly juxtaposed with a silly sketch of Doric fun in the sun. At the heart of the poem is the poet's yen to see men and women, covered in dust and sweat, wrestling one another, as they train for their erotic pancratium. Which is not what fuels the Augustan reformulation of the sexual instinct in the interest of improved family values.

In 3.13 the traditional Roman loathing of luxury, combined with a call for a renewal of old-time frugality and old-time religion, culminates in a lapidary warning: *frangitur ipsa suis Roma superba bonis*, 60, "Proud Rome is imploding from her own prosperity." But this admonition is spoken by Propertius as he impersonates Cassandra in one of her whiniest avatars. The topos that Livy and Horace, not to mention Augustus and Livia (he with his farmer's luncheon, she at her spinning wheel), had successfully embellished here encounters a poet who decides to turn it on its head. In an earlier poem the poet had linked luxury (and the prosperity that fuels it) with the emperor and his empire: *arma deus Caesar dites meditatur ad Indos*, 3.4.1, "The god Caesar is planning to attack India and its riches." Though he is certain that Caesar's project will be successful and though he hopes to see the day when the emperor returns, laden with spoils, in triumph from his eastern campaign, he himself intends to be standing on the sidelines with his dear girl at his side, cheering and praying for the enduring felicity of Caesar's clan. But he wants no share in the profits, which belong solely to those who have earned them (Caesar and his soldiers); he is content to be part of the adoring crowd of spectators who line the Sacred Way (*praeda sit haec illis*,

*quorum meruere labores: / me sat erit Sacra plaudere posse Via* [3.4.21–22]) In 3.13, the poet, who has not shared in the influx of imperial riches, protests that it is Rome's passion for luxury that encourages high-class hookers (and their society-girl imitators) to charge higher prices (*quaeritis, unde avidis nox sit pretiosa puellis, / et Venere exhaustae damna querantur opes*, 1–2). Once again, the orthodox platitudes dissolve in acidulous irony.

In 3.11 the poet begins with what promises to be a rationalization for the enormous ruin of his life, for his having become so abject, so degenerate, a Roman male—enslaved by his lust for a commanding woman (*quid mirare, meam si versat femina vitam / et trahit addictum sub sua iura virum*, 1–2). Beginning with Jason and ending with Jupiter who *infamat seque suamque domum* (28, “disgraces himself and his family”), the poet catalogues better males than himself, great heroes all, who have found themselves shamed exactly as he has been shamed. But the ruined males of poetic myth are not sufficient to explain his real self-debasement. He turns, inevitably, to recent history, to the greatest of the great Roman lovers, to Antony and to the abominations that Cleopatra had prepared for his destruction. To depict that tragic action and its monstrous architect, Propertius avails himself of every slander and half-truth that Augustan propaganda had been able to devise against the glamorous and doomed pair. Luckily, of course, this story has a happy ending—not for Antony of course, but for Rome, which Augustus, a real hero, greater than all the heroes of Greek poetry or Roman history put together, has saved from its bad fate. The poet's thanksgiving is so intense that he slips into a jingoistic blasphemy which most commentators tend to sweep under the carpet (for example, Newman, 344): *vix timeat salvo Caesare Roma Iovem*, 66, “While Caesar lives Rome hardly need fear Jove.” It makes perfect sense, poetically speaking, for Propertius to identify himself, elliptically, with Antony, for Antony was the larger-than-life Mad Lover who gave Latin love elegy its definitive figure. But, of course, after Actium, the equation is awkward: it invites the poet to try out-Vergiling Vergil and out-Horacing Horace in representing the wicked dominatrix (*et famulos inter femina trita suos*, 30, “A woman whom even her slaves had screwed”), and it tempts him to connect this theme with that of Augustus the Savior of the World. The logical progression is reasonable enough, but the juxtaposition of grand panegyric (*cape, Roma, triumphum / et longum Augustum salva precare diem!*, 49–50, “Sing, Rome, sing a song of triumph! Saved you are, so pray that Augustus' life may be

a long one”) with his own erotic servitude creates a funny, indecorous dissonance. Here as elsewhere in this group of poems, the poet is inept or insolent. Take your pick.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, in 3.9, to Maecenas, the poet indulges himself in an elaborate double-speak of humble aporia (can’t do it) scrambled with tentative, eventual capitulation (someday perhaps I can) to what the age and its makers demand. He begins by insisting that Maecenas is asking too much of him and reminds him that, particularly with artists, different kinds of talent suit different kinds of endeavor (*omnia non pariter rerum sunt omnibus apta*, 7, and *naturae sequitur semina quisque suae*, 20). Take, for instance, Maecenas himself. His services to Rome’s common good equal those of Rome’s greatest sons (Camillus, for instance, 32), and he will take his place in history alongside Augustus himself (33), even though he hasn’t bothered with military service or making himself conspicuous in the forum and elsewhere in public life. Instead, he is modest, he hides his light under a bushel: he is not a man of action, not someone you would put in an epic if you happened to be writing one. So, thinks Propertius, he will imitate his friend, the host of Rome’s choicest poetic soirees, and he will follow his own bent and not embarrass himself trying to write epic, and he will continue to delight young men and young women who are desperate to read about erotic bliss. That special audience, his very own, may well come to regard *him* as a god and offer *him* divine worship (*haec urant pueros, haec urant scripta puellas, / meque deum clament et mihi sacra ferant!*, 45–46). Then, with no transition whatever, he says: *te duce vel Iovis arma canam*. With you as my leader, better, with you as my general, I shall sing of War in Heaven and then go on to sing of Roman wars and Rome’s empire, war by war, century by century, until I get to—of course, Antony: *Antonique gravis in sua fata manus*, 56, “Antony’s hands fierce in shaping his own destruction.” And then, having once again offered his ironic submission (I’ll be a soldier, if you will), the poet asks leave to pursue his present path for a little while longer.

mollia tu coeptae fautor cape lora iuventae,  
 dexteraque immissis da mihi signa rotis.  
 hoc mihi, Maecenas, laudis concedes, et a te est  
 quod ferar in partibus ipse fuisse tuas.

12. See Nethercut 1971 for an exemplary reading of 3.11; see also the useful discussion by Fantham 2006, 196–98.

Partisan of my career (which is still in its early stages), while I speed onward in my poetic chariot, rein me in gently, I beg you. So much esteem you proffer now me, Maecenas, and it is because of your kindness that I will be said to have achieved a place among your circle of friends and poets. (57–60)

The gratitude is delicately (and carefully, and slyly) expressed. And once again, the regime's worldview and the poet's, though they seem about to fuse, finally fail to mesh, with the result that the regime is diminished (as I see it, the regime has all the power and nevertheless loses) while the poet's integrity (and poetic power), though feeble, remain (ironically) intact.

### THE TRIUMPH OF DISGREGATION

Antonio La Penna, in his marvelous book, *Propertius e l'integrazione difficile*, shows, better I think than most of the poet's readers, how fiercely Propertius confronted various efforts to get him to alter his poetic vocation. La Penna, as his book's title reveals, takes the poet's *recusationes* seriously. He thinks, however, that in the end Propertius found it impossible *not* to be integrated into Rome's society in its Augustan reformulation. I am arguing that the integration was not just difficult but impossible. We don't know how it was that Propertius first began writing his love poems (maybe he just felt drawn to the subject for unknowable reasons, maybe he fell in love and then wrote poetry; maybe—in the manner of Yeats and not a few other poets—he wrote poetry and then, subconsciously, fell in love in order to write intenser poetry). However it happened, however he became a poet of love, that became his vocation, that became how he lived, how he lived for the sake of his poetic identity and its poetry. And this happened just at the time that something new was taking shape in the world around him. Antony and Gallus, the great Mad Lovers who had been the icons of young lovers and young poets of love, died a decade and a half from one another, just in that period of time when their nemesis was cobbling together the values and the institutions that would define the state he would end by governing for over four decades after Antony died. It is inside that drastic change of climate that Propertius begins and ends his poetic career, his poetic mission. Whoever or whatever Cynthia was, she, her figure, symbolized

for Propertius and in his poems the freedom and the integrity of his poetic identity.

He could not write about ‘something else’ because, for him there was nothing worth talking about except his vision of a way of being liberated from outworn styles of living, a vision that had become fused with the shaping of a poetic craft that could represent that vision, make it visible, almost tangible, to the young men and young women who would become his readers, make it always new for them, make it always real for them. At the end of Book 3 he does in fact forswear Cynthia, and at the beginning of Book 4 he claims he will finally begin writing the kinds of patriotic poetry that Maecenas and his friends have been begging him to write. But Cynthia, as we’ve seen, returns to dominate the center of that final book of his, thus confirming the prophecy of the strange astrologer who disrupted the poet’s avowals of his change of heart in 4.1. The astrologer warns him that he won’t succeed at this new undertaking, and this resonant echo of what Apollo and Calliope had said to him in 3.3 strengthens our doubts about the likelihood of the poet’s capacity for carrying out his new design, for successfully performing his new role as celebrant of the triumphant regime. Not a few of the poems in Book 3 confirm the accuracy of the warnings from the god, the muse and the stargazer: they mock the regime’s platitudes mercilessly, and they affirm the constancy of Propertius’ identity both as poet-lover and as a *disgregatore*; as someone whom his Cynthia had shown the path to disgregation, away from Rome’s dream of empire, back to Callimachus and to Umbria and to poetic freedom. The heir to whom he passed his torch—or who snatched it up where he had put it down (the when, how, and why of this event ancient gossip is silent on)—would find himself facing—and taking—greater risks than those Propertius had met with, but his own style of constancy and his courage were more than equal to the task.