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Chapter 7

Narration in a Standstill

Propertius 1.16–18

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It has been noted before that Propertius, more frequently than the other elegists, evokes situations where the poet-lover is separated from the puella—even if conflict and separation is the stuff that (good) love poetry is usually made of. Going beyond this general position, I would define the Propertian elegies as poems of absence and separation in a deeper existential sense: to Propertius, love can be nothing but dolor and distance—eventually (perhaps) to be confirmed by death. Most attempts at communication between poet and beloved do not work out (e.g., 1.3) and even in her presence the lover seems somehow separated from his puella. Propertius’ elegies, I will suggest, rehearse ways toward communication and contact, and by doing so they convey a lack of communication and isolation. In fact, one cannot help getting the impression that in Propertius’ elegies only with the puella absent or in conflict is the poet-lover able to invent and narrate images of his love.

1. The Elegies 1.16–18: Evocation of Time, Place, and Action

The elegies 1.16–18, forming a triad near the end of the Monobiblos, are a poetic laboratory for Propertius’ intertwining of love as separation/absence and poetic image/narration. Indeed, each of them challenges master-inter-

1. See Griffin (1985) and Solmsen (1962).
3. Solmsen (1962) was the first to group these elegies as a subunity of the Monobiblos, whereas
texts in one way or another, and most significantly, they each profit from the
synergetic and narratological interplay of time, place, and action, featuring
remarkable and identifiable situations—principally of a “liminal” nature. In
contrast to epic, where the narrator “frames” and introduces the speaker, the
elegies feature a poetic ego or “I” speaking in free direct speech and always
present the speaker’s situation in medias res. Thus, the reader has to extract
crucial data from the poems themselves in order to reconstruct the dramatic
and narrative situation of the elegiac speech.

The speech situation of Propertius 1.16–18 has mostly been identified
as “monologue” or “interior monologue.” But here precision of terminology
is indispensable: they are rather “soliloquies.” Soliloquies are not identical
with monologues, which can be any speech—including that delivered in
the presence of other people. In contrast, a soliloquy in its pure form has
no intended outreach to other people and no intended audience. Though
perhaps directed in imagination to another person or persons, these speech
acts are highly self-reflective. Should there happen to be an eavesdropper,
he/she is not necessarily configured as an intended audience for the speech—
although certainly there are elegiac soliloquies where the speaker counts on
being heard.

In elegy (in a very similar way to dream narratives), soliloquies offer the
perfect means of making known the otherwise unknown motivations and
emotions of a character. With the soliloquy, the elegiac poet can thus take
advantage of an inward-reflecting communication system in which speaker,
addressee, and object are the same person. Moreover, in relation to this con-
cept and model of the soliloquy, one can refer to Plato who, in his Sophistes
(263e), points out the dual dialogic and soliloquizing nature of thought as
a type of dialogue with oneself. Frequently, soliloquies are seen as the verbal
performance of deliberative acts or self-definitions. Yet, soliloquies promi-

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Leach (1966) conceives 1.17, 18, 19 as a subunity defined by the motif of journey. This is not con-
vincing because 1.18 and 19 hardly show journeys in the strict sense. As 1.19 envisions life after death,
it rather belongs in the context of poems where the death motif is predominant. King (1975) takes as
a unit all poems with Cynthia as addressee, including 1.17 and 18, even if these are only imaginary
addresses to Cynthia (though, to my mind, there should be a stricter differentiation). As all attempts
to analyze the overall structure of the Monobiblos are not totally convincing so far, it is best to admit
that the elegies could be grouped together differently, depending on the parameters chosen.

4. Rieks (1986) states that both 1.17 and 18 rework Catullus 76 (though “split up”: both
poems have in common the argumentative structure of imagining different explanations of the pres-
ent conflict situation. If we consider that Catullus 72 certainly stands behind 1.16 (alongside other
intertexts), this marks 1.16–18 as a Catullan triad.

5. See Camps (1961), 10. On the special nature of 1.16 as double soliloquy see below.


7. Ibid., 8.
nently integrate dialogic elements. In poetry these are realized, for instance, in apostrophes—a device embracing a wide compass for outward-looking creative potential, since in this respect nearly everyone and everything can be included in the speech. This advantage, of course, is of tantamount importance for the integration of a narrative in a short form.

Propertius stands in a long tradition of using soliloquies as a narrative strategy. Though the term *soliloquium* is only attested as late as Augustine, ancient poetry offers a poetic theory of the soliloquy well before its exploration in philosophical, psychological, and narratological theory. Whereas in the Homeric epics it is employed as a quasi-dramatic entity, with any direct speech spoken by a character necessarily interrupting the flow of epic narration, in early Greek lyric poetry, especially Sappho and Archilochos, it appears in shorter, self-contained, and subjective forms. Of course, in the dramatic genres the performative potential of the soliloquy was fully realized and explored. In his elegiac soliloquies Propertius takes up the self-contained subjectivity of early Greek lyric but enriches this short form with elements of other genres—profiting from the use of soliloquy in Hellenistic epigram, drama, and epic to develop his own coherent narrative synergy of time, place, and action. Thus, the soliloquies of 1.16–18 always take place in a clearly defined space. Because poetical landscapes (whether urban landscape, seashore, or grove) are evoked, the spatial dimension plays a crucial role in the creation of sense and meaning. The surroundings of the narrator are encapsulated and integrated in his speech, but tinged with his own subjective, selective perception and interpretation.

In narratological terms, one has to differentiate among chronological time, aspect, and the time of performance of these elegies. In this respect, the elegies use relatively vague indicators of chronological time: they take place at night/dawn (1.16), darkness/night (1.17), and daylight/twilight (1.18). Furthermore, the poems can only vaguely be situated at some point in the lifetime of the speaker/narrator/poet and are regulated by a relative “interior” time system. That is, the dominating time-coordinates are the past and present of the poet’s (love) life, supplemented by an imaginary projection toward an uncertain and open future. These elegies do not rehearse the temporal or chronological unfolding of any action or events in the obvious sense.

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8. See Walsh (1990); Fusillo (1985); and Walde (2001b), 175–84. Next to Callimachus’ epigrammatic experiments in soliloquy, the epicotragical soliloquies of Medea in the *Argonautica* of Apollonius Rhodius are the most prominent examples.
9. See Lefèvre (1977); Warden (1980), 90; and Benediktson (1989), 18–51 on Propertian speech situations.
10. For different approaches to time and narrative, see Genette (1990, 1988) and Bal (1997).
But, due to their obvious spatio-temporal and dialogical dimensions, they can be seen to represent dialectics in a standstill, snapshots of a life, taken at one decisive moment in time—and yet still open to new developments. The elegiac narrator in each of these elegies proposes and reflects alternative potential plots, constituting a past and future through the reference to other elegies and to various intertexts, if only in a vanishing line.

2. Doorstep Lyrics (1.16)

(a) Narratology of the speech situation

Elegy 1.16, often seen as the most witty and “artificial” of the triad,\(^{11}\) is a paradox: in a collection of subjective love elegies showing us the restricted perspective of the lover-poet, we are unexpectedly invited to listen to a door endowed with remarkable powers of speech. In 1.16, in a sophisticated poetic mirror technique, a soliloquizing door reports a lover’s complaint in direct speech. In fact, the elegy is like one of those Russian dolls: it includes not only two direct speeches, but also the poet’s rendering of the door’s complaint, which in turn is a reproduction of the lover’s complaint. The embedded lover’s complaint—a paraclausithyron—is a song in solitude (a soliloquy) masked as dialogue between a human being and a supposedly mute and unfeeling inanimate entity—namely, the door, but more likely the hard-hearted puella who will not open the door—as the elegy’s intended audience. Seen from the standpoint of this indirect communication with the puella, the door, assuming that it (in Latin she) is the addressee of the elegiac poet-lover, reads it all wrong. Her amusing misinterpretation of the dialogic situation presented here compels the (external) reader to his or her own assessment of the speech situation. The lover may complain that the door does not give an answer, but it is only the door’s voice we are listening to—quoting the lover complaining that the door doesn’t answer. Indeed, we may wonder: who narrates the door’s lament, and who is its/her intended audience? This effect refers us to an agent outside of the immediate frame of the poem, pointing to the creative potential of elegy and to the elegiac poet himself.

The remarkable speech act—a talking door—represented in 1.16, compels the reader to look for parallels. Seen from a narratological standpoint, the door’s rendering of the lover’s complaint in direct speech is analogous to the way a speaking person is introduced in epic. And in transferring this

\(^{11}\) Contra, e.g., Baker (2001), who finds the elegy only “funny.” On the poem in general see MacKay (1956) and Terzaghi (1957).
device into a “small” elegiac form, Propertius has prominent predecessors: Polyphemus’ speaking in Theocritus *Id.* 12, Gallus’ lament in Virgil *Eclogues* 10, or Ariadne in Catullus 64. Aptly, Theocritus, Catullus, and Virgil feature complaints of unsuccessful lovers—with perhaps the closest parallel to Propertius being Virgil’s lamenting lover-poet Gallus. The most important difference here is that, unlike the narrators of these intertexts, Propertius presents an inanimate yet humanized *persona*—a talking door. In Propertius 1.16 we perceive the lover-poet from a distance through the eyes of a door. His fractured voice marks the unmediated voice of the other elegies, the free direct speech, as a mediated artificial product. Indeed, the subsequent poems 1.17 and 1.18 similarly feature the soliloquies of a lover lamenting his lost love.

(b) The creation of literary personae in place and time

The process of endowing a door with a voice and speech parallels the poetic creation of any literary *persona*. In respect to talking doors, Propertius could turn for inspiration to Catullus, who in poem 77 rehearses an amusing dialogue between the poet and a telltale door. With his own audacious *prosopopoeia*, Propertius seems to step back from realism (a dialogue between a door and a human is not “really” possible, as the poet-lover in 1.16 reminds us). But at the same time he counters this realism by giving the door the character and emotions of an unhappy human being. In a remarkable gender-blurring, the door, as intermediary between inside and outside, displays characteristic traits of both the *domina* and the poet-lover. The door (gendered feminine in the Latin) argues just as a woman (specifically, as Cynthia) might argue. Indeed, “she” too has been the victim of male aggression, has lost her good reputation as a result of the unruly attentions of disappointed young men. But “she” too is also a victim of the *domina’s* harsh treatment and *duritia*—just like the excluded lover, who has similarly lost time, health, and reputation.

The interlocking of two direct speeches allows a dual perspective on the event narrated in 1.16.12 The door’s self-description establishes the spatial and temporal narrative dimensions of the elegy. That is, its/her memory and immobility serve as a foil to the lover’s life dedicated to love and poetry. Indeed, there has to be a fixed point in this elegiac narrative (as in any narrative), if any movement or nonmovement is to be illustrated. The door is a very well-chosen image in several respects: through this figure, an entire

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urban landscape is evoked in and through which the lover-poet and other protagonists move. Indeed, the door serves as a symbol of the history and changing use of such urban spaces (here a private domus) and “through the door” we are shown a potent indicator of social change in and through time. Because the door looks back to its/her own glorious past linked to the importance of her former owners, the Roman triumphatores, the elegy attains a historical and sociological dimension to complement its poetological dimension. For, in its/her long lifetime the door (fixed in space) could not but witness the events unfolding within and outside of the house. And over time, it/she has somehow adopted the conservative values of its/her human occupants. The door complains that in (golden) times past when military success was the marker of Romanitas, it/she was opened for triumphi: on her doorstep the victor’s golden chariot stopped and she was suffused with the tears of supplices (that is, of conquered people, enslaved and in supplication). But now (whatever time that “now” may be), due to social changes, a woman owns the house and men serve in the “urban” military service of militia amoris; the now discredited door is not opened, but thronged by the rejected admirers of the house’s domina. They fix garlands and leave burnt-out torches on the doorstep as signs of their futile attendance.

Propertius’ prosopopoioiia here is successful to such a degree that most of his interpreters accept the authority of the door’s complaint regarding the (complaining) poet-lover and his puella levis. But should we really trust the door? A close reading of the elegy reveals that the door’s narrative of its/her change of circumstances tells a subtle story, as the general pattern of its experience effectively remains unchanged over time: the powerful triumphatores are replaced by a no less powerful woman; weeping supplices still crowd the doorstep; and songs, albeit of a different tone and nature, still celebrate both the house and its inhabitants. What seems to be the usual vituperatio morum is, in fact, here reduced to the temporal difference between the door “once-upon-a-time” being opened (and famous) versus the door “now” not being opened (and notorious). And crucially, this is the point where the lover’s and the door’s narratives and complaints coincide: though the lover blames the door for not opening, we learn from the door’s complaint that it/she would willingly open to the lover (and perhaps even to other people), if it/she were able to, in order to save her reputation.

(c) The poetological reading

The sophisticated echo technique of the lover’s and the door’s complaint(s) has been noted before. Its effect is a sort of interior self-reflective intertex-
tuality, with the door as both audience to and commentator on the poem of the lover—who in turn reworks this configuration in his own poem. This points beyond the immediate context of elegy 1.16 itself to the intratextual narratological techniques employed in the *Monobiblos* as a whole. The embedded poem provides a key to the interpretation of the door's framing speech which, when read from the perspective of the embedded poem—in a pendulum motion—provides clues for the interpretation of the poet-lover's own complaint.

Singing to the door (i.e., before the house of the *domina*) the poet has to endure long cold nights, the hardship and rejection he experiences forcing him to compose new songs (*carmina*) which might persuade the door (or the *puella*) to let him in. In this context he says: *tibi saepe novo deduxi carmina versu* (for you I have often drawn out new verses)—an expression used in other contexts in relation to the production of innovative (Hellenistic) poetry. The anonymous rejected lover inventing ever new love-songs to win over door or *domina* stands for the poet and the necessity to write ever new versions of his or others' love stories—love seeming to offer eternally productive *materia*. Therefore, elegy 1.16 alludes not only to other versions of the *paraclausithyron*-motif in elegy, but also to the other poems of the *Monobiblos* and, ultimately, to poetry in general. Poets of all ages are forced to be innovative, and the *carmen* featuring a soliloquizing door is per se proof of this ever renewed force of poetic production. This interpretation is confirmed by further poetical markers in the door's speech: not only are *carmina* mentioned (10, 16, 41), but the terms *celebrata* and *tradita* refer to a quasi-literary poetic production. Garlands and *obsena carmina* are set in contrast to the chariots of past *triumphatores* arriving at the doorstep. In particular, “garlands” evoke multifarious metalinguistic associations: there are garlands at symposia, as gifts to a beloved or as offerings to the gods; and garlands of flowers woven together serve as both symbol of poetic production and a *terminus* for a collection of poems—an “anthologia” in the etymological sense. Furthermore, a ride in a carriage is also a familiar symbol of poetic—including elegiac—production: although here the chariots of the *triumphatores* seem to evoke Roman historical epic and its narratives celebrating Rome’s famous *imperatores* and their military feats. Beyond the superficial meaning, then, we can discern a poetological program setting the

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13. Whereas it is suspected that Virgil used Gallus’ poetry in *Eclogue* 10, Propertius uses his own poetry (or a poem made up for this purpose) for this device.

14. See Ovid, *Met.* 1.4 with Bömer (1969), 13f., who (in contrast to Horace 3.30) sees Propertius' *deducere carmina* as “quasi-ironisch” (and also refers to Horace 2.1.4ff.). See also Rothstein (1920), who compares spinning a thread to composing a song.

15. On poetological imagery see Nünlist (1998), 220 (on garlands), 255 (on chariots), 162 (on torches).
traditional (and public) master genre of Roman poetry—historical epic—in contrast to the new (and private) genre of love-elegy. But one that is here able to grant the poem’s subject (whether seen as the poet-lover, beloved woman, or door) no less fame than the subjects celebrated in the epic tradition. Indeed, the door’s complaint that *differor aeterna invidia* (I am forever constantly defamed) is fulfilled in the fact that we read the elegy “now.”

(d) Other narratological perspectives

Apart from very few allusions to mythology both Greek (*Eous*, 24; *Zephyro*, 34) and Roman (*Tarpeia*, 3), this elegy has no obvious mythological framing. The intertextual dimension offered by Catullus and Virgil or the Hellenistic versions of *paraclausithyra* are decisive in enabling a metapoetical discourse on the nature and creative potential of poetry in a diachronic development. Yet, the liminal situation of the closed door, as the suspended situation par excellence, is chosen well here, because it evokes a situation of separation (albeit only across a very small spatial distance); one that makes direct communication impossible and encourages the imagination of other potential plots. For the situation could change any moment: the door might be flung wide open, or cracked slightly open—with different consequences to each possibility. Alternatively, the door might stay just as it is: it might never open to the rejected lover, or to anyone. But the reader will never know whether our poet was ever allowed to enter the house (in the past) or whether he will again or for the first time enter the house—or whether the *puella* really lies in the arms of another lover, whether she would pity the poet if she heard his song, or whether she listens to his songs with annoyance and/or amusement. Any of these possibilities could serve as *materia* for an infinite number of elegies, which can only be fulfilled in and by the readers’ imagination.

3. The Absent Muse (1.18)

The evident reworking of traditional material and motifs is central for 1.16.\(^{16}\) It not only refers back to the preceding elegies, but as a “door” to interpretation, it also develops a close relation to the subsequent elegies of the *Monobiblos*, 1.17 and 1.18. And as 1.18 realizes the intertextual impulses of Virgil’s tenth *Eclogue* again, in the triad 1.16–18, we might consider

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\(^{16}\) See Baker (2001); Prinz (1932); Stahl (1968); and Grant (1979).
poem 1.17, the most innovative and arguably most “Propertian” elegy, to be framed by two poems reworking well-known *topoi* with strong poetological and narratological dimensions.

(a) *Speech situation*

Elegy 1.18 is a soliloquy in the strict sense—that is, without an intended audience, at least in the beginning. Now, “this time” the poet-narrator apparently does not want to produce an effect upon a second or third-party with his *carmen*—he desires only to ease his heart. Again the reader has to construct the time, moment, and place of this elegy’s narrative. The deictic *haec*, with which the elegy opens, especially invites the reader to form a visualization of the narrative scene. We can surmise from lines 1–4 that the speaking *ego* is in a grove, where he has found at last the appropriate location for his elegiac lament. Furthermore, we learn from lines 5ff. that the poet seems to have fallen out of grace with his beloved Cynthia. Indeed, the second word of the opening line, *certe*, then seems to conclude his thoughts up to that point—as if the poet had been searching for a place such as this for a long time. When the poet-narrator has found and established this place in the readers’ imagination with this equivalent of an introduction by a third person, he then begins his self-reflective dialogue. His first apostrophe to the absent Cynthia is in both form and content the equivalent of an epic proem, in which he asks the Muses to refresh his memory and/or to provide suitable poetic (epic) *materia* for his poem (5–6):

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unde tuos primum repetam, mea Cynthia, fastus?
quod mihi das flendi, Cynthia, principium?
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From what first cause, dear Cynthia, should I recount your scorn? What first reason, Cynthia, do you give for my tears?

With this vaguely familiar programmatic gesture Propertius reclaims as his subject, not heroic feats, but the couple’s painful relationship, a constant

17. See Warden (1980), 88, who votes for a silent interior monologue classified as “sort of law-court debate.”

18. Cynthia is referred to by name twice at the beginning (5 and 6); the *mea Cynthia* (5) denotes a close attachment on the side of the devoted speaker. In the course of the poem the name occurs in the context of the poetical production (the poet writing her name in the bark of trees, 21f.; calling out her name aloud to provoke an eternal echo, 22 and 31).
source of dolor and materia for the lover-poet. Through the generic markers supplied here, these lines offer an indirect recusatio of the great form of epic (with Cynthia replacing the inspiring divinities) in accordance with a familiar elegiac pattern. Of course, the lover does not get an answer to his (rhetorical) questions. He has to rely on his own evaluation of the situation narrated here. After establishing the current status quo (Cynthia has rejected him after an indeterminate period of presumed happiness), he develops several conflict scenarios detailing different degrees of guilt on his part and different degrees of Cynthia’s supposed heartlessness. Structured by questions in lines 9, 10, 17f., and 23f., the poet-lover’s thoughts show a constant pendulum-swing between his own emotions and the suspicion that Cynthia has fallen out of love with him.

Though he denies the first two alternatives (that is, Cynthia’s present indifference to him as due to his misbehavior or the magic incantations of a rival), the idea that Cynthia is indeed indifferent and estranged from him, makes him consider that she might really have found fault with him—or perhaps she is simply jealous of another girl (10). He admits to several offenses (not described) in the past, including that he professed his dolor strongly in other situations (cf. 1.3), but he insists that (unlike Cynthia) never has he behaved so badly as to make his beloved cry or give her reason to bear a lasting grudge against him. This puts the blame squarely on Cynthia and on her unreasonable behavior. But this attribution of blame is paradoxically rejected as the poet describes his repeated laments in the past for her absence and loss, viz. loudly crying out his woe in nature’s solitude and cutting Cynthia’s name in the bark of trees—to which the trees, he claims, could testify. This leads to—a not entirely logical conclusion—the question (23) of whether Cynthia was perhaps offended by complaints about her uttered in other (urban) surroundings which were not intended for her to hear.19 As, upon reflection, these offenses turn out to be very small or no offenses at all (if we can trust the poet’s own “reading” here), there is only one possible conclusion: the narrator does not know why this present conflict has come about—and as a consequence the reader, too, is none the wiser.

One might expect several possible outcomes now (the poet might leave the unfair puella for good). But, with the apostrophic self-assurance of his own devoted love and consequent guiltlessness, the poem takes an unexpected turn. The poet’s declaration of his unswerving love turns out to be the program for his poetic production. The reward for his love and servile

19. Certainly, as Stahl (1968) proposes, this refers to 1.16, but it also evokes situations of a different kind, e.g., complaining behind closed doors.
obedience, namely, that he is now alone in the solitude of a *vacuum nemus*, a deserted grove with divine fountains, not inhabited by other human beings or gods, is only insufficient at first glance. In spite of scholarly protestations to the contrary, the *divini fontes* (27) here can only be the fountains of poetic inspiration, whereas the *frigida rupes* are an explanation of the nature of his unrequited love and his poetry as a substitute. The *trames incultus* (28), the untrodden way far from civilization, is a common poetological metaphor in ancient poetry,\(^2\) with *incultus* denoting the innovative character of his poetry, and *dura quies* his tough existence as lover and poet. The *materia* for his poetry will be his *querelae*, then, and Cynthia in all her moods (*qualiscumque es . . .*) will be his Muse after all. With his self-ordination as a poet, wondering in solitude, he makes up for the lack of communication that characterizes his relationship with Cynthia. But at the same time, his calling out her name means using her and possessing her—even against her will—as *materia* for his elegiac poetry. The grove is no longer *vacuum* but filled with the poet’s voice and marked with his inscriptions on the trees. It is *his* grove now.

As in 1.16, in this narcissistic, monadic cosmos, the rocks bounce back the poet-lover’s own voice—calling out for Cynthia in a mediated form that he is able to hear himself. This echo, this bouncing back, is poetry—representing a sort of splitting from the poet himself, a setting free of words and ideas, no longer only his, as a means of transgressing individuality and making available experience to a wider public. In a poetic paradox, he is himself and another. And alongside Cynthia he too has become a literary *persona*.

\(b\) Sense construction in 1.18

The temporal dimension of 1.18 is in the form of a comparison between a happier past and an unhappy present, with the indication of repeated actions and intentions for the future.\(^2\) It is situated at an interstice, at one decisive point in a longer “frozen” process. For, even if he sketches several scenarios that could serve as *materia* for his elegies, due to the inherent ambiguity of the situation, the narrator (and with him the reader) will never break through to Cynthia or achieve perfect communication with her. He (and we) will have to make do with approximate images of her alone.

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20. See Grant (1979), 53, who takes in consideration that this somehow could refer to the *fons Musarum*, and Allan (1985).
22. Note: *modo*; 8 *nunc*, 15 *semper*, 21 *quotiens*, 25 *consuevi*, 31 *resonent*. 

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The spatial dimension of the elegy and the “event” it narrates can be reconstructed with reference to several decisive intertexts and allusions to a series of mythological figures who give shape and contour to the figure of the Propertian lover-poet. This works along the associative chain: grove—unrequited love—soliloquy—poetry. A major reference point here is the poet Gallus in his role in Virgil’s tenth *Eclogue*—and still vividly present in the mind of Propertius’ contemporary readers. Whereas in *Eclogues* 10 the lament of Gallus vis à vis nature is embedded in a narrative frame providing information on the current situation and the eventual death of Gallus, in Propertius’ elegy we are confronted with a free direct speech without a framing narrative. Indeed, alongside Gallus, Propertius’ soliloquy in the woods also conjures the figure of Orpheus; Cephalus, and Procris (for whom a similar soliloquy turns out to be fatal for the couple); poets meeting with Muses; and also, perhaps, metamorphic trees who were formerly lovers.  

4. *Des Meeres und der Liebe Wellen* (1.17)

Elegy 1.17 is a masterpiece of imagination: the *ego* or ‘I’ of the elegy is alone, at the seashore, presumably after a shipwreck, or perhaps only on a break in a voyage forced by a stormy sea. His soliloquy is again structured by questions in lines 7, 12, and 18—crucial turning-points in the argumentation. Although here Cynthia and other figures are imaginary addressees, this speech act is highly self-reflexive. Indeed, the narrator subjectively blurs the boundaries between himself and the absent Cynthia, taking her part too. This blending of roles is conveyed by the evocation once again of situations and protagonists from the mythological-poetical tradition. These associations help us reconstruct the narrator’s situation and consequently reevaluate the innovative nature of the poem.

(a) The status quo in lines 1–5

The first line—*et merito quoniam potui fugisse puellam* (and I deserve it,
since I could bring myself to run away from my girl)—neatly summarizes a wealth of narrative information in just six words. From the perspective of the reader an indeterminate past is cited as the cause for a no less indeterminate present. The *potui* here refers back to a past situation, while *fugisse* marks a completed process (the halt of flight or even a decision not to flee any longer). Even with the short exclamation of *et merito*, a sense of narratological temporality is opened. Whatever the poet-lover is going through, it is deserved (due to an event in the past), because he dared to leave (in the past) his *puella*. An exclamation at the beginning of an emotional direct speech is common in epic, but here it introduces a free direct elegiac speech without a framing introduction. Furthermore the conjunctive *et* at the beginning of the poem implies that the speaker has been silent for a while and only now, after long pondering, begins his *querela*. Moreover, *puellam* functions here as a one-word program. It is an affectionate term for the girl the poet loves and especially a *terminus technicus* in Roman love elegy. Yet here, *puella* stands in contrast to *fugisse*. Why should one try to escape from a *puella*? Behind *potui fugisse puellam* a whole world of conflicts in this couple’s narrative history is hidden—as we will find out when we read on and see that in line 15 the *puella* suddenly appears as a *domina*. The term *fugisse* also implies a movement in space, an intention and a cause. The narrator is the agent of this movement in space—and, at the same time its victim. The reader understands that his flight is somehow interrupted or prevented. The *et merito* is taken up by the *nunc* phrase which provides us with information about the present and “deserved” situation of the narrator.

*Alloquor Alcyonas* is at once a description of this situation and its performance. The kingfishers (*desertas . . . Alcyonas*) that he addresses carry multiple associations and provoke a variety of connections. The kingfishers, which breed only when the sea is calm and the winds still—identified since Homer (*Il.* 9, 561–64) as the transformed lovers Ceyx and Alcyone—are a symbol of love crossing the border between life and death. Is *Alcyonas desertas* here, then, a mythological allusion to the devoted lovers Ceyx and Alcyone or simply a reference to the real-life birds? This ambiguity, on which a lot of scholarly ink has been spilled, cannot be easily resolved. Perhaps only a general notion of the Alcyonae as lovers connected with storms and shipwrecks is needed to understand the poem, in the same way that an Aeschylean chorus evokes subtle associations that help us to grasp the tragedy. As the (real) kingfishers normally live beyond human civilization (and that is what *desertas* entails), at least we can now see more clearly the location in which to imagine the narrator of this soliloquy. But in fact the

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27. Cf. the soliloquies of Juno in the *Aeneid* 1.37ff. and 7.293ff.
28. See Gutzwiller (1992) on the several uses of kingfishers in Greek poetry.
poem will allow for other interpretations of the Alcyonae too—as we will see.

(b) Poetic sense construction

The first four lines establish the action, place, and time of the elegy, as the poetic image of a lonely figure on a stormy beach emerges. This combination of ship, beach, love, separation (and possible death) of the speaker/narrator leads to several realizations of these motifs in other famous intertexts: namely, the story of Ariadne left behind by Theseus in Catullus 64. This reference to Catullus enhances the ecphrastic picture-quality of the elegy. It is also an allusion with an illuminating gender-reversal: in literature, leaving the girl behind is a common way to finish conflicts (and this is perhaps what the speaker here intended and desired—to leave Cynthia behind and so put an end to their relationship); but all the same, this lover is as lonely as the girl traditionally left behind with only his querela on the seashore.

But a man loudly crying out a querela on the roaring seashore suggests an epic intertext too: the homesick and crying Odysseus of the Odyssey (5.82), who wants to go home to Ithaca and his beloved Penelope. Odysseus does not have to escape in silence from his lover Calypso, but with her aid, when he bids farewell to the lover left behind, he makes her swear (Od. 5.173) that she will not do him any harm—that is, create a storm to wreck his raft, as angry gods and goddesses in epic are wont to do. Calypso complies, but to no avail: Poseidon sends a storm anyway (Od. 5.285ff.). In the end Odysseus laments on a rocky beach and Ino Leukothoe (Od. 5.334ff.), in the guise of a sea bird, comes to his aid. If we now return to 1.17 with this configuration of intertextual allusion in mind, we find a hidden rationale behind the argumentation and the fantasies of the narrator. Perhaps the narrator talks pleadingly to the Alcyonae because he hopes that they might help him, as Ino Leukothoe helped Odysseus. Indeed, the Alcyonae are famous escorts for sailors in distress. With his resigned exclamation, the narrator not only synaesthetically (aspice and increpat) evokes his position on the roaring seashore, but he also defines the storm as a punishment and his interrupted flight as one interrupted by the will and design of Cynthia:

29. Before Propertius, aequanaeus (25) is only used in Catullus 64.
30. In fact Cynthia is called absent (tibi absenti 5), although the lover himself is the voluntarily absent one (potui fugisse).
31. See Gutzwiller (1992), 206 on Theocritus Id. 7.
Even in your absence, the winds act still to your advantage, Cynthia. See the terrifying howl the storm roars out.

This idea is the intertextual pivot of 1.17. The fantasies and imaginations of the narrator seem to encapsulate the whole narrative of the parallel Odyssean episode: the lover left behind; the voyage; the “flight” interrupted by a sea storm roused by the ill will of another actor; despair, and eventual salvation. Indeed, the narrator seems to perceive Cynthia as a combination of Calypso and Poseidon: as Poseidon, Cynthia was initially unaware of her lover’s flight but, after noticing his escape, sent the storms as an obstacle. Or, like Calypso, he attributes to Cynthia the power to rouse storms and shipwrecks—but in this case Cynthia/Calypso somehow did not keep her promise, in an innovative and very “Ovidian” reworking of the story of Calypso and Odysseus. In the poet’s fantasy, Cynthia is stylized as a divinity or a quasi-mythical figure endowed with magical powers—as a Circe or a Calypso. In this way, the reader gets a glimpse of the couple’s conflicts, of the power and the bad temper of the puella or domina who has here transformed her lover into a runaway slave. The crucial question is: how far would Cynthia go? Will she or will she not shrink back from killing her lover? The narrator takes the extreme view: having caused his death, could she really bear to listen to narratives about his death and not to bury his bones and ashes—here viewing Cynthia as a sort of reverse Penelope, happy that her lover did not return? A curse of the primus inventor of ships follows, but here we read only the abridged version of a fuller and more logical argumentation: “If only I had not tried to escape. But I am not to blame: I could only escape because ships as means for distancing oneself from home were invented. Blame the inventor of ships.” Contra Leach, I do not read the curse as simply a conventional epigrammatic line. Certainly it lifts the stream of thought here to a more abstract level and “docks” the story into mythological stories in which ships similarly play a crucial role (notably, the stories of Odysseus, Jason and Medea, Ariadne and Theseus, Ceyx and Alcyon), consequently “mythologizing” the narrator and his beloved puella too. But the curse also serves as testimony that the narrator regrets his escape, which leads to a reflection upon how everything might have turned out differently, if only he had stayed in Rome (15–17):

32. Yet, reposcere (instead of reponere) in 11 is plausible, considering that 1.16–18 are concerned with storytelling and narrations.
Would it not have been easier to overcome the moods of my mistress (although hard, she was a girl rarely to be found), than to prospect a shoreline surrounded by unknown woods and to look out for the desirable Dioscuri?

Here the reader not only gets another hint as to why the relationship between Cynthia and Propertius did not work out (the undefined \textit{mores} and the \textit{amator}'s lack of dynamism),\footnote{Realis in \textit{nonne fuit} implies that the narrator has decided already that this would have been the better solution.} but we understand better why the Alcyonae are the narrator’s perfect audience for his soliloquy: in Hellenistic literature they are a symbol of marital devotion and love.\footnote{Gutzwiller (1992), 206ff.} Certainly throughout the \textit{Monobiblos}, Propertius emphasizes the nonmarital relationship of \textit{puella} and poet-lover, but the qualities of love and \textit{pietas} are crucial to this extramarital \textit{foedus amoris} too. Neither lover quite lives up to the standards of this \textit{foedus amoris}—as the lover-poet’s flight shows. Yet, the juxtaposition of (imagined) death in a foreign country (7) alongside (imagined) death at home (19ff., \textit{illic} here designates Rome) refers us back again to the Homeric intertext, in which, tormented by Poseidon’s storm, Odysseus wishes that he had died fighting in Troy and received an honorable funeral as a war hero. In contrast, Propertius imagines his own death had he stayed in Rome instead of daring this unsuccessful escape from Cynthia: he cannot but imagine a love in \textit{dolor}, eventually leading to his death as veteran of love, since death from love is as much a risk to the elegiac lover-poet engaged in \textit{militia amoris} as to the epic hero engaged in military service.

The description of a funeral in Rome may seem to add simple local coloring here, but there are remarkable divergences from the common burial practice: instead of his family, Propertius imagines Cynthia at his funeral in distress, identifying her as the one significant relationship of his life. Because this is nothing but the narrator’s fantasy, the reader never learns...
about Cynthia's motives or her attitude toward the narrator. However, in the end, the narrator opts for a positive version of his love-story: in a prayer he asks the Nereides to escort him to mansueta litora, if ever they have felt love themselves. This prayer not only alludes to the episode of Odysseus and Galatea in the *Odyssey*, but evokes marine frescos in contemporary Roman villas—again demanding a visualization of this elegiac scene.

The prayer to the Nereides links to another famous intertext—to Sappho, who prays for the safe return of her brother (5 Voigt/L.-P. = 193 LGS) by invoking the aid of Kypris and her consorts, the Nereides. In this poem, Sappho explores the possibilities of the imagery of the sea and of a sea voyage as symbolizing love, by blending a real voyage, now separating brother and sister, with the idea of an unhappy love affair. Consequently she prays for both: for her brother's safe return and for him to find the love he is longing for. In 1.17, the narrator is in the situation of Sappho's brother, now praying himself to the Nereides for a successful love affair and a return to friendly seas and seashores. We know from secondary sources that Sappho, too, in another famous poem similarly mentioned kingfishers in an amatory context. That Propertius takes up both motifs, the sea of love and the Alcyonae, is no coincidence: in a gender reversal he establishes himself as the poetic brother of Sappho, presenting us with a male instead of a female subjectivity. But whether he was granted a safe return, we will never know.

5. Conclusions

(a) Soliloquy and dialectic in a standstill

Due to their use of unmediated soliloquy, elegies 1.16–18 evoke eternal presentness by simultaneously reaching out dialectically in time. The reader witnesses quasidramatic soliloquies in a motionless, yet decisive moment. Through open questions, projections, and fantasies, the narrator creates a virtual context of possible pasts and futures. And because all three elegies feature moments in time connected to a certain place, as movements in a standstill, they have great potential for generating ever-new versions of the love story of Cynthia and Propertius the poet-lover. They can invite new stories “in contrast to . . .,” or “in sequel to . . .,” and also leave room for radically different interpretations. This open, suspended construction

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37. Frg.195 LGS (= Demetrius, eloc. 166).
38. This use of ‘fruchtbare Momente’ (“fertile moments”) in this sense is explored similarly in Ovid’s *Heroides*. See Seeck (1975), Walde (2000), and Liveley in this volume.
invites the reader to question how their relationship will continue, or what really happened before—questions only to be answered by inventing other (new) versions of the love-story. This incalculable surplus production of associations—personal, mythological, poetical, generic—makes up for the information missing in the elegies which so often renders it difficult to sum up the action narrated in them in a precise way.

(b) Mythological and literary intertexts and generating stories

The “narration” of the individual poet-lover’s subjective story (or rather, stories) paves the way to programmatic statements that are also part of “his” poetic story. Behind nearly every elegy stand mythological and/or intertextual models that only flash or glimmer for a moment’s recognition, conveying a certain timeless quality to the elegies, even if the recognition of “uncanny” similarities in the sense of Freud cannot be accounted for in every case. The effect is a sort of clear ambiguity, with Propertius counting on recognition as a means of exploration of his poetological cosmos—but at the same time countering this recognition by ambiguity, unusual contexts, and—sometimes—gender reversals. In this respect, Propertius could profit from a privileged Roman perspective toward Greek myth and literature. The Romans exploited, as Blumenberg showed in his 1984 seminal study “Arbeit am Mythos,” new dimensions of interpretability of Greek myth by linking it up to psychological states and “using it” deprived of its former context as materia for new interpretations.

Propertius’ use of mythology is not restricted to Hellenistic allusions as a badge of erudition and poetic mastery: deeper analogies between myth and poetical vitae can be observed. Propertius transfers the mechanism of a quasi-structuralistic generation of versions in Greek mythology where various, even contradicting versions of a myth exist next to each other, to invented/fictitious literary personae of his own time. The individual (contemporary) experience is—analogous to different, co-existing, even contradicting versions of a myth—laid out in no less “structuralistic” multiplicity based on very few and often ambiguous fixed points. Each individual elegy is not only a particular version in a context of co-existing versions, but together with others constitutes a poetic laboratory of a theoretically infinite number of versions. Propertius marks poetry as a narrative “realm of possibilities,”

40. On intertextuality and the Freudian Uncanny, see Perri (1978).
providing his readers with an encyclopedia of experience similar to that provided by Greek and Roman myth. In this respect, the “invention” of Cynthia is a similar process of creation to that, for instance, in constructing mythological figures or endowing inanimate things with speech and life.

(c) Narratological perspectives

The range of “photographically” fixed moments in which we see Propertius and Cynthia—set, as Genette would say, in a *situation intercalée*—allows for the narration of ever new individual stories, offering a kaleidoscope of experience. Even if the elegies of the *Monobiblos* seem to complement each other, they do not add up to an obviously coherent love story. The collection of elegies emerges as a laboratory of narratological experiences, yet each elegy, in fact, is part of a larger virtual context that has to be imagined and supplemented. Consequently, a high degree of audience-participation is required. To make the heterogeneous and sometimes seemingly incompatible levels of meaning readable, decipherable, narratable, Propertius uses images and situations in a standstill, but situated in the interstices of a longer narrative process. The interstice position of the individual, manifesting itself through the inward-looking, self-reflexive form of the soliloquy, and enhanced by the liminal situations of door, seashore, and grove, is also used as an interstice in regards to the literary tradition. Apparently allowing us access to the inner emotions and thoughts of the narrator-poet-lover, Propertius’ elegies 1.16–18 simultaneously offer us a manifest and a literary theory of love elegy as the *Monobiblos* rehearses and narrates small epics of the self.