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# POETRY

## SEXTUS PROPERTIUS

*Selected and Introduced by Joseph Brodsky*

**V**ery little is known about Sextus Propertius except that he was born circa 54 B.C. at Assisi in Umbria and died, most likely in Rome, circa 16 B.C. That adds up to too many *circas* for anyone's liking. Nevertheless, from this uncertain chronology we learn that Propertius was a few years younger than Virgil and Horace and a bit older than Tibullus and Ovid. Whether he was personally acquainted with them is of little import. Presumably he was, since he lived most of his life in Rome and shared with some of those poets the patronage of Maecenas. It has also been argued that Propertius's work prefigures Ovid's love poetry.

The little that is known about Propertius is gleaned chiefly from his own verses, that is, from the one book of his which is extant. The book is called *Cynthia Monobiblos*. All in all, it contains 92 poems called "elegies," partly because of their subject matter and tonality and partly because of their form, the so-called elegiac couplet, a combination of hexametric and pentametric lines that was the main poetic medium of the time.

The book owes its title to the addressee and heroine of some of these elegies. "Cynthia" was what you might call a society girl who apparently belonged to a social group inferior to our poet's own equestrian class. This class difference decisively colored the character of their interplay by ruling out the possibility of marital union. She was red-haired and slightly older than Propertius, of delicate constitution, in fact quite sickly, like the poet himself. She also had a number of admirers (the Illyrian praetor is not the poet's invention), was well read, and led a life that could be characterized as financially and emotionally independent. The same could be said of the poet himself.

**C***ynthia Monobiblos* is essentially a book of love poetry. By the time Propertius was writing, this genre was highly developed, and the love lyric had become practically a conceit. Every poet worth his salt would produce a sequence of love elegies offering a description of the sentiment itself as well as of jealousy, rejection, regret, remorse, and so forth, accompanied by the necessary admixture of pastoral imagery and highly erudite classical exempla. It is the latter—rather than the emotional investment in the subject—that furnished the criteria by which love poetry of the period was judged.

Propertius's elegies are extraordinary because they modify the pastoral element by intermixing urban imagery. However, what truly sets Propertius apart from his far better-known contemporaries is the intensity of his actual sentiment for his heroine. His is genuine love poetry: The story

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it tells is not so much that of passion as that of pure obsession. The Cynthia of these elegies is not a point of departure for an eloquent journey, as was the customary heroine in the Roman poetry of that period, but both the destination and the very means of transportation. She is the raw nerve of this poet's verses, as well as his own neurosis and its panacea. Toward the end of Part One, one develops a sense that, for all her and his numerous side shows, Cynthia was the one to show him the light.

Propertius openly acknowledges his indebtedness to the Greek poetry of the Hellenistic period and to Callimachus in particular: The anxiety of influence apparently did not cloud his agenda. But more interesting than his usage of Alexandrian tropes and mythological references is the fact that each of the elegies treating the subject of love invariably winds up in a discourse on death. Speak of Eros and Thanatos—Propertius could be used as a case study of their mutual affinity as well as of their affinity with the art of poetry. You may put this affinity down to the state of the poet's health or to his awareness of his medium's essential morbidity; you may also consider the possibility that the grip of one of these deities may suggest—by its strength—the other. Tradition, of course, calls the postcoital condition *petite mort*, but *petit amour* for the postmortem won't do. You also have to bear in mind that, as many of the elegies indicate, Cynthia herself was of a sickly disposition.

**T**oward the end of Part Two, Cynthia's presence diminishes. Evidently both she and her poet are embarked on different and diverging pursuits. In Part Three she is hardly there; nor in most of Part Four also. Finally, at the end of Part Four, the poet suddenly learns that Cynthia has died. This news results in the famous "queen of elegies": Elegy Number Seven in Part Four. This poem will never die, for here Eros and Thanatos indeed overlap. This poem is about an apparition: Charred by the funeral pyre, the soul of Cynthia visits the poet one night, shortly after her death. What distinguishes this poem from all the works in a similar vein throughout the history of literature is the stated reasons for this visitation. Cynthia's instructions to Propertius are so pragmatic that you end up believing the encounter indeed took place, that this is not so much a poem as a record of what transpired, of words actually spoken by a shade.

I hope that this elegy will whet readers' appetites for Sextus Propertius. His standing with the American public is either nonexistent or incomprehensibly low. This may in part have to do with a singular disservice done him by Ezra Pound's "Homage to Sextus Propertius"—the moronic pastiche of our eternal sophomore enamored of foreign name-dropping. Largely, though, this is so because, as regards the literature of antiquity, we are the true barbarians. The shorter shrift we give it, the deeper we bury our imaginations and the greater the desert of the human heart. Propertius can make it more habitable. By reading him, we may at least learn what it takes to endure 2,000 years, without being a messiah. Without the knowledge of what it takes to so endure, our run is bound to be short indeed.

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## Sunt Aliquid Manes; Letum non Omnia Finit . . .

There are ghosts after all, then; death is not the ending;  
the soul, like smoke, escapes from the funeral flame.  
Beside my bed I saw the wraith of Cynthia.  
From that new grave by the noisy road she came  
to me who, shaken, still, by the rites, lay restless  
in the bed that was once our kingdom and was no more.  
Her eyes, her hair, were the same as I had known them;  
fire had charred one side of the robe she wore  
and had eaten away the beryl ring on her finger;  
her lips were withered from water drunk underground.  
Her spirit, her voice, were living, but as she stood there  
her brittle finger bones made a rattling sound.  
"You forget so soon?" she said. "No woman ever  
had a truer lover, yet sleep can erase the sight  
of the little room we shared in the noisy Subura,  
my window worn by ruses of the night,  
the rope tossed over the sill where I'd hang for a moment  
and hand over hand climb down into your embrace.  
Under our cloaks the earth has been warmed by our bodies  
as we lay by the crossroads in some shadowy place.  
Our pledge was wordless, but our lies, our cheating,  
the deaf southwestern wind has brushed away.  
When I came to death, no man's voice called my name out,  
though yours would have kept me alive another day;  
for me no watchman troubled to sound his cleft reed;  
a broken tile props up my fallen head.  
Who has seen you stand by my grave grief-stricken?  
Who has seen your robe grow wet with the tears you shed?  
If you could not bear to pass beyond my doorway,  
could you not have begged them to carry me slowly here?  
Could you not have prayed for a wind to fan the flames high  
or made them fragrant with nard? If you held me dear,  
would a handful of hyacinths have been too costly  
for my grave, or wine poured out of a broken urn?  
It was Lygdamus the slave—I knew he was guilty  
when I drank the wine. Let him feel the brand-iron burn!  
As for Nomias, my woman, she may hide her poisons;  
that burning jar will tell her crime to the town—  
she, that cheap whore, that lowest of streetwalkers,  
now trails in the dust the hem of her golden gown!  
And if she hears that a slave has praised my beauty,  
loads her shoulders with tasks she must faint beneath—  
Petale's chained to a log, that poor old woman,  
because she dared to bring to my grave a wreath;  
Lalage's hung by her hair, whipped till she's bleeding,  
for having asked Nomias a favor in my name.  
And you—you let her melt down my golden image  
to win her dowry from the fruit of that flame!  
What reason I have to berate you!—yet I cannot;  
in all your poems, it is my story you tell.

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By the immutable chant of the Fates I swear it  
(I tell the truth. Be silent, O dog of hell!):  
I was faithful to you. If this is false, let adders  
hiss on my tomb and coil through my bones, as well.  
Beside the river of death there stand two mansions,  
and to one or the other the dead must point the prow.  
Adulterous Clytemnestra moves toward this one,  
and Pasiphae in the wooden guise of the cow.  
Toward the other in rose-decked boats go the blest, the godly,  
where flowers are stirred by the softest airs of spring  
and the air is full of the sound of harp and cymbal,  
and turbaned dancers move to the plucked string.  
Andromeda is there, and Hypermestre,  
telling their stories of suffering and reward—  
one as the scapegoat for her mother's boasting,  
chained to the rock and rescued by Perseus' sword;  
the other the single one of those fifty sisters  
not guilty of murder on her wedding night.  
Only death's tears can heal the wounds love dealt us;  
I would hide your fickleness from all men's sight.  
Listen—if your new mistress gives you leave to;  
if you can hear my dead voice as I plead—  
take care of my nurse Parthenie. You remember  
she treated you well: see that she is not in need.  
And that best of servants, Latris—do not expect her  
to hold the mirror before your new love's face.  
The poems you wrote to praise me—burn them, burn them.  
Do not seek glory through my vanished grace.  
But come to my tomb, and clear away the ivy  
whose roots twist 'round my bones in a living mesh,  
here where the Anio dawdles past the orchards  
and ivory does not yellow, the air is so fresh.  
Write a fitting phrase on some random pillar,  
brief enough to catch the hurrying eye:  
GOLDEN CYNTHIA LIES IN TIVOLI'S EARTH HERE:  
NEW REASON TO HALLOW THIS LAND AND THE STREAM NEARBY.  
You will have dreams, and you must learn to trust them;  
through holy dreams the truth may be revealed.  
At night we dead can wander—even Cerberus,  
his chain cast off, will stray through forest and field,  
until with dawn hell's law returns us to Lethe  
where Charon the ferryman counts over his own.  
Take your new love. I shall share you with no other  
when you come to me here, and bone shall grind on bone."

And suddenly, her sad complaining ended,  
she was gone, and I stood with my empty arms extended.

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Poem excerpted from *The Poems of Propertius*, translated by Constance Carrier.  
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