CHAPTER TWELVE

THE THIRD BOOK:
DEFINING A POETIC SELF

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It is not in his personal emotions . . . that the poet
is in any way remarkable or interesting.
T. S. Eliot, Tradition and the Individual Talent (1919)

Philodemus of Gadara

Eliot these days is old-fashioned, though he was echoing both the
Russian Formalists and innumerable poetic eminences, among them
Catullus (16.3–4) and Thomas Mann. Philodemus (110–35 BC?),
himself an elegiac poet, once complimented on his art by Cicero,
was also a literary theorist who dedicated a treatise to Virgil and
Varius. He was therefore Propertius’ senior contemporary, and may
have influenced both his poetry and his poetics. Under the scrutiny
of modern papyrology, his importance for the understanding of the
Augustan aesthetic is being increasingly appreciated (Obbink, 1995;
Summers 1995).

Both these critical statements, old or modern, are in debt to
Aristotle, who, in Chapter 9 of the Poetics, had drawn a sharp distinc-
tion between poetry and history. Poetry is “more philosophical and
serious than history” (1451b 5–6) because it deals, not with particu-
lars, but with universals. Since art is essentially imitation (1447a 16),

\[\text{Philodemus of Gadara}\]

1 “Why he added the term ‘truth’ [to his definition of poetry?] completely baffles
me”: De Poematis Liber Quintus, ed. C. Mangoni (Naples 1993) p. 137. The context
is fragmentary.

2 See Königliche Hoheit (1909), in which the author of a bacchic Euxei! turns out to
be the asthmatic, teetotal, early-to-bed poet Axel Martini. On the Formalists, Erlich
(1955) 192ff.

3 Cf. A.P. 5.123.1–2 and Prop. 1.3.31ff.; Horace, Sat. 1.2.119–22 and Prop.
2.23.12ff.
a takeoff (what the English call a “send-up”) of experience, as a corollary of that, the writer must rarely speak in his own person, for then he has ceased to be an imitator (1460a 7–8).

Aristotle is referring primarily of course to the lofty genres of epic and tragedy, rather than to the humble elegy (miserabilis . . . elegos, Hor., Odes 1.33.2–3; exiguos elegos, A.P. 77). Nevertheless, the intriguing background of Propertius 3 is that its maturing author is trying to come to terms with the literary position reformulated by Philodemus. In this, he was perhaps aided, as will be suggested below, by a study of Pindar.

There was, however, a dilemma. In denying the claim of truth, Philodemus argues that poetry is a self-sufficient realm, one therefore on which mundane matters must not intrude. As a Roman and Augustan poet, Propertius does not enjoy such freedom. Even if besotted by the furor of love (1.1.7), he is committed to public utilitas (ille furor patriae fuit utilis of vatic Cassandra, 3.13.65: cf. 4.1.51; vates . . . utilis Urbi, Hor., Epp. 2.1.118, 124); committed also to a patron, who (like most Roman patrons) had a political agenda, in this instance uniquely involving a religious renewal. Yet he was Philodemean enough that, in the end, we may say it is not by fidelity to his experience with a particular mistress, but by his loyalty to that Augustan agenda, that Propertius most deviates from the rules of poésie pure.

_Lycio vota probante deo_ (“with the Lycian god approving my prayers,” 3.1.38): if vatic (2.10.19; 4.6.1), sacerdotal (3.1.3; 13.59) Propertius sits on an Apolline tripod, one may think of its three legs as all under more than usual tension. He accepts Philodemus’ veto on truth, if that means enslavement to trivial “facts,” such as a single, real-life Cynthia; but he is also one of the genus irritabile vatum (Hor., Epp. 2.2.102; cf. Prop. 2.10.19; 4.6.1), bound therefore to a truth that is Augustan, national. As a poet of the modern movement, he intensely admires Callimachus, yet feels free to play with, even reverse, Callimachean positions and catchwords. Finally, even though he is a poet in what Aristotle at least would define as a non-epic genre (Poetics 1460a 2–5), like lyric Pindar, he puts on display an epic talent.

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4 _Poetas novos_, Suetonius, _de gramm._ 16; _nova carmina_, Virgil, _Ecl._ 3.86.