

Aspirations and Divagations: The Poetics of Place in Propertius 2.10

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That the *recusatio* constitutes a poetic strategy that at once challenges and yet tends to affirm the traditional hierarchy of genres is by now a familiar, if variously formulated, observation.¹ Hence a multitude of meanings in any specimen of *recusatio*, and the promise of internal paradox, a constellation of possibilities that holds an irresistible attraction for the modern critic, for whom genre remains a central concern and to whom (and without apology) complications and problems offer very appealing aspects of literary expression. Although in important respects it differs from other Augustan instances of its kind, Propertius 2.10 is unquestionably a *recusatio*.² The prospect of Propertius' turning from elegiac poetry to the composition of Augustan epic is configured in terms of what Oliver Lyne describes as "the motif of (failed) ascent," which here refers to the poet's failed metaphorical ascent of Mt. Helicon.³ The poem begins with the declaration (1)

Sed tempus lustrare aliis Helicon choreis

But now it is time to move over Helicon with other dances

and concludes with the admission (25–26)

nondum etiam Ascræos norunt mea carmina fontes,
sed modo Permessi flumine lavit Amor.

¹Fundamental on *recusatio* is Wimmel 1960. Even a highly selective list of recent and important work must include: Nisbet and Hubbard 1970: 181–83; Davis 1991: 28–36; White 1993: 81–82; Conte 1994: 123–25; Cameron 1995: 454–84; Lyne 1995: 31–39.

²Divergences noted (*i.a.*) by Rothstein 1920: 276, and, esp., Lyne 1998: 25.

³Lyne 1998: 25–28. The staged quality of the *recusatio* is of course now widely recognized. In Prop. 2.10, the poet demonstrates his actual capacity for addressing epic matters in lines 13–18; cf. Davis 1991: 28–36; Lyne 1998: 25.

Not yet do my poems know the Ascraean springs, but Love has only
bathed them in the river Permessus.

It seems clear from the literary pedigree of this final distich, about which more presently, that the poetic geography of this poem sets the *Ascraeos fontes* (usually identified by critics with the Hippocrene) on Helicon's peak and the Permessus at its base. Each of these waters carries obvious (if contestable) generic symbolism, organized here along the vector of (failed) ascent, and it is the nearly universal conclusion of critics that this poem situates its author, for all his efforts to rise above himself, at the base of Helicon, on the river Permessus, an elegiac love poet still. That conclusion can hardly be rejected.⁴ But perhaps a complication can be introduced, and it is the purpose of this paper to suggest that, although Propertius 2.10 of course wittily inscribes a failed attempt to elevate Propertian elegy from love poetry to Augustan encomium, its situation of epic at the apex of its ambitions (and of itself at the bottom) is by no means a simple or straightforward arrangement. Ascent, failed or otherwise, is not the only trajectory to be reckoned with in this poem. The poet's metaphorical representation of his epic aspirations concentrates on *two* very different situations: mountain peaks *and* epic plains. The selection of these disparate targets as symbols of epic composition, which hardly seems accidental, can be explained, as we shall see, in an examination of the poem's Virgilian background, which introduces a network of allusions that requires the reader at least to consider the implications of yet another paradigm for epic composition, the motif of successful *descent*, in making any assessment of the literary program delineated in Propertius 2.10. In the end, despite the poem's determination to define the genres of epic and elegy in terms of their specific locations in its own poetic landscape, 2.10 itself eludes fixed installation in Helicon's geography, depending on how one elects to read the poem's final line.

⁴The poetic geography of Prop. 2.10 develops the scene imagined in Verg. *Ecl.* 6.64–73 and, presumably, in the lost work of Cornelius Gallus; see Skutsch 1901: 36–38; Luck 1969: 131–32; Clausen 1994: 199–201; Lyne 1998: 26–27. A competing accounting of things can be found in Ross 1975: 31–34 (and see below in the text of this paper). Helicon's actual geography: West 1966: 153–54; Wallace 1974; cf. Luck 1969: 132: "it is useless to bring into this discussion the topography of Helicon, of which Propertius and other poets had only a vague conception. When he names realities, he usually acknowledges an obligation to make his symbols rich...." The symbolism of the waters and their locations will be reconsidered below, but the interpretation of line 26 indicated in the text is generally accepted: Skutsch 1901: 36; Rothstein 1920: 283–84; Butler and Barber 1933: 209; Enk 1962: 116; Camps 1967: 111; Richardson 1976: 244; Giardina 1977: 148; Stahl 1985: 160; Lyne 1998: 26–28.

This elusiveness, it is here suggested, constitutes a commentary on the resistance to generic stability and definition that is generally regarded as an essential quality of the *recusatio*.⁵

It is a prominent feature of Propertius 2.10 that it tends to accumulate the various methods of the *recusatio*. By far the most conspicuous influence is Virgil.⁶ The final couplet of Propertius 2.10, cited above, although it opens the floodgates on several currents of the literary tradition, is most obviously an allusion to *Eclogue* 6.64–73, in which passage Cornelius Gallus is led by a Muse from the banks of the Permessus to the Aonian mountains (viz. Helicon), where the fabulous poet Linus gives him the instrument of Ascrean Hesiod in order that he might compose aetiologial poetry (an epyllion on the Grynean grove). The scene is ostentatiously derivative (it goes back to Hesiod but by way of Callimachus), and, as is well known, the proposition has been advanced that Virgil's immediate model was Gallus' own account of his shift from love elegy to aetiology.⁷ Virgil's account of Gallus' poetic inspiration comes near the conclusion of the song of Silenus, which constitutes the bulk of *Eclogue* 6. But that poem begins with a *recusatio* (*Ecl.* 6.3–9): there the poet is admonished by Apollo not to compose epic but rather, on aesthetic grounds, to prefer bucolic verses, a patent imitation of Callimachus' own encounter with Apollo (*Aet.* fr. 1.21–24 Pf.). Although the initiation of Gallus in Virgil does not participate in the actual *recusatio* of *Eclogue* 6, critics have speculated that, if Gallus was indeed Virgil's model here, then Gallus' own account might somehow have integrated Callimachus' admonishing Apollo into his own, again Callimachean,

⁵Although textual controversies naturally intrude on this discussion (how not in Book 2?), every effort has been made to evade them. The text of Propertius assumed and cited here is that of Goold 1990, with the difference that I do not accept the idea that the opening lines of Prop. 2.10 are lost (on this point see Lyne 1998: 23, and references accumulated there). This paper does not address the relationship between Prop. 2.10 and Prop. 2.11. Nor does it take up the problem of book division in Book 2 or the question of Prop. 2.10's placement in Book 2A or 2B, on which matters see Heyworth 1995 and Lyne 1998, each (esp. the former) with further references.

⁶Verg. *Ecl.* 6.3–9, 64–73; *G.* 3.1–48. Wimmel 1960: 193–202 reviews the Virgilian background, esp. the importance of *G.* 3, in detail (see p. 201: “War 2,1 kallimachisch, so ist 2,10 noch am ehesten vergilisch”).

⁷Virgilian allusion to Gallus in *Ecl.* 6: Skutsch 1901: 34; Ross 1975: 20–38. Gallus' own sources, and their relevance for Prop. 2.10, involve even greater speculation. Parth. *Elegiaca*, fr. 10–11 L, make it clear that he dealt with the Grynean Grove; Servius ad *Ecl.* 6.72 points to Euphorion as another influence on Gallus. For discussion, see Lightfoot 1999: 149–52.

initiation.⁸ The influence of Gallan *recusatio* upon Propertius 2.10 must of course remain hypothetical. The importance of Virgilian *recusatio*, on the other hand, is unmistakable.

Propertius also looks back to *Georgic* 3.1–41. There the poet promises to compose an Augustan epic, represented as a temple in which Caesar will be honored. In *Georgic* 3, epic is not rejected, but rather it is postponed (in order to complete the *Georgics*, hence 3.40–41: *interea Dryadum silvas saltusque sequamur / intactos, tua, Maecenas, haud mollia iussa*), in what Richard Thomas has described as an “anti-*recusatio*,” but “anti” only because the historical Virgil did in fact go on to compose an actual, and extant, epic (though hardly at first blush the one promised in the third *Georgic*).⁹ Like Virgil, but with less temporal consistency, Propertius in 2.10 announces an Augustan epic, and, like Virgil, he introduces a sample of epic material (Prop. 2.10.13–18, cf. *G.* 3.13–36). Like Virgil, then, Propertius does not actually disavow epic, and, again like Virgil (though working with a less accommodating meter), Propertius briefly assimilates his (allegedly) intended genre. Unlike Virgil, however, Propertius cannot adduce a work in progress that requires completion: instead, he must, for the moment, plead incapacity (Prop. 2.10.23: *sic nos nunc, inopes laudis conscendere currum*) which is yet another tactic—though not a Virgilian one—available to the author of a *recusatio*. It has been suggested that this ploy, which first appears in Latin in Horace (*S.* 2.1.12–13), also goes back to Cornelius Gallus.¹⁰ In any event, and there can be no missing this, Propertius 2.10 positively teems with literary gestures associated with various specimens of *recusatio*.

Propertius 2.10, then, tends to accumulate the various methods of the *recusatio*. The one method which is not explicitly included, and the omission is underscored by the poem’s allusion to *Eclogue* 6, is the appeal to Callimachean aesthetics that opens Virgil’s poem, a move that would not be immediately appropriate in a promise to undertake epic when the time is right.¹¹ But otherwise there is ample material in Propertius 2.10 for an inquiry into the nature and limits of the *recusatio* strategy itself. The strategy was one that

⁸Lyne 1995: 35 and 36–37 n. 11.

⁹Thomas 1988), 36–49 the quotation is from p. 36). The non-similarity between the epic suggested by *Georgics* 3 and the *Aeneid* is rightly noted by Mynors 1990: 181.

¹⁰Lyne 1995: 35–36. I believe that Goold 1990 is correct to prefer Markland’s *currum* in line 8, adopted also by Camps 1967 and Giardina 1977, but the precise reading of that line is not really pertinent to my discussion here.

¹¹See, by way of parallel, Thomas 1988: 36–37 on Virgil’s Callimachean rejection of Callimacheanism in *Georgic* 3.

appealed to Propertius, not least, one suspects, on account of his interest in the question of genre.¹² Certainly Propertius 2.10 is a poem obsessed with generic purpose and with the place of Propertius' *carmina* in the tradition, or better, as we shall see, *traditions* of literary inspiration. That place receives its definition in the poem's final couplet.

But let us first review the poetic landscape of Propertius 2.10, in which poem the poet's situation, actual or hoped-for, is without question a vital element in his definition of genre. Matters are at least somewhat confounded from the start, inasmuch as the poet in line 1 (cited above) represents his epic aspirations in the description of the dancing of the Muses on Helicon's height, whereas in the second line, strongly correlated with the first in its repetition of *tempus*, these same aspirations are indicated in the introduction of cavalry (or, from a more purely literary perspective, of the horse of epic) to the plain of battle:

et campum Haemonio iam dare tempus equo

and it is now time to give the field to the Thessalian horse

—an activity that, in Roman reality as well as in literary epic, can hardly be imagined taking place on mountain tops.¹³ Whether the juxtaposition of graceful choruses with Thessalian cavalry is meant to be disturbing or comic need not detain us. Let us instead focus on the proper location(s) of Propertius' literary trajectory: he aims at Mt. Helicon at the same time as he sets his sights on the epic plain—and on the realities of Roman warfare, a likely subject of any Roman's epic project. These twin destinations persist. At line 11 the poet commands his soul to rise up (*surge, anime, ex humili*). Yet in lines 19–20, after his concise catalogue of Augustan conquests, the poet situates his epic calling in the very company of the Roman army:

haec ego castra sequar; vates tua castra canendo

magnus ero....

This is the camp I shall follow; by singing of your camp I

shall become a great poet....

The plain of battle and the heights of Helicon are thus mapped onto one another, as a consequence of which there are two distinct vectors that define the motion toward epic in the world of Propertius 2.10. The vertical move is the more

¹²See Prop. 2.1; 3.1; 3.3; 3.9; Nethercut 1972: 92. Propertius and genre: DeBrohun 1994.

¹³The (possible) exception is Luc. 4.43–45; see Masters 1992: 56–58. Epic significance of line 2: Lyne 1998: 23–24.

more importantly, he comes down. Virgil describes his (future) epic success in terms of a triumphant *descent* from Helicon.¹⁵ It is not impossible that his great epic predecessor did the same: Lucretius at any rate represents Ennius' returning from Helicon with a garland,¹⁶ another epic symbol (1.117–19):

Ennius ut noster cecinit, qui primus amoeno
detulit ex Helicone perenni fronde coronam
per gentes Italas hominum quae clara clueret.

As our own Ennius sang, who first brought down from pleasant
Helicon a garland of evergreen leafage to win a glorious reputation
through the nations of Italian men.

Propertius' poem also tends to locate Greek literary tradition on Helicon and Roman epic on the plain. But there is no Virgilian orderliness in Propertius 2.10. The poet has eliminated the literary descent that unites what is above with what is below. Lines 21–22 reinforce the poem's vertical aspect, in starkly polarized terms that make it clear that higher is better, and this perspective remains evident in line 23 (*conscendere*), whatever the precise reading of the line's last word (the Virgilian background is certainly more obvious if that word is *currum*). Ennius' garland, glorious on account of its descent, becomes, in Propertius' treatment, a figure of failure.

Which brings us to the poem's final couplet, in which the poet, still obsessed with ascent, confesses his failure to trace the Muses upward to their spring (25–26):

nondum etiam Ascræos norunt mea carmina fontes,
sed modo Permessi flumine lavit Amor.

These lines tap into many sources. The most immediate references, to Virgil *Eclogue* 6.64–73 and to Gallus, have already been commented on (though not for the last time). They hardly exhaust the issue, however. The poet's initiation by the Muses on the summit of Helicon, owing to Callimachus' appropriation of the idea from Hesiod, was a fundamental Alexandrian literary convention, as was the (also ancient) employment of springs and rivers as symbols of poetic inspiration.¹⁷ Out of Virgil's description of Gallus' initiation, Propertius has configured a significant contrast between the situation of the springs of Ascræa and the river Permessus. They represent, respectively, the height and the base of

¹⁵Hinds 1998: 52–54.

¹⁶Lucretius and Ennius: Gale 1994: 106–10.

¹⁷Initiation: Hes. *Th.* 1–35; Call. *Aet.* fr. 2 Pf.; see Kambylis 1964. Water symbolism: Wimmel 1960: 222–33; Kambylis 1964: 22–30, 110–22, 183–88.

Helicon, and they make clear the poet's failed ascent of the Muses' mountain.¹⁸ Here there seems to be no identity whatsoever between the high and the low, such as we observed in the poem's opening representations of the poet's epic purposes. Quite the contrary; the two waters represent distinct literary genres. It is obvious that the Permessus represents erotic elegy.¹⁹ It is far less clear what is referred to by *Ascraeos fontes*.

The potential ambiguity of the plural, *fontes*, introduces an interpretative difficulty that is all too often dodged by simply equating *Ascraeos fontes* with the Hippocrene.²⁰ But this is not the only Hesiodic water: *Theogony* 6 mentions the river Olmeius, apparently neglected by Latin poets until Statius (*Theb.* 7.284), and Callimachus, in recounting his own Hesiodic transportation to Helicon, made reference both to the Hippocrene and to the Aganippe, the latter of which Callimachus explicitly associated with the Permessus (though the precise nature of the connection remains irrecoverable).²¹ Propertius of course knew the Aganippe: he alludes to it at Propertius 2.3.20, but not in such a way as to illuminate the circumstances of Propertius 2.10.25. In view of Virgil's mention of *Aonie Aganippe* in his catalogue of the Muses' haunts (*Ecl.* 10.12), in a poem on Gallus (who as we have seen is not irrelevant to our poem), it will be difficult to resist the conclusion that *Ascraeos fontes* is a significant plural. The adversative organization of Propertius 2.10.25–26 renders it impossible, in this poem, to *equate* the *Ascraeos fontes* with the Permessus, however it was that Callimachus figured the Aganippe in his *Aetia*.²² Nor is the relationship between the Aganippe and the Permessus sufficient to vitiate the poem's prior

¹⁸The starkness of the contrast is more Propertian than Virgilian: Rothstein 1920: 284.

¹⁹But cf. Ross 1975: 32–34.

²⁰See above, note 4. The important exception is Ross 1975: 32–33, to whom what follows is indebted although it takes a very different tack to Prop. 2.10.

²¹Call. *Aet.* fr. 696 Pf. See Pfeiffer 1953: 102–3 for testimonia and discussion of the relationship between the Aganippe and Permessus in Callimachus. The Permessus and Olmeius in Hesiod: West 1966: 153–54.

²²It is here that I part company with Ross 1975: 32–33, who insists on the identity of the Permessus and Helicon in their *every* appearance in Augustan literature. In the case of Prop. 2.10, Ross rejects the idea that there is any indication that the poet seeks “to *climb* Helicon, or to be *transported* there” (32), which runs counter to most critics' view of the poem, and certainly counter to mine, as should be clear from the text. Nor can I follow Ross in accepting Prop. 2.13.1–4 as the determining text for interpreting Prop. 2.10 (though the relationship between the two poems is interesting and invites further consideration). In any event, at Prop. 2.10.25–26 a distinction *of some kind* is unmistakably drawn between the waters of line 25 and the waters of line 26. What follows is an attempt to explore that distinction and the purpose to which it is put.

emphasis on the motif of ascent.²³ Still, a strict and polar dichotomy between the *Ascræos fontes* and the Permessus is also difficult to maintain. This must have implications for the literary symbolism of line 25.

Let us resist specificity for a moment. When Propertius elected to depict his epic ambitions through the motif of (failed) ascent, that is, in terms that reversed Virgil's depiction of his own (Ennian) ambitions in the *Georgics*, he ran the risk of making himself into a totally ridiculous literary figure. One need but compare Catullus' treatment of the despised Mentula in poem 105:

Mentula conatur Pimpleium scandere montem:
Musae furcillis praecipitem eiciunt.²⁴

Mentula tries to ascend the mountain of the Pierian Muses:
the Muses toss him headlong with pitchforks.

Failure to ascend the Muses' mountain is a laughing matter, but not for the poet who is the failure. Propertius 2.10 is a very witty poem, but it hardly seems designed as an instance of self-ridicule. Which suggests that there is more than mere humor in Propertius' reversal of Virgil's trajectory at *Georgic* 3.8–18. Now Stephen Hinds has recently discussed how Virgil's promise in that poem, as well as the claim for Ennius made in Lucretius' lines at *DRN* 1.117–119 (see above), employ the idea of bringing epic down from Helicon as an emblem for literary *innovation*.²⁵ The conceit was quite familiar to Propertius, since he employs it in another, and later, *recusatio* (Prop. 3.1.17–20):

sed, quod pace legas, opus hoc de monte Sororum
detulit intacta pagina nostra via.
mollia, Pegasides, date vestro sarta poetae:
non faciet capiti dura corona meo.

But this work for you to read in peace my page has brought down
from the mountain of the Muses by an untrodden path. Muses of
Hippocrene, give your poet a soft wreath; a hard garland will not suit
my head.

²³One cannot press much from the Hesiodic scholiast's indication that the Olmeius was κατὰ τὸ ἄκρον (with respect to Mt. Helicon), even if that perspective reflects Alexandrian scholarship (cf. West 1966: 69). Discussion of the realities of Helicon's topography: see above, note 4.

²⁴In Catullus the Muses' mountain is Olympus, not Helicon, but that is beside the point here.

²⁵Hinds 1998: 52–56.

By shifting his focus in Propertius 2.10 from triumphant descent to (failed) ascent, Propertius seems to organize his ambitions around the idea of seeking out the proper location for epic inspiration, of searching for the proper tradition in which not to innovate but rather simply to *fit* his poetic agenda. But therein lies a difficulty.

It is common and sensible, in view of lines 1–25, to conclude that the springs of Ascrea refer to epic poetry.²⁶ Yet that conclusion is open to reasonable criticism. Lyne is not the first to observe that Gallus, whose literary ascent is recalled in line 25, was not an epic poet.²⁷ Nor do the Callimachean and Hesiodic associations of the line automatically suggest heroic epic.²⁸ Consequently, an alternative conclusion might be that line 25 indicates a modification of the poem's opening ambition: aetiological composition, not epic, constitutes the poet's new destination. But that seems a strange conclusion to a poem devoted to the struggle to reach epic heights, which is after all the impression that the poem, at least in the view of most critics, plainly strives to create.²⁹ Yet can one hardly avoid the implications of the lines' literary sources: Gallus suggests aetiology. So does Callimachus. And their great predecessor, Hesiod, leads one to the same conclusion.³⁰ But here we must come to grips with the very complexities of generic classifications that the *recusatio* tends to challenge or affirm. Epic poetry, from the ancient perspective, comprised two quite distinct literary traditions: on the one hand, there was heroic epic, of which genre Homer's poems were the ultimate exemplification, and, on the other, there was didactic epic, into which category Hesiod comfortably and naturally fit.³¹ Consequently, the Hesiodic associations of line 25 do at the very least open the door to an epic presence. Nevertheless, even if one locates *didactic* epic as well as aetiology at the Ascrean springs, that is all a far cry from the *heroic* epic that was the subject of the whole of the poem until its conclusion.

²⁶Skutsch 1901: 37; Rothstein 1920: 283; Butler and Barber 1933: 209; Enk 1962: 166; Giardina 1977: 148; Goold 1990: 151.

²⁷Boucher 1965: 182; Stahl 1985: 160; Lyne 1998: 39.

²⁸Wimmel 1960: 200 recognizes this. See also Ross 1975: 32–34.

²⁹Therefore the point is taken to be a confession on the part of the poet that he has not managed to compose even Gallan aetiology, much less heroic epic: Stahl 1985: 160; Lyne 1998: 27–28 (each placing heavy emphasis on *etiam* in line 25).

³⁰Hesiod's role in the aetiological tradition is, however, rejected by Cameron 1995: 362–86.

³¹Didactic and heroic epic recognized as distinct traditions: Farrell 1991: 61–62; Gale 1994: 100–104; Hardie 1995; Toohey 1996: 5–7.

But it is wrong to reject completely the possibility that line 25 can refer to heroic verse. Gallus and Callimachus do not constitute the entirety of its literary reference: there remains a dimension of the line for which we have been prepared by the poem's earlier allusions to *Georgic* 3. Virgil's epic ambitions, as we have seen, were expressed in Ennian terms, and, in view of Propertius 2.10's epic pretensions, Ennius' initiation must also be entitled to a share of Helicon's poetic turf. The specifics of Ennius' initiation, in Book 1 of the *Annales*, remain controversial.³² That the poet, in a dream, met a distinctly didactic Homer, who explained the physical realities whereby his soul had passed into Ennius, is certain enough. Whether in this same experience Ennius also encountered the Muses, whom he invokes at *Annales* 1.1 as dancing on Olympus, whether he shifted the location of his encounter to Helicon or to Parnassus, and whether he drank from a poetic spring, are possibilities that have all been challenged by eminent authority.³³ Yet by Book 7, in a proem that reprises his earlier inspiration and in which Ennius contrasts his literary achievement with that of his predecessors, he vaunts himself as Rome's first *dicti studiosus*, the Alexandrian quality of which has long been patent, and that claim is associated with his having attained the mountain of the Muses (*Musarum scopulos*).³⁴ Alexandrianism and mountain-tops, then, figure prominently in Ennius' inspiration and poetic identity, whatever the precise calculus. The Hippocrene, too, at least in the depiction offered in a later poem of Propertius (Prop. 3.3.1–6).³⁵ Hitherto in Propertius 2.10, to return to our present subject, epic has been represented, with less than perfect neatness, in terms of Greek literary inspiration and in terms of the realities of the subject matter of Roman epic verse, as we have seen. This duality persists, only by line 25 these two characteristics of (likely) Augustan epic composition stand on the same ground, for Ennius' status as an epic poet was, for the Roman reader, no less paradigmatic than Homer's or Hesiod's, and reference to his inspiration combines, or confounds, Roman heroic epic not simply with didactic epic but also with Alexandrian poetic sensibilities.

³²Enn. *Ann.* 1.1–10 Sk.

³³Skutsch 1985: 147–53, with testimonia and further bibliography.

³⁴Enn. *Ann.* 7.206–9 Sk.; see Skutsch 1985: 366–75. It is perhaps relevant to this passage that Ennius' narrative in Book 7 began by explaining the *origins* of Carthage; cf. Skutsch 1985: 367.

³⁵Cf. Enn. *Ann.* 7.210; Verg. *G.* 2.175; Skutsch 1985: 375 (with further references) for a possible reference to springs in the proem to Book 7.

Let us remain with Ennius a bit longer, since his epic account of his literary ascent represented a declaration not of a change from one genre to another but rather of a *transformation* of a single genre:

...scripsere alii rem
vorsibus quos olim Faunei vatesque canebunt

[cum] neque Musarum scopulos...
nec dicti studiosus [quisque erat] ante hunc.³⁶

...others have written this story in verses which Fauns and seers used
to sing...

[when] neither the mountain of the Muses.... nor [was anyone] a
learned poet before this man.

The exemplum of Ennius and his effect on epic as one important item in the literary tradition invoked by line 25 raises but does not answer the question of Propertius' conception of the transformation his *carmina* will undergo when they reach the top of Helicon. Perhaps it will not press matters too far to revisit line one of our poem:

Sed tempus lustrare aliis Helicon choreis.

The relationship with Hesiod's *Theogony* 1–3 is patent. But once the reader is prompted to recollect Ennius at line 25, it becomes easier to detect in line 1 a reference to Ennius *Annales* 1.1:

Musae, quae pedibus magnum pulsatis Olympum

O Muses, who beat great Olympus with your dancing steps

a reference that must be more obvious still if this line is in fact the epic's opening line (and a line whose shape recalls Hes. *Op.* 1).³⁷

Propertius' poem, through its deployment of Virgilian references to Ennius and to Gallus, all in contexts that fit into the *recusatio* strategy, accumulates various and varying traditions in line 25, each of which must be deemed

³⁶The verb governing *scopulos* is not given in Cicero's reporting of these lines, on which see Skutsch 1985: 373–74, but it was probably something like *escendit* which Skutsch offers **strictly exempli gratia**). Recent discussion of these lines: Hinds 1998: 57–63. Enn. *Ann.* 7.208 Sk. is recalled at Prop. 2.30.27; see Skutsch 1985: 374.

³⁷The first fragment is widely assumed, on the basis of Var. *R.* 1.1.4, to be the epic's opening line, but this idea is questioned by Skutsch 1985: 143–44.

unexpired: aetiology, didactic epic, and Roman heroic epic. The summit of Helicon is a crowded neighborhood, a state of affairs that perhaps reflects the totalizing tendencies of the epic genre so fully outlined in recent criticism.³⁸ Yet despite epic's apparently ample accommodation, Propertius' *carmina* fail to squeeze in. It is not merely that the poet has not yet had done with elegiac poetry (lines 7–8): *inopes...conscendere* is the cause adduced in line 23, but one wonders if this phrase ought to be read not merely as an admission of incapacity but also as a commentary on the vexing contradiction of a genre that heralds its exclusiveness and generic superiority even as it annexes other traditions.

This is perhaps the moment to consider increasing the population density of Helicon further, in response to Alan Cameron's recent proposal to rezone the area of concern in Virgil's *recusatio* at *Eclogue* 6.3–8. Cameron argues that in *Eclogue* 6 Virgil is not so much disavowing epic poetry per se as he is rejecting the presence in bucolic poetry of the elevated style appropriate to panegyric.³⁹ In other words, decorum and suitability, not simply genre, are at issue. Cameron furthermore asserts, in this instance without argument, that it is encomium in this sense that Propertius has in mind at Propertius 2.10.12 (*magni nunc erit oris opus*),⁴⁰ a possibility that might find support in the preceding line (Prop. 2.10.11: *surge, anime, ex humili*) and in the poet's reference to *laudis...carmen* at line 23. If so, then lines 21–24 will be read as a commentary on the suitability of the specimen of panegyric that the poet has introduced in the previous lines of his elegiac poem. Now this is not the place to undertake a detailed review of Cameron's provocative thesis on *Eclogue* 6. But the conflation of concern for genre with concern for quality, one obvious aspect of which is the apt employment of a suitable style, is an issue that another Roman *recusatio* does in fact address explicitly.⁴¹ In Propertius 2.10, the elegiac contextualization of the poet's panegyric move at lines 13–18, where the poet demonstrates his epic capacities, results in subsequent self-referential "criticism" that, in the overall scheme of the poem, remains an element of Propertius 2.10's engagement with genre and with the relationships amongst the traditions suitable to specific genres.

Propertius' *carmina* do not occupy the springs of Ascræ. Therefore, it is widely concluded, they lie at the base of Helicon, love poems still. "Love has

³⁸Totalizing epic: Hardie 1993: 1–18.

³⁹Cameron 1995: 459–71.

⁴⁰Cameron 1995: 468. Propertian *recusatio* is discussed more fully at Cameron 1995: 472–75, where it is recognized that the rejection of epic *poetry* is a part of Propertius' representation of himself as an elegiac poet and where Prop. 2.10 seems to be accepted as one element in the poet's rejection of epic strictly speaking.

⁴¹Hor. S. 2.1; cf. Tatum 1998, esp. 694–95.

merely bathed them in the river of Parmessus,” as Lyne translates the poem’s final line, and this can only be judged a reasonable assessment.⁴² Like the garland placed at the base of tall statues in line 22, Propertius’ poetry remains at the bottom of the hierarchy of genres established in this poem: his songs have not seriously progressed beyond love elegy.

Of course, the demonstration in lines 13–18 indicates that, before he elected to plead incapacity, the poet rather hoped that his verses might display epic inspiration in their elegiac meter.⁴³ That is, the poem raised the possibility of a final couplet that might have included a balanced *nondum modo...sed etiam*, a prospect whose disappointment is echoed in the gratuitous (since Propertius’ *nondum etiam* = *nondum*) rearrangement of that familiar collocation.⁴⁴ But now I want to look more closely at *modo* in the final line of the poem. Like *quando* in line eight, the word is rather teasing. One can read (8)

bella canam, quando scripta puella meast

as either “I will sing of wars, *since* my elegiac project is completed” or “I will sing of wars, *when* my elegiac project is completed.”⁴⁵ Similarly, it is just as possible to take *modo* in line 26 as an equivalent to *nuper* as it is to take it as an equivalent to *tantum*. If so, the line would then mean that Love has *just finished bathing* Propertius’ *carmina* in the Permessus, not that they are actually to be located there.⁴⁶ There may be some benefits in taking the last line in this sense.

As Lyne has correctly observed, the active allusion in line 26, unavoidable after *Ascræos fontes*, is less to drinking from the Muses’ stream than to Hesiod *Theogony* 5–8:⁴⁷

καί τε λοεσσάμεναι τέρενα χροά Περμησσοῖο
ἢ Ἴππου κρήνης ἢ Ὀλμειοῦ ζαθέοιο

⁴²Lyne 1998: 27.

⁴³Lyne 1998: 25.

⁴⁴*Nondum etiam* = *nondum*: Rothstein 1920: 76, followed by other commentators. This equation is rejected by Stahl 1985: 345–46; Lyne 1998: 28 n. 44. The collocation *nondum...modo* is not common in elegiac: Prop. 2.24b.19–21; Ov. *Am.* 3.5.13–14.

⁴⁵*Quando*: Wimmel 1960: 194, 197; Nethercut 1972: 87–88; Stahl 1985: 345. *Scripta puella*: Wyke 1987; Kennedy 1993: 5–7.

⁴⁶*Modo* here is nearly always taken simply as *tantum*. However, Rothstein 1920: 283 takes *modo* as *nuper* (“seit kurzem”; cf. *TLL* 8.1305–8), though with the explanation that the poet has only recently attained the status of an elegiac poet, in which proposition he is followed, apparently, by Stahl 1985: 161.

⁴⁷Lyne 1998: 27. Cf. Rothstein 1920: 284–85, who looks to the idea of drinking (e.g., P. *I.* 6.74).

ἀκροτάτῳ Ἑλικῶνι χοροὺς ἐνεποιήσαντο
καλοὺς, ἱμερόεντας.

And having bathed their tender skin in Permessus or Hippocrene or
sacred Olmeius, the Muses made beautiful, graceful dances on the
peak of Helicon.

Wherever it is that the Muses actually enjoy their bath, afterwards they move on to their dances (compare the opening line of our poem). In Hesiod, the site of the Muses' bath seems unimportant. Only what they do subsequently. This emphasis on the aftermath of the bath is patent in Hesiod, and that poet's aorist participle is at least possibly picked up in Propertius' use of the perfect *lavit* in line 26. This would tend to situate Propertius' poetry not in the vicinity of the Permessus (= love elegy), and certainly not on Helicon's peak (= epic poetry in all its possible manifestations), but rather elsewhere, in some unsurveyed spot on Helicon, yet moving in the direction of the summit.⁴⁸

But if so, so what? What can be made of this possible indeterminacy in locating the current situation of Propertian elegy? It is, of course, tempting to look ahead to the creative experimentation of Book 4, where the poet explores the possibilities of, and the impediments to, transforming the generic categories of elegiac discourse.⁴⁹ But it is perhaps more to the point here to consider the possibility that, in this poem, Propertius is investigating the impossibility of locating, in generic terms, the very variety of poem that 2.10 represents, the *recusatio*. The *recusatio*, especially when it is inclusive of the very genre it rejects or fails to attain, must by dint of its very inclusiveness and versatility become a difficult form of poetry to categorize, to define generically. Like epic, the *recusatio* has assimilationist tendencies. Unlike epic, however, the strategy of the *recusatio*, in the very act of challenging and affirming the existence of specific genres and of a generic hierarchy, must yield a poem that itself resists classification. Such a poem must, whatever its origins or its aspirations, become something else. That, after all, is what makes it a successful *recusatio*.

In the final couplet of Propertius 2.10, the poet makes it possible for his reader to understand that while, true to the demands of the *recusatio*, his poem must fail to transgress the defining qualities of its genre (and consequently fail to become epic in any of its possible realizations), it nevertheless succeeds in transcending the limitations of those very defining qualities, through the very strategy, the *recusatio*, that polices them. Love elegy lies at the base of Helicon.

⁴⁸The occupation of an unsurveyed, undefined space enacts Apollo's injunction in Call. *Aet. fr.* 1.25–28 Pf.

⁴⁹DeBrohun 1994.

Epic, multifarious and imperialist, has annexed Helicon's peak—and the field and waters in the valley below. Propertius' *recusatio*, in its witty effort to transform elegy, must at least struggle to occupy new ground. At the same time, Propertius 2.10 remains Propertius' **elegiac** *recusatio*. However we read line 8, the project of the *scripta puella* is manifestly not complete at the end of line 26: *Amor* continues to be the dominant figure. From this perspective, then, it is perhaps not so surprising that the poet deposits two possibilities in his use of *modo*: Propertius 2.10 is merely love elegy, is only love elegy, or has just moved beyond love elegy, annexing new territory for Propertius' real literary project. In the context of this *recusatio*, it is all of the above.⁵⁰

⁵⁰I am grateful to the anonymous readers for their helpful criticism, and I am especially grateful to Marilyn Skinner for her contributions to this paper. This is not to say that she shares my views on Prop. 2.10.

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