

Alexandrian Implications In Tibullus I.1 *

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The Augustan poet Tibullus was one of those Roman poets who fell under the influence of Alexandria. In my present paper I shall be mainly concerned with Tibullus' first poem. My starting point will be that it is supposed to be a programmatic poem. But my reading suggests that it is only in a limited sense.

Great importance is always attached to an introductory poem of any poet. It is expected that Tibullus provides in I.1 a poetic program for the whole work or at least for his first book of elegies. The study of Tibullus I.1 leads - to a great extent - to a clearer understanding of the poems which follow. This poem is expected to set the tone of his work especially in the way Tibullus employs the elegiac conventions in combination with some outstanding Alexandrian characteristics.

I shall consider the Alexandrian implications in I.1, through considering the structure of the poem and the sequence of Tibullus' thought. The poem falls into two main sections:

1- (1-44) the countryside with both its poverty and simplicity versus wealth and military action.

2- (45-78) love and elegiac conventions as set against wealth, military action and renown.

* This paper was read at "Alexandria Second International Conference on Cultural Interaction Among Mediterranean Peoples", January 15-19 1996.

Tibullius begins the poem by rejecting wealth (*divitias*) of yellow gold (*fulvo...auro*) and rejecting the sounding of the war-trumpets (*martia...classica pulsa*)⁽¹⁾:

*Divitias alius fulvo sibi congerat auro
et teneat culti iugera multa soli,
quem labor adsiduus vicino terreat hoste,
Martia cui somnos classica pulsa fugent.*

(1-4)

Then he mentions his own preference, which gives him personal freedom. His poverty is to bring him an inactive life⁽²⁾:

me mea paupertas vita traducat inerti,

(5)

Tibullus contents himself with a humble life-style (*contentus vivere parvo*, 25), and rejects once more long marches (*longae...viae*, 26). He aspires to the modest and simple routine of the farmer in the countryside, describing the rustic work which he is going to undertake (7ff.) as a true countryman "rusticus" (8), an alternative to the military action.

We know that urban life in the Hellenistic world with its large cities caused a longing for the quiet and beautiful country life. This in turn excited a tendency for expressing the simple and the rustic in Alexandrian literature. For example, the Alexandrian writer Callimachus⁽³⁾, quite in the Alexandrian manner, when he wrote his famous epyllion "*Hecale*", laid emphasis, not on Theseus' heroic deeds, but on the simple and realistic details of the ordinary and everyday life of poor Hecale⁽⁴⁾. Callimachus does the same in his victory ode for Queen Berenike (*Victoria Berenices*) in which he focuses on Hercules' visit to the humble peasant Molorchus and the latter's invention of a new kind of mouse-trap⁽⁵⁾. This outstanding literary characteristic of the Alexandrians

reappeared in some of their Roman successors, Tibullus was one of those, and his first elegy is a case in point.

We should keep in mind that Tibullus was the only Roman elegiac poet who joined military service. We know from his poetry that he accompanied his patron Messalla on several military campaigns⁽⁶⁾. So when Tibullus rejects war he speaks from a personal experience, and when he rejects wealth and accepts poverty, he connects himself with the Alexandrian literary conventions⁽⁷⁾.

Throughout the first half of the poem, Tibullus re-emphasizes his poverty and the modesty of his farm⁽⁸⁾. Modesty is its outstanding characteristic, as well as of his sacrifice and his flock. He addresses the Lares, the tutelary gods who watch over his farm which is now poor, but was once thriving, asking them to accept his offerings:

vos quoque, felicitis quondam, nunc pauperis agri
custodes, fertis munera vestra, Lares.

(19-20)

In those days a slaughtered heifer was a peace offering for his countless cattle. Now a lamb is the little sacrifice of his small land:

tunc vitula innumeros lustrabat caesa iuencos:
nunc agna exigui est hostia parva soli.

(21-22)

Tibullus asks thieves and wolves to have mercy on his scanty flocks:

at vos exiguo pecori, furesque lupique,
parcite:

(33-34)

When appealing to the gods to be with him, he asks them not to despise gifts from a poor table:

adsitis, divi, neu vos e paupere mensa
dona.....spernite.....

(37-38)

This modest way of life is either a literary topos⁽⁹⁾ or it is historically true that his farm was diminished in the famous confiscations of 42 B.C., to provide settlements for soldiers⁽¹⁰⁾. Perhaps his circumstances suited his poetic program. So poverty and simplicity as Alexandrian features are related to the theme of Tibullus' love of the countryside⁽¹¹⁾, which occurs repeatedly in his poetry⁽¹²⁾.

Tibullus shows an interest in the piety of the countryside, reverence for the gods, rural cults and performance of rites⁽¹³⁾. His worship is explicitly professed: (nam veneror, 11). The first product of his farm is placed as an offering before the god of the countryside:

libatum agricolae ponitur ante deo.

(14)

Tibullus appeals to the rural deities to do their part: yellow-haired Ceres (flava Ceres, 15), Priapus, the god of gardens who is the watch (custos, 17f.), the tutelary gods of the farm (custodes...Lares, 20). He offers sacrifices to the gods to secure their protection for his herd (21f.). He appeases Pales too, the goddess of shepherds (35f.). Finally Tibullus asks the gods in general to be with him (37).

Tibullus' concern for crops and flocks reflect a genuine Roman spirit. In this respect, one may wonder whether Tibullus was inspired mainly by Virgil's *Georgics* to write about the countryside⁽¹⁴⁾, or only by the Hellenistic tendency towards it and the Alexandrian enthusiasm for expressing poverty and simplicity. Both Virgil and Tibullus show enthusiasm for the countryside, but Tibullus' enthusiasm is

free from the political motivation that is present in Virgil's poetry⁽¹⁵⁾, and consequently the two poets differ in their approach. Tibullus presents himself as a man of peace and a lover of the countryside, which may suggest Roman moral dimensions. But did Tibullus choose the countryside because of its moral qualities? In other words, did he admire and aspire to the moral status of the traditional Italian farmer? To live in the countryside is Tibullus' vision of idealized life, and the logical result of Tibullus' social position as a descendant of an equestrian land-holding family. But unlike Virgil, Tibullus' concerns are not didactic. Rather, he takes personal delight in rural simplicity, and has a personal conception of happiness. So when Tibullus chooses the life of the farmer it is only to achieve his own individual happiness, and here too he was inspired by Alexandrian literature⁽¹⁶⁾.

So far in this poem, all we know of Tibullus is that he is an ex-soldier who desires to become a farmer. Let us consider the movement of Tibullus' ideas in the second part of the poem which he combines so elaborately that he succeeds to achieve unity of feeling⁽¹⁷⁾. Tibullus' poetic program, up to this point, looks to rustic life, later on he thinks of his girl. How pleasant it is to hear the winds rage as he lies and holds his girl in his bosom:

quam iuvat immites ventos audire cubantem
et dominam tenero continuisse sinu

(45-46)

At line 45, for the first time we hear of the "domina", and Tibullus reveals to us that he is a lover. This is what is called by critics "the technique of delayed information"⁽¹⁸⁾. Love means every thing to Tibullus. It means much more than wealth and renown. He wants love to be his happy lot (hoc

michi contingat; 49). Let him be deservedly rich who can endure the rage of the sea and the gloomy rains:

...sit dives iure, furorem
qui maris et tristes ferre potest pluvias.
(49-50)

In the lines just quoted there is the judgement of the poet upon those who travel in search for wealth, those who deny themselves security and comfort. But as for himself, Tibullus wishes that all the gold and emeralds perish before any girl should weep for his travels:

o quantum est auri pereat potiusque smaragdi,
quam fleat ob nostras ulla puella vias.
(51-52)

At line 53 Tibullus' shifts the emphasis, we are introduced to his patron Messalla⁽¹⁹⁾. This is a turning point in the poem, through which he returns to the previous idea of rejecting war. He announces that his choice of life is different from his patron's⁽²⁰⁾. It is Messalla's right to campaign by land and sea so that his house may show the spoils of the enemy:

te bellare decet terra, Messalla, marique,
ut domus hostiles praeferat exuvias
(53-54)

But for Tibullus the bonds of a lovely girl are keeping him a defeated captive⁽²¹⁾, sitting as a keeper in front of her doors:

me retinent vinctum formosae vincla puellae,
et sedeo duras ianitor ante fores.
(55-56)

The profession of personal freedom of the opening lines now comes to an end: (*vinctum...vincla*, 55). The picture of Tibullus that we form from this poem is in sharp contrast to that of

Messalla. Tibullus is devoted to the life of love and simple pleasures. He adores the countryside and scorns war, wealth and renown. On the other side, Messalla is a wealthy military man of action and an ambitious statesman. But Tibullus doesn't intend to make any judgement concerning his patron's activities⁽²²⁾. And this does not mean that he is criticizing Messalla when he considers military action inferior to love and idleness, but he rejects war as a career for himself, a way of life quite unfitted to him. And this does not imply any intended antagonistic political stance on Tibullus' side. He is, before all else, a modest peaceful countryman devoted to the pleasures of life and love, rejects war because it demands effort and restricts his personal happiness. In my view, Tibullus is temperamentally not politically opposed to politics⁽²³⁾.

Lines (55-56), quoted above, refer to one of the conventional elegiac themes: the "exclusus amator", the lover outside the closed door of his girl⁽²⁴⁾. This is one of the favourite themes in Alexandrian poetry⁽²⁵⁾. But Tibullus touches upon the idea briefly. Although no setting is indicated in this passage, scholars suggest that it is an urban rather than a rural scene⁽²⁶⁾. The setting of the "exclusus amator" does not necessarily need to be urban⁽²⁷⁾. As long as the second part of the poem does not specify an urban setting, it is understandable, I suppose, that the setting is the same. The reader is given a rural setting in the first part of the poem and is led to project it into the second part.

At last Tibullus is addressing his dear Delia⁽²⁸⁾ by name. He does not care to win renown, but only to be with her:

non ego laudari curo, mea Delia; tecum
dum modo sim, (57-58)

Delia plays a minor role in I. I.⁽²⁹⁾ He doesn't express his emotions towards her, but mentions her to stress his preference for the idle effortless life of love to that of active military action. After talking much about his vision of living in the countryside, rejecting war and wealth, he turns his thoughts to Delia and to the elegiac conventions, concerning the enjoyment of lifelong love with her. "Tibullus rusticus" (7ff.) and "Tibullus amator" (45ff.) are now considered as being one and the same person.

The perspective of love changes suddenly to death, a transition from one state of mind to another. A sense of pessimism and sorrow now colours the situation and counterbalances the hope of the first part of the poem⁽³⁰⁾. Tibullus gives a detailed picture of his death and funeral. He wants to look at Delia when his last hour comes, to hold her hand while dying:

te spectem, suprema mihi cum venerit hora,
et teneam moriens deficiente manu.

(59-60)

He stresses the idea of her weeping for him, repeating "flebis" twice (61 and 63). In a very emotional way he imagines how she is going to give him kisses mixed with bitter tears:

tristibus et lacrimis oscula mixta dabis.

(62)

How moving it is that from his burial no youth, no maiden will be able to return home dry-eyed:

illo non iuvenis poterit de funere quisquam
lumina, non virgo sicca referre domum.

(65-66)

He asks Delia to unite with him in love, while fates allow:

interea, dum fata sinunt, iungamus amores.

(69)

It seems more than once that death cast a shadow over Tibullus' thoughts⁽³¹⁾. With such a state of mind he mentions death in I.3⁽³²⁾: his talk of love and Delia is combined with his talk of death.

Tibullus reveals further, in I.1, his pessimism when he talks about death that will come (*veniet...Mors*, 70) and the inactive old age that will steal upon him, when it will not be seemly to love nor to say soft words:

*iam subrepet iners aetas, nec amare decebit,
dicere nec cano blanditias capite.*

(71-72)

Now the poem closes - as it starts - on a note of optimism. Tibullus devotes himself to joyous love that will be his business, being still young, it is not shameful to break down doors to get access to his lover:

*nunc levis est tractanda venus, dum frangere postes
non pudet*

(73-74)

In this respect - as far as love is concerned - Tibullus is a leader and a good soldier (*hic ego dux milesque bonus*, 75)⁽³³⁾. Here is a reference to the elegiac motif of *militia amoris*, known in Latin Love Elegy, where love is viewed as a military campaign⁽³⁴⁾. Words and themes which come in a context of warfare recur in a context of love. The poet-lover emulates the soldier.

Tibullus comes once again to the point which he starts his poem with: the rejection of war and wealth. This ring-composition contributes to the unity of feeling in the poem. Tibullus asks the signals and trumpets of war to go away, to

bring wounds to the greedy men, and to bring them wealth as well:

vos, signa tubaeque,
ite procul, cupidis vulnera ferte viris,
ferre et opes,

(75-77)

In the last two verses, Tibullus, being safe with his harvest, scorns wealth as he scorns hunger:

ego composito securus acervo
dites despiciam despiciamque famem.

(77-78)

I would argue that Tibullus' choice of themes in I.1 reveals that he is advancing a conception of his life⁽³⁵⁾. What impresses one about this poem is the high frequency of contrasts⁽³⁶⁾: *rusticus* versus *miles* and *divitiae* versus *paupertas* in the first part of the poem, *amator* versus *miles* in the second part. This is to say that Tibullus contrasts his chosen ways of life with that of the soldier.

The countryside is connected in some of Tibullus' poems with the theme of love⁽³⁷⁾. Poem I.5, for example, displays love in the countryside. Tibullus is going to live there (*rura colam*, 21), and Delia will be there with him (*aderit mea Delia*, 21). But in I.1 Tibullus' preoccupation is the countryside and love. Although the countryside plays a spectacular role in I.1, Tibullus does not explicitly connect it with the theme of love⁽³⁸⁾ as he does in I.5.

Much of the scholarship on Tibullus' first poem has been concerned with its programmatic intent. Many critics, if not most, usually call Tibullus I.1 a programmatic poem⁽³⁹⁾. There is a point worth attention here. According to my reading of the poem, I can safely say that although there are in I.1 the typically Tibullan ideas or programmatic elements which

occur repeatedly in the poet's work-as we have already seen-such as his hatred of war, rejection of wealth, contentment of his lot, acceptance of poverty as a way of life, the desire for a life in the countryside and praise of his patron Messalla, still it is surprising that the theme of love is delayed in I.1 and plays a minor role⁽⁴⁰⁾, although it is known and accepted that love is the primary and most characteristic subject of Roman Elegy, and although it is preeminent in most of Tibullus' poems to the extent that he is considered one of the most delicate poets of romantic love. The topic of love does not have the prominence we would expect in the opening poem of a collection of love elegy. It was not Tibullus' professed intention in I.1 to work upon the feelings of his girl, nor to make his love story an object of display. Love with some elegiac motifs are remarkably combined with some Alexandrian ideas in I.1, but love does not dominate the poem. It is rather subordinate to other topics. The poet mainly indulges in visions of the ideal sort of life he would prefer to lead. Rural visions that contain Alexandrian elements win out over love elements in I.1. So the poem is not representative of the whole work. From the standpoint of readers' expectations of a programmatic poem there is a lack of fulfillment. In this perspective, I.1, as I can see it, is not actually programmatic in the full sense of the word.

Notes

- 1- Cf. Tibullus I.10; II.3. F. Cairns, *Tibullus, A Hellenistic poet at Rome*, Cambridge, 1979, pp. 24f., considers Tibullus' rejection of war an implicit rejection of writing epic.

- 2- It is, however, typical of Tibullus that in his present estimation of himself he wishes to be called inactive and idle: (*quaeso segnis inersque vocer*, 58).
- 3- Although the debt of the Roman poets to Callimachus is very considerable, that of Tibullus to Callimachus is not acknowledged by the poet in an explicit way as Propertius' debt (Tibullus is always silent on his literary models). On the influence that Callimachus exercised on Latin poetry, see: B. Arkins, *The Freedom of Influence: Callimachus and Latin Poetry*, *Latomus* XLVII, 1988. I notice that when Arkins talks about the Callimachean "spectacular" influence on the best of Latin poetry (pp. 286, 393) he does not mention Tibullus in his list, although Tibullus' debt to Callimachus is very great.
- 4- Hecale is the old lady who offered Theseus hospitality in her humble hut, on his way to Marathon.
- 5- *Supplementum Hellenisticum*, 254-269.
- 6- See: Tib. I.3, I.7 and I.10.
- 7- Cf. Callim. Epigr. 34, where the poet presents his persona as poor, see also Epigr. 32, 47, 48 and *Iamb.* 3; *Theoc. Id.* 16.
- 8- Cf. Tib. II.1.
- 9- Because we know that Tibullus was descending from a wealthy family, so he might have been following the Alexandrians in this respect, see above n. 7.
- 10- Tibullus' statements (I.1. 19ff.) to the effect that his farm was once grand but is now humble are usually interpreted by scholars as referring to the famous confiscations, see D.F. Bright, *Haec Mihi Fingebam, Tibullus In His World*, Leiden, C.C. S III, 1978, p. 13; R.

- O. Lyne, *The Latin Love Poets From Catullus To Horace*, Oxford, 1980, p.152.
- 11- F. Solmsen, *Tibullus As An Augustan Poet*, *Hermes* 90, 1962, p. 305, emphasizes the integrity between *paupertas* and *rura*, *militia* and *divitiae*. Cairns 1979, p. 21, sees a connection between Tibullus' simple life in the country and the Hellenistic contempt for the inflated and pompous in literature.
- 12- Cf. Tib. I.5; I.10 and II.1.
- 13- Cf. Tib. I.10 and II.1. For religion in Tibullus see R. B. Palmer, *Is There A Religion Of Love In Tibullus?* *CJ* 73, 1977. Consult Cairns (1979) pp. 13ff., 18f., 24, who sees in Tibullus I.1: "rustic reverence", "yearning for a past age", "idealised primitive Roman past", "antiquarian interest", "religious associations", "piety", "pious reverence for the gods" and "sentimental nostalgia for an ideal past".
- 14- W. Y. Sellar, *The Roman Poets Of The Augustan Age, Horace And The Elegiac Poets*, Oxford, 1892, pp. 239f., stresses the point that while Tibullus writes in the spirit of the *Georgics*, he is quite independent. Solmsen 1962, p. 300, thinks that Tibullus, while doubtless previously sensitive to the attractions of the countryside, became through Virgil more consciously aware of their poetic potentialities. See also Barbara Boyd, *Parva Seges Satis Est: The Landscape Of Tibullan Elegy In I.1 And I.10*, *TAPA*, vol. 114, 1984, p. 274; G. Luck, *Love Elegy in: The Cambridge History of Classical Literature, The Age of Augustus vol. II*, Cambridge, 1990, p. 116.
- 15- I do not agree with Cairns 1979, p. 34, when he says that peace and the farmer in Tib. I.1 have the same import

- they have in Virgil's *Georg.*, where the poet's wish to eulogise the achievements of the princeps is quite explicit.
- 16- Cf. the sort of life-style Theocritus presents in *Id.* 7.
- 17- Luck 1990, p. 117, points out to the unity of mood and feeling in *I.1*. I would like to suggest that Tibullus breaks this unity of mood by the vision of his death and funeral, as I shall demonstrate.
- 18- See Cairns 1979, pp. 145ff.
- 19- He was Marcus Valerius Messalla Corvinus, a military man and orator. He was one of the equestrian class. He headed a literary circle, to which Tibullus and Ovid belonged. Tibullus' friendship with him was one of the repeated themes of his poetry: *I.3*, *I.5*, *I.7*, *II.1* and *II.5*.
- 20- In the first part of *I.1*, Tibullus compares himself indefinitely with "alius" (1f.), any greedy man who collects wealth through war. In the second part of the poem he compares himself with Messalla (53ff.).
- 21- The amor versus militia theme appears in *Tib. I.2*, *I.3*, *I.5*, *I.7* and *I.10*. Cf. *Prop. III.4*.
- 22- In an attempt to make a compromise between the two different life-styles of both Tibullus and Messalla, Cairns 1979, p. 146, goes so far as to suggest that Tibullus [in *I.1*] lauds Messalla's martial achievements: as an agricola enjoying pax, he depends on the achievements of Messalla as a general. As a lover he relies on the kindness and understanding of a patron who will not insist on his going to war but will allow him freedom to live as he wishes.
- 23- My conclusions are opposite to those of R. J. Ball, *The Politics Of Tibullus: Augustus, Messalla and Macer*, GB 9, 1980. I agree with Cairns 1979, p. 34, who argues that Tibullus' rejection of war as a career for himself in *I.1* is a

literary gesture rather than a political stance. In Luck's words (1990, p. 116) Tibullus "seems to live in a dream-world of his own". The subject of Tibullus' political stance is so vast and lies beyond the scope of this study.

- 24- Cf. Tib. I.2; Prop. I.16; Ov. Am. I.6. For the elegiac conventions in the second half of Tib. I.1, see Boyd 1984, p. 276.
- 25- See for example Callim. Epigr. 43 and 64; Theoc. Id. 3.
- 26- See: Sellar 1892, p. 234; Solmsen 1962, p. 305; J. H. Gaisser, Amor, Rura, and Militia in Three Elegies of Tibullus: I.1, I.5 and I.10, *Latomus* 42, 1983, p. 62.
- 27- Notice that the "paraclausithyron" (i.e. the lament of a lover in front of the closed door) in Theoc. Id. 3 has a rustic setting.
- 28- Delia is Tibullus' girl-friend who dominates the first book of his Elegies.
- 29- Compare the importance given to Propertius' Cynthia in the first poem of the first book.
- 30- Tibullus wishes that hope would not disappoint him: (*nec Spes destituat*, 17).
- 31- Cf. Tib. I.10. Perhaps Tibullus was not endowed with good health. For the various interpretations of the theme of death in Tib. I.1, see Gaisser 1983, p. 64.
- 32- See my discussion in: *The Propempticon In Tibullus I.3*, *Bulletin Of The Center Of Papyrological Studies And Inscriptions*, No. XII, Part 1, *Ain Shams Univ. Cairo* 1995, pp. 147-8.
- 33- Taking into consideration the fact that Gallus was a genuine *dux milesque*, E. W. Leach, *Poetics And Poetic Design In Tibullus' First Elegiac Book*, *Arethusa* 13, 1980, pp. 85f., argues that Tibullus' new formula

- cleverly implies the elegist's determination to prove a more successful lover than his predecessor.
- 34- "Militia Amoris" is a very Roman motif. Cf. Prop. IV.8; Ov. Am. I.9.
- 35- Solmsen 1962, p. 305, thinks that I.1 is evidently meant to be the poet's self-introduction to his readers. Leach 1980, p. 84, correctly considers Tibullus I.1, "an *ars vivendi* which carries...the weight of a poetic manifesto".
- 36- Palmer 1977, pp. 6 and 10, most sensibly points out to the fact that Tibullus builds up his poetic world through a subtle mixture of antitheses.
- 37- Cf. Tib. II.1 and II.3; Theoc. Id. 11. Gaisser 1983, *passim.*, traces the relationship between amor, rura and militia in I.1, I.5 and I.10. He establishes the importance of this relationship for Tibullan elegy as a whole.
- 38- Scholars stress the point that love and the countryside are completely separate in I.1. Solmsen 1962, p. 305, points out that just as Delia is not mentioned as long as the delights of rural life are spread out before us, so in the part concerned with amor and Delia no effort is made to remember the rural setting of the first half. Gaisser 1983, p. 62 notices that in the description of Tibullus' career as amator (59-74) there is no reference to the theme of the rura. Boyd 1984, p. 277, notes that when Tibullus shifts his attention to Delia, he implicitly abandons his farm. But I would like to propose that there is an implicit relationship between love and the countryside in I.1. As I have said (above p.5), the reader is led to project the rural setting of the first part of the poem into the second part.
- 39- See for example: Cairns 1979, p. 11; Leach 1980, p. 86; Lyne 1980, p. 68; Gaisser 1983, p. 67.