

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10318-3 - Powerplay in Tibullus: Reading Elegies Book One

Parshia Lee-Stecum

Excerpt

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## INTRODUCTION

## Collecting the set

Tibullus Book One presents the reader with ten poems, one after another.<sup>1</sup> In the same way, this study takes the form of a linear reading of those ten poems, one after another. To some this approach may seem simply common sense: it is a well tried and still popular technique of literary criticism, and particularly criticism of classical texts.<sup>2</sup> To others it may seem overly rigid, anachronistic, even naive. At any rate, such an approach should not be taken for granted; it needs some explanation and defence.

On a basic level, this linear approach finds support in the physical nature of the ancient ‘book’. The mechanics of the book roll demanded that a reader move through that roll’s contents in a linear motion. The reader could only ‘[un]roll’ through. To get from point A to point C (or vice versa) there was no other way for it but to go through point B: ‘The roll imposes linear movement through or back. No skipping around or dipping in.’<sup>3</sup> This physical imperative to read texts in a linear fashion is echoed in the theory of the so-called ‘Reader Response’ school of literary criticism, where the physical

<sup>1</sup> There is general agreement on the sequence of the poems in the manuscript tradition. The only serious attempt to challenge the physical sequence of poems offered by the manuscripts seems to have been that of Doncieux (1887), which has gained little, if any, critical support: see Ball (1983) 225. On the other hand, Scaliger’s rearrangement of the poems into *internal* orders which conformed to a structure and meaning matching the editor’s expectations (Scaliger (1577)) stood until the manuscript authority was restored by Volpi (1749); for an overview of the history of editing Tibullus, which I have followed here, see Ball (1983) 12ff.

<sup>2</sup> One of the classic examples of this is Putnam (1970). More recent, and more immediately relevant to the approach taken here, are Henderson (1991) and (1992), a two-part, consecutive, linear reading of two consecutive elegiac texts (Ovid *Amores* 2.7 and 2.8).

<sup>3</sup> Van Sickle (1980) 5.

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‘unfolding’ of the book is tied to the process of reading and the reader’s construction of meaning from the text. A statement of Michael Riffaterre makes clear this connection, and the exemplary nature of ancient ‘books’ in this regard:

One can never give enough stress to the importance of a reading that runs in the direction of the text, i.e. from beginning to end. If one ignores this ‘one way’ sign, one is missing a vital element of the literary phenomenon: namely that the book unfolds (just as in antiquity the scroll materially unrolled) and that the text is the object of a progressive discovery, a dynamic and constantly changing perception, whereby the reader not only advances from surprise to surprise, but at the same time sees as he advances how his comprehension of what he has read changes, because each new element lends a new dimension to preceding elements by repeating, contradicting or developing them.<sup>4</sup>

The physical layout of the book, and in particular the ancient book roll, conditions the reading process, and provides a necessary context for interpretative responses such as this present study.

But, as these words of Riffaterre suggest, the process of reading is not that simple, and neither the linear approach nor even the particular assumption that a poetic collection should be treated as a single entity is unproblematic. ‘Reading is not a straightforward linear movement, a merely cumulative affair.’<sup>5</sup> It has now almost become a truism in certain branches of literary criticism that every reading, especially the reading of a collection, is a re-reading.<sup>6</sup> The ‘dynamic and constantly changing perception’ which Riffaterre finds in the reading process entails constant re-reading of what is already read, and even reading forward as expectations of what is yet to be read are formed and re-formed. ‘One might simplify by saying that each intentional sentence correlative opens up a particular horizon, which is modified, if not completely changed, by succeeding sentences. While these expectations arouse interest in what is to come, the subsequent modification of them will

<sup>4</sup> Riffaterre, quoted in Iser (1978) 222.

<sup>5</sup> Eagleton (1983) 77.

<sup>6</sup> ‘[T]here is no *first* reading, even if the text is concerned to give us that illusion by several operations of suspense, artifices more spectacular than persuasive’, Barthes (1974) 16.

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also have a retrospective effect on what has already been read. This may now take on a different significance from that which it had at the moment of reading.<sup>7</sup> Reading, as Iser describes it here, is a constant process of re-reading of previous readings (and re-readings of readings of readings and so on).<sup>8</sup>

While this study takes the form of a straight reading from poem one through to poem ten in order, it is necessarily as much a reading back as it is a reading forward. In the reading of a collection of poems the constant process of re-reading which Iser and others have examined often at the level of interaction between sentences within a unified (or at least 'monolithic') text<sup>9</sup> also takes place on another, larger and thus perhaps more obvious, level. This is the interaction within any reading of the various individual poems of the collection. The nature of such a reading has been well described by Paul Miller in his recent book on Lyric texts: 'The reader of the collection is led from one poem to another, constantly posing the questions: what is the relation of this poem to those which came before and those which will follow after; are these experiences related to one another; what is the nature of the subjectivity projected by these poems that integrates them into a meaningful whole?'<sup>10</sup> There are problems with the approaches of Iser and Miller which will be discussed below, but it is basically this reading process (or, rather, the attempt to read this way) which this study seeks to examine, question and enact through the method of a linear reading of each poem from start to finish. The questions which Miller sees the lyric collection as posing, and others like them, are the flesh of any reading and will be the fuel of this study. (Criticism, by these terms, is carnivorous, if not cannibalistic.)

<sup>7</sup> Iser (1980) 53–4.

<sup>8</sup> See also Barthes (1974) 11: 'To read is to find meanings, and to find meanings is to name them; but these named meanings are swept towards other names; names call to each other, reassemble, and their grouping calls for further meaning: I name, I unname, I rename: so the text passes: it is a nomination in the course of becoming, a tireless approximation, a metonymic labor.'

<sup>9</sup> Iser, for example, makes extensive use of Ingarden's notion of 'intentionale Satzkorrelate', Iser (1980) 52ff; see also Iser (1978) 111.

<sup>10</sup> Miller (1994) 55.

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The multiplicity of complex inter-relations between poems and facets of poems, each opening up further possibilities in turn (and so on, and so on in an accelerating spiral), will be pursued, as vigorously as space allows, in the course of this reading. But, at the same time, I am aware of and hope to draw attention to the ironies and problems inherent in the circular nature of such a reading. As Miller puts it, ‘these separate readings qualify one another in such a way that the speaker’s projected experience is constantly recycled as a paradigm of that experience’s own intelligibility. Each moment is always interpreted in light of the others known to the reader. Thus the action or sentiment described in one poem frequently only becomes fully intelligible in light of the actions or sentiments described in another poem and vice versa’.<sup>11</sup>

Of course, the ‘actions or sentiments’ of one poem may in fact be made less intelligible by their inter-relation with other poems or even passages within the *same* poem. The danger of viewing reading as a process, as Riffaterre, Iser and Miller (in the context of a poetic collection) do, is that it becomes equated with progress.<sup>12</sup> This would imply that all the shifting re-readings, the modifications of expectations, the dissemination of competing possibilities, however they might destabilise any reading as it moves through the text, will finally be resolved into certainty when the reader reaches the end. This is the quality, for instance, which Barthes equates with the classic or ‘readerly’ text: ‘here [in the readerly text] dissemination is not the random scattering of meanings toward the infinity of language but a simple – temporary – suspension of affinitive, already magnetized elements, before they are summoned together to take their place, economically, in the same *package*’.<sup>13</sup> In the readerly text, according to Barthes, meaning becomes clear in the end, however obscure or ambiguous it may seem in the beginning and middle. The reading of a

<sup>11</sup> Miller (1994) 57.

<sup>12</sup> See Culler (1982) 79, for a discussion of this tendency of reader response criticism.

<sup>13</sup> Barthes (1974) 182.

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collection as of any text, however, is not necessarily a march towards enlightenment. Possibilities can remain open, questions remain unanswered, the language of the text and the comparison of and interaction between poems and passages within poems can escape any final certainty, fail to resolve into the neat ‘package’ of which Barthes speaks.<sup>14</sup> It is one of the contentions of this study that the Tibullan text dramatically fails to resolve itself into Barthes’ category of the ‘readerly text’.

Despite these qualifications, Miller’s central point, that the inter-relation of the poems of a collection effectively forms the context for the meaning of those poems (reading forming the context of itself), largely stands. This is what Duncan Kennedy calls, specifically in the ‘context’ of Tibullus’ first book, ‘the piquant circularity of extrapolating “reality” from the text and then using it to assess the viewpoint from which that “reality” has been presented’.<sup>15</sup> The ironies and discrepancies which this ‘hermeneutic circle’ can foster are necessary parts of any reading and, as I intend to argue, are particularly visible in the reading of Tibullus Book One. Kennedy’s words will seem appropriate at many points in the course of this study.

Techniques which seek out formal patterning within ancient collections have also stressed the inter-actions between poems within the Tibullan first book. But this approach and the static, closed, often diagrammatic nature of many of the grouping strategies employed by various critics<sup>16</sup> will be largely rejected here as unproductive representations of the reading process. Ironically, it is only when the bewildering variety of conclusions which this approach to the collection has spawned is viewed collectively that the shifting and expanding number of

<sup>14</sup> ‘This overpowerfulness as the life of the signifier is produced within the anxiety and the wandering of the language always richer than knowledge, the language always capable of the movement which takes it further than peaceful and sedentary certitude.’ Derrida (1978) 73.

<sup>15</sup> Kennedy (1993) 15.

<sup>16</sup> Those who wish to pursue such an approach to the collection are referred to: Littlewood (1970); Powell (1974); Grondona (1975); Ball (1979); Dettmer (1980); also see Ball (1983) 225ff. and the survey of ‘recent structural studies’ in Ball (1989).

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possibilities which the reading of a collection opens up start to suggest themselves. It is one of my prime contentions in this study that Tibullus Book One destabilises precisely this desire to fix meaning, to diagrammatise the relations between poems or sections of poems, which these grouping strategies display. This sort of confidence finds no safe home in the world of Tibullan elegy. As Iser has claimed, ‘selection automatically involves exclusion.’<sup>17</sup> To fix finally upon any meaning, any one possibility, demands that all other possibilities which the text may suggest be excluded. This is particularly true, I will argue, of the Tibullan text. The only way to achieve final control over the meaning of Tibullus’ first book is to ignore the ‘overflow of possibilities’<sup>18</sup> which the text spawns. As Shoshana Felman noted in her reading of James’s *Turn of the Screw*: ‘To *master*, then, (to become the Master) is, here as elsewhere, to *refuse to read* the letters; here as elsewhere, to “see it all” is in effect to “shut one’s eyes as tight as possible to the truth”; once more, “to see it all” is in reality to *exclude*.’<sup>19</sup> Such inter-relations within Tibullus Book One as the various grouping strategies propose are, I would argue, a necessary part of reading the collection, but where they are formed they exist, for as long as they do exist, in a constant state of flux, metamorphosis, insecurity and danger of collapse: ‘The play between truth and fiction, reader and text, message and feint, has become impossible to unravel into an “unequivocal” meaning.’<sup>20</sup> This ‘play’ is part of what I want to trace through this linear study of the ten poems, one after another.

### The whole and the sum of its parts

The examination of the first Tibullan collection (in particular) as an inter-related sequence has a distinguished critical pedigree. This approach to Tibullus was first established by Ludolf Dissen in 1835.<sup>21</sup> It was Dissen who made the first sustained

<sup>17</sup> Iser (1978) 126.    <sup>18</sup> Iser (1978) 126.    <sup>19</sup> Felman (1982a) 194.

<sup>20</sup> Johnson (1982) 501.    <sup>21</sup> Dissen (1835).

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## THE WHOLE AND THE SUM OF ITS PARTS

attempt to construct meaning from the poems in the order in which they appear in the manuscripts. While at times this mission led to the smoothing out, or forced reconciliation, of disruptive or conflicting elements in the cause of creating a unified meaning for the poems<sup>22</sup> (just as Scaliger had sought to do by the physical re-positioning of various lines and passages, or in more recent years Walter Wimmel<sup>23</sup> by re-ordering and grouping the poems in their supposed chronological order), in its fundamental linear approach to the text, and to the construction of meaning from that text by means of such a sequential reading, Dissen's work is the prototype of this present study as it has been of much of the Tibullan criticism of the last one hundred and fifty years.

More recently, one of the strongest arguments for approaching the first Tibullan collection *in order*, as an entity of necessarily inter-related facets, has been made by Eleanor Leach.<sup>24</sup> Leach herself exploits and moves on from attempts to find symmetrical patterns in the arrangement of the poems (in particular the work of R. J. Littlewood)<sup>25</sup> to argue for the sequential development of the collection.<sup>26</sup> The first book of Elegies is seen as the developing statement of Tibullus' poetic credo. It follows that this 'thematic development'<sup>27</sup> necessitates a linear reading of the collection: 'the *ars poetica* of Tibullus' first book [is] a poetic statement in evolution inseparable from the order of the poems.'<sup>28</sup> Like the structural, symmetrical patterning strategies from which she draws the impetus for her own approach, Leach's concept of linear development draws a stable, complete meaning for the collection

<sup>22</sup> For example, see below, 68–9.

<sup>23</sup> For his first attempt at this approach to Tibullus see Wimmel (1968); a similar re-ordering is employed (explicitly or implicitly) in the approaches of other critics to various elements of the Tibullan text: see, for example, Schiebe's approach to the Tibullan poet's presentation of the 'ideal life', Schiebe (1981).

<sup>24</sup> See especially, Leach (1978) 79–105; (1980a) 79–86; and (1980b) 47–69.

<sup>25</sup> Littlewood (1970).

<sup>26</sup> Leach (1980a) 80.

<sup>27</sup> Leach (1980a) 81.

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from the inter-relation of its parts. The difference in Leach's case is that this stability of meaning comes only after the reader has made it to the last line of the final poem. Rather than simply a set pattern, the collection is thus seen as a thematic journey with shifts, moments of apparent self-contradiction and ambiguity, but a strong teleological sense. All is made clear in the end, at last. Here, for example, is Leach's summary of her linear reading of the collection:

The *ars poetica* of Tibullus' book thus involves the hypothetical creation of an ideal poet, a self-assured figure who has assessed the weaknesses of his predecessor and confidently assumed control over his own fate. The order of the poems presents a structure of experiences by which this control is challenged, fails, is reconstituted and is at last brought into accord with reality.<sup>29</sup>

The 'final resolution'<sup>30</sup> which this reading produces is seen as characteristic of the early Augustan poetic collection, and particularly the collection of ten poems. Both the *Eclogues* of Virgil and Horace's first book of *Satires* are described by Leach in similar terms. Of Horace, for instance, Leach claims: 'the general progress of his plot may be described as the emergence of the satirist Horace *in propria persona* from beneath the impersonal mask of the diatribe satirist worn in the initial poems.'<sup>31</sup> In the same way, in the case of the *Eclogues* Leach writes of the 'sense of progressive change in the book'.<sup>32</sup>

While I do not want to deny that each of these collections involves the construction of poetic identity and the questioning of the nature of poetry itself, and I fully accept Leach's emphasis on the necessity of reading the poems in order, her picture of a final safe harbour of meaning to be reached at the end of such a reading, like Miller's ultimate 'intelligibility' created by reading each poem in the light of each of the others,

<sup>29</sup> Leach (1980a) 91.

<sup>30</sup> Leach (1978) 98. See also Ross (1975) 162: 'Conflicts and tensions are finally resolved'.

<sup>31</sup> Leach (1980a) 81.

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## READING (TIBULLAN) ELEGY: THE LAST THIRTY YEARS

produces too stable and confident an analysis of the collection. As I hope I made clear above, this does not accurately reflect the process of reading Tibullus' first book as I see it. The sequential reading of the collection emphasises, rather, the difficulties of channelling the possibilities raised by the poems and the interaction between poems into a single, uni-directional master-meaning. The interplay and multiplication of meaning thus involves the reader, and especially the critic, of the Tibullan collection in a power struggle. Meaning can only be pinned down, finalised, fixed, at the cost of repressing the evasive, ambiguous, even self-contradictory aspects of the text: '[it is] an unfolding . . . of meanings which irreversible, linear consecution, moving from present point to present, could only tend to repress, and (to a certain extent) could only fail to repress.'<sup>33</sup> While my own reading cannot perhaps avoid involvement in this repression, this struggle, it is also, for the same reason, uniquely placed to trace it. The reading which *this* sequential study produces is one in which such confidence in a complete and recoverable meaning is specifically destabilised, rather than confirmed, by the ironies and complexities of a linear procession through each poem, one after another.

**Reading (Tibullan) Elegy: the last thirty years**

In recent years, relatively few developed critical models of reading Tibullan elegy, or indeed Augustan elegy in general, have been successfully propagated. One model, of which Francis Cairns is the leading constructor,<sup>34</sup> represents the poems as varied sets of literary conventions, traditional subjects and motifs, subtly handled and grouped by the poet<sup>35</sup> but, in the final analysis, Hellenistic, Alexandrian or, at any

<sup>33</sup> Derrida (1978) 217.

<sup>34</sup> The central work which presents this model is Cairns (1979). See also Bulloch (1973); Luck (1969) ch. 1; and Wimmel (1960).

<sup>35</sup> For example, 'Certainly Tibullus is consistently original in his combinations and modifications of the standard topoi which he inherited from the Hellenistic world,' Cairns (1979) 23.

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rate, traditional: and, hence, decodable in those supposedly understood terms. This is clear not only from the title of Cairns' major work on Tibullus, but in the first chapter of that work, where even the fact that 'not all the characteristics of Hellenistic poetry are alluded to in Tibullus 1.1'<sup>36</sup> provides legitimisation for this model: 'This makes the elegy all the more valuable as a literary manifesto in that it allows something of Tibullus' place within the great range of Hellenistic poetry to be understood.'<sup>37</sup>

There is of course a tension apparent in the aims of Cairns, and others who follow a similar model of reading, such as A.W. Bulloch. This consists primarily of the attempt to reconcile a reading practice which foregrounds the depiction of 'Hellenistic' elements in Latin elegy, and Tibullus in particular, with what seems to be for them another important critical task, the location of originality. This tension has been addressed by critics in various ways.<sup>38</sup> Bulloch's statement that 'the Roman elegists stood at the beginning of their own tradition, and it is understandable that they should have looked for so much guidance to Greek culture'<sup>39</sup> sums up the nature of the critical 'pull in both directions'. The depiction of Latin elegy as a development in some way from its Hellenistic models is the most common means of overcoming this perceived tension, often using Gallus, and his conveniently absent elegiac works, as a bridge. Cairns, for example, states: 'The very sophisticated and almost wholly subjective love-elegies of Tibullus Book One also imply that Tibullus is building on the work of a predecessor – Gallus – who had gone far beyond the Greek achievement.'<sup>40</sup> Expressions throughout *Tibullus: A Hellenistic Poet at Rome*, such as 'In the Roman elegists this principle is carried even further ...',<sup>41</sup> reinforce this model.

This need to assert the *Roman* elements of Roman Erotic Elegy, to pinpoint in some way the *originality* of the Roman

<sup>36</sup> Cairns (1979) 11. <sup>37</sup> Cairns (1979) 11.<sup>38</sup> For example see Day (1938); and Luck (1969). <sup>39</sup> Bulloch (1973) 83.<sup>40</sup> Cairns (1979) 227. <sup>41</sup> Cairns (1979) 24.