Title
Militia and Longae Viae Tibullus and Messalla Corvinus in the First Book of the Corpus Tibullianum (1st Cent. BCE)

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Routes, and roads, sea trips, military expeditions, long voyages, belong to a value system openly disapproved by the ‘antimilitarist’ elegiac poets of the Augustan era, Tibullus probably sounding like a prelude to ecological ideas of our times. As soon as the terror of Roman civil wars (first cent. BCE) is over, it is time for the development of an openly pacifistic poetry combined with a modus vivendi overtly disapproving war and also undermining politics and civil life in favour of private sphere. Augustan regime, once established, would have approved pacifism (at least within the Roman state) but would have been very sceptical about contempt for politics and traditional Roman values. Contradictions emerge when poets, like Propertius and Tibullus, have strong dependence bonds with representatives of the opposite pole, generals or magistrates clearly preferring political-military negotium to elegiac isolation in the private sphere of Epicurean otium (albeit contaminated by love).

Propertius will try to overpass this contradiction by partly satisfying Maecenas’s requests to compose a sort of ‘national’ poetry, although he took good care to cover national thematology under etiological themes or subtle irony: in his fourth book Propertius will ‘squeeze’ his elegy on Actium naval battle (4.6) among compositions only partly corresponding to Augustus’s and Maecenas’s Roman priorities: his aim will be to become a Roman Callimachus rather than an ‘alter Homerus’ (a second Homer) or a Vergil’s simile.

Maecenas has low personal ambitions regarding battles and expeditions, so he may be a good pretext for his protégé; Propertius avoids directly praising Octavian and military action by paying tribute to his peaceful friend (and poetry friend) Maecenas instead of Augustus, with the exception of the (dubious after all) el. 4.6 of course. But what Tibullus can do, being a cliens of a general, one personally responsible for the longae viae and the militia of which Tibullus himself suffers, as he complains at the beginning of el. 1.3? Equilibrium is easy to achieve.

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1 This paper, presented in Crises and Networks in the Mediterranean World II. History, Society, and Literature, Colloquium co-organized by the Mediterranean Studies Group (Hitotsubashi University Tokyo), the Ionian University, Department of History (Corfu, Greece), And the Region of the Ionian Islands, in the Ionian University, Department of History, March 28, 2016, is largely indebted to an older paper of mine: see Vaiopoulos (2014) 53-125.
lose, difficult to preserve. Yet, it is always worthy of trying.

In fact, in 1.1.53-54 Te bellare decet terra, Messalla, marique./ ut domus hostiles praeferat exuvias [it’s right for you to war by land and sea, Messalla, so that your house might display the enemy spoils].

Messalla is related to military activity on land and sea –terra marique, thus combining what is axiomatically despised by elegiac ambient, already from the beginning of the poem: voyages and war, longae viae and militia:

1.1.1-2 Divitias alius fulvo sibi congerat auro/ et teneat culti iugera multa soli [Let other men gather bright gold to themselves/ and own many acres of well-ploughed soil].

The poet’s disapproval is clear and definite. But an interesting detail is visible: at the beginning the military value system is connected with the unnamed profit-hunter, the alius of line 1.1.1; war and sea trips are overtly condemned when related to the anonymous soldier in the first part of the poem: war is a way to get wealth, it is the fruit of avarice. Yet, in the second part, the miles is identified with Tibullus’s friend and patron Messalla, and this development has brought a significant rephrase: war or no war has now become a matter of decorum; it suits some people, it suits not others.

The blame put on Messalla is considerably softened by the key-word dect: Tibullus’s personal denial of war and sea may be covered under a question of decorum. What suits Messalla does not necessarily suit the poet, so Tibullus’s disapproval becomes rather element mutatis mutandis. It is always easier to be critical towards an anonymous alius than towards your own patron.

Reference to Messalla has also resulted to a change regarding the purpose of wars: Messalla fights for glory, i.e. for a noble aim, in contrast to base profit, what the anonymous soldier used to fight about. Now that threaten from the East, the monstrum (as Horace calls Cleopatra in Od. 1.37), has been averted, (through military action of course, the bellum iustum of Octavian), war may be undermined without Rome being at risk. Unless it is about our patronus: then there might be an alternative, less humble, more respectable aspect of war, half-heartedly acceptable if not desirable. Sallust had done the same talking about ambitio and avaritia in Catilina 11.1-3, ambition being considered as a lighter vitium, more correctly as a vitium close to virtus, thus keeping Sallust’s protector, Julius Caesar well protected from criticism.

As for himself, in the first part of the composition, which lies at the opposite pole of epic/civil/Roman values, Tibullus has already proposed and possibly chosen an alternative version of Romanitas, based on the combination of pax and rura, a value system that Octavian

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2 I use Kline’s translations for all Tibullan passages.
4 Sall., Cat. 11.1-3.
5 Leach (1980) 63.
6 On Tibullus’s reluctance to adopt the way of life and the mores of urban society, see for instance
himself would not have disapproved\(^7\) (Vergil had already revealed his preference for this field in the *Georgics*):

1.1.7-10 *Ipse seram teneras mature tempore vites/ rusticus et facili grandia poma manu,/ nec spes destituat, sed frugum semper acervos/ praebet et pleno pinguia musta lacu* [Let me plant the tender vines at the proper time,/ tall fruit-trees, myself a rustic, with skilled hands:/ nor let hope fail, but deliver the piled-up fruits,/ and the rich vintage in overflowing vats];

1.1.49-50 *Hoc mihi contingat: sit dives iure, furorem/ qui maris et tristes ferre potest pluvias* [Let this be mine: let him be rich, of right,/ who can stand the raging sea and the mournful rain].

This is what ‘Tibullo decet’, what is right for Tibullus, even though he intends to add passionate and pathetic love to his value system, thus fatally destroying every hope for Epicurean *otium*:

1.1.45-46 *Quam iuvat immites ventos audire cubantem/ et dominam tenero continuisse sinu/ aut, gelidas hibernus aquas cum fuderit Auster,/ securum somnos imbre iuvante sequi!* [What joy to hear the raging winds as I lie there/ holding my girl to my tender breast,/ or when a wintry Southerly pours its icy showers,/ sleep soundly helped by an accompanying fire!].

So, if an alternative motivation for war is suggested by Messalla, an alternative way to *Romanitas* is also possible according to Tibullus: not only through war, but also through the love of peace and land, love itself not excluded.\(^8\)

Of course, it is clear from the beginning that Tibullus and Messalla live in conflicting worlds: Tibullus is static, peaceful, pathetic, *iners*, inactive, an enemy of wars and sea voyages,\(^9\) but not an enemy of Augustan *Romanitas*, because he remains a faithful admirer of Roman *pax* and Italian *rura*,\(^10\) the basic ingredients of the *pax romana* now starting; Messalla represents military activity on land and sea, but he is not disparaged overall, because in his case the noblest possible motive for war is proposed, *laus* (in the frame of Augustan *Romanitas*). A fair compromise is attempted. At the end of the day, Messalla is entitled to travel and make war, because it befits him as much as the happy Italian country befits Tibullus,\(^11\) the latter only entitled to make love instead of war.

A reconciliation of the poet with his patron (more correctly: the total submission of the poet/(*clien*)t to his patron/general) appears in the epitaph lying in the middle of el. 1.3, which clearly alludes to the *terra marique* of Messalla’s activities in 1.1.53 (lying in the middle of the first composition as well).

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\(^7\) Cf. Putnam (1973) 8-9.

\(^8\) On the contrary: amor is the main reason for the poet’s choice of paupertas, pax and rura, cf. Lee-Stecum (2000)182.

\(^9\) Apart from ideological statements, meta-poetic allusions are not at all absent; see Tzounakas (2006) 114-115.


1.3.53-54 “Hic iacet inmiti consumptus morte Tibullus,/ Messallam terra dum sequiturque mari” [“Here lies Tibullus wasted by inexorable death, while following Messalla by land and sea”].

Tibullus has done what he used to condemn, he has literally become a second Messalla: he accompanies Messalla on land and sea, “sequitur Messallam” terra marique as his client, the obsequium being a fundamental part of this relationship; finally Tibullus became a sea-voyager and soldier for Messalla’s sake and dreams of his death as a soldier: a real sacrifice, as he also had to leave Delia. Tibullus chooses to put emphasis on his righteous behaviour as a cliens towards his patron. Messalla is treated exactly with the generous neutrality of the second half of 1.1, but remains representative of the anti-elegiac universe in 1.3 too.

But a complaint is rather explicit: Tibullus presents himself sick and at risk of dying. The reader spontaneously explains this misfortune: this happened perhaps because Tibullus had acted against his personal decorum (as exposed in the programmatic 1.1): he participated in a military mission, he realized a long sea trip, he did what ‘decet Messallae’ and not ‘Tibullo’, so inevitably, and probably deservedly, risks of becoming a victim of Mors atra, as he calls Death in 1.3.5 abstineas, Mors atra, precor [… ] [I beg, black Death, I beg you keep away].

Tibullus does not omit to declare that his inclusion in this world of action, war and voyages was involuntary, so a grievance about the bad luck/resultant of the anti-elegiac aberration, of the violation of decorum for Messalla’s sake, which for Tibullus means joining forces in martial activity and taking up a longa via, is not concealed. Quite the contrary, no attempt is made to cover it up, however much discretion towards Messalla is tested to the limits.

But, death remains only a possibility; it is only a Tibullan speculation or fear, it is not a

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15 The two poles represented by Delia and Messalla are in the heart of the dilemma: Tibullus seemed a bit ambivalent in the beginning of the poem; then he seems to prefer Messalla, as Lawall (1975) 95 believes; but his ‘real’ preference is unfolded in the second part of the composition. See also Vaiopoulos (2008) 32-50.
16 It was about settling the disturbed affairs of the Orient, according to Octavian’s orders, a little bit after Actium (in the fall of 31 BC). See Smith (1913) 35, 232, cf. Cairns (1979) 44.
17 Cf. Bright (1978) 36 on the consequences of being involved in war and war.
18 A similar violation of principles is committed by Marathus’s prostitution for the sake of gifts, something like a sacrilege; see Dettmer (1980) 73, also Gagliardi (1992) 82.
19 The epitaph probably contains Tibullus’s ironic auto-sarcasm; the poet did not finally hesitate to follow Messalla terra marique; he let himself be polluted by the aetas ferrea, although he had rejected it in el. 1.1, echoed in the epitaph. See Lawall (1975) 95.
Diseases are often useful as a pretext for diplomacy, but also in poetry, as we see. The poet’s sickness saves the elegiac pretences, and forces the generically obligatory elegiac inertia to become “real”: Tibullus is immobilized in Corcyra/Corfu, as befits any static elegiac persona. The poet does not practically complete his error, this violation of his personal and literary decorum; his illness saves him from committing the crime to the end: he never goes to the East, he never takes part in a battle; he interrupts his involvement with civil affairs and sea by necessity. That the necessity may be his own literary invention seems an insignificant detail; on the contrary it is rather a crucial detail, because his literal immobility in Corfu confirms his generic immobility in peaceful/static elegy.

Sickness normally demands return to passivity and immobility, but this trick cannot completely cover the bizarre for an elegiac poet literary reality created. Tibullus has, though partially, in fact violated some basic elegiac principles: immobility, inertia, prohibition of sea-trips, and military expedition. As a literary character of his own poetry, he has temporarily stopped being an iners Tibullus, a pax, rura and Delia lover, and has for the circumstances become a little Messalla, or a Messallae comes, going to a military port (lying not far from Actium after all, the symbol of the new era and of the triumph of civil priorities) instead of a Deliae comes amoris, as had been depicted in the programmatic el. 1.1.

Tibullus, of course, has become a Messalla (or rather a comes Messallae) only because he started the trip. He came into contact with the soldier’s world, Messalla’s world, only as much as was needed for him to have a small but, because of illness, bitter foretaste of its consequent adversities, for which reason his losses remain limited in the end, not having to face all wounds of the Iron Age. Since he shortened considerably (by more than half) the (initially) longa via [long journey] by remaining in the Adriatic, (in the end he did not follow Messalla in the East either in the real or in the poetic world), he faces only weakness and sickness, many miles away from his patron. He is not dead, he has not participated in a battle after all. So, he has the literary possibility and the moral right to poetically lament his miserable state. His temporary transformation into a failed soldier and voyager then rather facilitates his poetic creativity offering the necessary pre-literary material for his elegy; moreover the way our poet chooses to present his failure further serves his poetic intentions lying in the genre of elegiac lament.

In this way Tibullus has demonstrated his willingness to pay tribute to his patron and at the same time his inability to complete any mission incompatible with his own nature. He wanted to participate because of his loyalty to his patron/general, but obviously couldn’t. He is always sea-sick: in real life as in poetry. His sea-sickness that used to be a matter of generic

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23 Bright (1971) 201.
obsession, as happens in elegiac poetry generally, became his personal ‘reality’. He is lying sick in Corfu after a sea trip. His duty towards Messalla has remained unaccomplished; his civil activity, his involvement in epic action, military mission and sea voyage is incomplete.

This is not a surprise within the ‘territory’ of elegiac poetry, the image of the elegiac meter being a representation of the inability to accomplish epic action: the epic exameter is always succeed by a pentameter, that is of an unaccomplished epic exameter, one dactylic foot missing. Tibullus epic identity can never be completed, exactly as epic continuity is interrupted by the missing foot in the pentameter. Thus, it is Tibullus’s elegiac/pacifistic identity that is finally preserved, although injured by his initial departure from Rome: illness has been a righteous punishment and a warning at the same time.

Besides, Tibullus reminds us that the identity of the soldier does not mean conformity with public ideals in general; it is a submission to the needs of his relationship with Messalla, as a friend or as a patron. So, the poet might gently imply that being a member of Messalla’s cohors has not been a matter of choice but an act of unavoidable necessity, as was the usual practice in clientage. The compulsory character of his participation in the campaign confirms that his principles remain in the private sphere, that he may be paying his dues to the sphere of traditional values and duties, but he does it half-heartedly, feeling almost sorry for that, and, of course mostly paying his duty to a friend.

Moreover the epitaph, in case he dies, would be the result of his faith to a friend, to a beloved person. In the funerary epigram, Messalla is mentioned with the same warmth and devotion as an erotic poet would speak of the puella for whose sake he found death. The obsequium, a subject that had just been unfolded in 1.2, after the en germe programmatic appearance of it in 1.1, is now adapted to Messalla and comes to replace the obsequium to the elegiac mistress. Tibullus covers his own involvement in an expedition under the ideal of friendship, which belongs to the private life and at the same time is a traditional Roman value, and also declares that he didn’t accomplish his ideological and generic crime; and, finally, that the most probable consequences for this partial violation of his value system would be death.

It is obvious to me that, even during his nearly military adventure Tibullus is mindful to keep in touch with private sphere. He does not want to be memorised for his contribution to community, as would be the ideal of an epic hero who would have chosen a heroic death. He projects his consumption for the sake of a friend/patron, the devotion to whom resembles the devotion programmatically attributed to the elegiac puella. He practically substituted the obsequium to Delia with the obsequium to his friend and patron Messalla. A comes amoris has temporarily become comes at an overseas journey and a military expedition, creating a considerable surprise for the Tibullan audience. With one stone two birds? Messalla and

24 Catull. 64.1-7, Prop. 1.17.13-14, 3.7.21 ff., Ov., Her. 12.7, Am. 2.11.1-6.
25 Campbell (1973) 154.
26 Sabbattini (1976) 367.
Tibullan audience, Tibullus himself satisfied at the same time? I am not quite sure.

References