

TIBULLUS 2.6

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To Kenneth Quinn on his retirement

In a well constructed text, our progress along the line of sense creates an illusion of inevitability: there is a beginning and an end and some kind of connection between them. (*How literature works* [Canberra 1982] 39)

BOOKS 1 AND 2 OF TIBULLUS are followed in the manuscripts by a third, which consists of 20 poems. Modern scholars agree that Tibullus did not write poems 1–7 or 13–18 but still argue about 8–12 and 19–20. In any event, the work of a different poet immediately follows books 1 and 2. Strange, therefore, that no-one has asked whether the last poem of book 2 is complete. Certainly, once books 1–3 were circulating in one volume, damage to the end of 2.6 would hardly have left the opening of 3.1 intact; but if someone else wrote 3.1, the intactness of its opening proves nothing about the end of 2.6. Furthermore, Tibullus died soon after Virgil's death on September 21st 19 B.C.,¹ and 2.5 at least, which commemorates Messallinus' admission to the *quindecimviri*, cannot be much earlier;² so that it would not be surprising if he had failed to complete and publish book 2. That he did indeed fail has been inferred from the shortness of the book: 428 lines, against 812 in book 1 and similar totals in books published by other poets of the Augustan period.³ Yet what has been contemplated for the whole book has never, it seems, been contemplated for its last poem.⁴

2.6 has 54 lines. It has been observed that unlike the elegies of book 1, which all stay close to the average length of 80 lines, those of book 2 alternate: 90, 22, 80, 60, 122, 54.⁵ Though this observation shows that

¹Domitius Marsus fr. 7 Büchner (from manuscripts of Tibullus; attributed only in the *fragmentum Cuiacianum*); Donatus *Vita Vergilii* 35.

²R. Syme, *History in Ovid* (Oxford 1978) 118, puts it in 21 or 20 B.C., other scholars even later.

³L. Dissen, ed. (Göttingen 1835) 1.xxxi; E. Hiller, "Die tibullische Elegiensammlung," *Hermes* 18 (1883) 343–361, at 352–353. Other collections of elegies range from the 678 lines of *Tristia* 4 to the 990 of Propertius 3, though the 1362 lines of Propertius 2 raise the higher figure if it is one book and may lower the lower if it is two and has suffered no losses in transmission; *Tristia* 2, a single poem, has 578 lines, *Odes* 2 572, and *Georgics* 1 514. Cf. M. Pulbrook, *Hermathena* 122 (1977) 30–33. Hiller entertained the idea of losses from Tibullus 2 (353, n. 1), but nothing worse seems to have gone wrong in 2.1–5 than in book 1.

⁴Rather than list all the works from 1475 to 1982 that I have consulted, let me simply invite contradiction.

⁵W. Port, *Philologus* 81 (1926) 445.

2.6 could have stopped at 54 lines, it does not show that it could not have gone on, say, to 66, 72, or even 80; and if book 2 was going to have 10 elegies like book 1, the sixth, being the first in the latter half, could have inaugurated a new structural scheme anyway. Furthermore, even if 2.6 appeared to be a complete poem, it would be incautious to treat it as one. No-one would miss, for instance, 1.3.57–94 or 1.9.53–84. At the beginning of 1.3 Tibullus is lying sick in Corcyra while Messalla goes on his way over the Aegean; in lines 55–56, after convincing himself that he is at death's door and blaming himself for ever leaving Delia, he writes himself an epitaph, "here lies Tibullus, wasted by a cruel death as he followed Messalla over land and sea." If the poem ended here in the manuscripts, no-one would complain; but it goes on, with new material, for another 38 lines. Similarly, 1.9 opens with a protest against the infidelity of a boy friend who has sold his favours to someone else; after explaining at length why he did not deserve such treatment, Tibullus says in lines 51–52 "away with you, if all you can be bothered to do is sell your beauty and come home with your hands full." He could have stopped there; but instead he turns to the third party and delightfully endows him with a wife who sleeps around, a sister who drinks like a fish, and gout, before threatening the boy friend himself with a rival, *puer alter*. All this occupies another 32 lines. Even if 2.6 appeared to be complete, therefore, with only 54 lines it might well not be.

In fact it does not even appear to be complete. What it lacks above all is a decision on the dilemma of lines 7–12, whether to go soldiering like Macer or to persevere in unrequited passion for Nemesis. Tibullus need not have gone right back to Macer and produced another specimen of ring composition like 1.1, 1.7, 1.10, 2.3, or 2.5; plainly he might have done, but Macer is going off on campaign anyway,⁶ and lines 1–6 do not leave anything unresolved. Lines 7–12 do; or if the dilemma is to be thought of as resolved by Tibullus' own feet, which ignore his frequent disavowals and return whether he likes it or not to Nemesis' threshold (13–14), then another form of the same dilemma arises in 27, namely whether or not he is to go on hoping. Certainly he wants to: he tries an indirect appeal (29–40), retreats to a softer approach (41–44), and blames his difficulties on a *lena* (44–54). None of this, however, reveals what he himself is going to do or what attitude he is going to adopt.

Does it not suffice, someone may say, that in the last couplet he curses the *lena*?

*tunc tibi, lena, precor diras. satis anxia vivas
moverit e votis pars quotacumque deos.*

⁶E. N. O'Neil, "Tibullus 2.6: A New Interpretation," *CP* 62 (1967) 163–168, at 165–167, suggests that Macer has deserted elegy for epic rather than love or elegy for military service; but not even satirists represent epic poets as lugging equipment, marching long distances, following the regimental flag, and carrying water in a tin hat.

He does not curse the *lena* here. A hasty reading of *satis anxia vivas* may suggest that he does, but a wish would make nonsense of the pentameter,⁷ and in the rest of the couplet, *tunc tibi, lena, precor diras*, he is describing what he often does: lines 47 and 49 begin with *saepe*, and both *tunc* in 51 and *tunc* in 53 refer to *saepe*.⁸ It is hard to believe that Tibullus meant to end the poem with an account of how a *lena* often treats him and he her. At the very least one expects a reaction here and now to the difficulty caused by the *lena*.⁹

A point of style contributes to the expectation that the poem will continue. In 1.5 too *saepe* is repeated and picked up by *tunc*, but in the middle of the poem (lines 37–42 out of 76). 1.6 also includes a repeated *saepe* in an autobiographical passage, this time even earlier in the poem (lines 25–28 out of 86). No poem but 2.6 ends with consecutive couplets that begin with the same word, even though there are over 40 such repetitions in the 16 poems of books 1–2. Tibullus comes closest to such an ending in 1.6:

*at quae fida fuit nulli, post victa senecta
ducit inops tremula stamina torta manu
firmaque conductis adnectit licia telis
tractaque de niveo vellere ducta putat.
hanc animo gaudente vident iuvenumque catervae
commemorant merito tot mala ferre senem;
hanc Venus ex alto flentem sublimis Olympo
spectat et infidis quam sit acerba monet.
haec aliis maledicta cadant: nos, Delia, amoris
exemplum cana simul uterque coma.*

The last couplet, however, makes all the difference. Without it the poem would tail off.

Tibullus' endings are neither multifarious nor elusive.¹⁰ 11 of the 16 poems in books 1–2 end either with a prayer or with an echo of the

⁷Valckenaer proposed *vives* for *vivas*, and many have followed him. He was surely right, because a future perfect in the subordinate clause calls for a future rather than a potential subjunctive in the main clause (cf. 1.6.53), and the subjunctive could easily have been introduced by someone who expected the *dirae* to be specified.

⁸As Disen says (2.300) "*huic . . . se diras imprecari solere dicit maximas.*"

⁹I might agree with M. C. J. Putnam's note on 51–52 in his commentary (Norman, Oklahoma, 1973) if I knew what it meant: "the harping on death in this poem is out of the ordinary, even for elegy, and the abruptness of the ending cannot be denied." I do not know what he means by "the ending" or why he passes this comment on 51–52 rather than 53–54. The ending is abrupt in my view not because of anything that happens in 51–54 but because nothing happens afterwards. When Guy Lee, *Tibullus Elegies*² (Liverpool 1982) 21, says "the poet signs off suddenly," he seems to mean that the cycle of poems addressed to Nemesis ends suddenly, not 2.6.

¹⁰See Disen's remarks on page lxix of his general introduction, in his introduction to each poem, and at relevant points in his commentary. To my mind, however, his assertion

opening.¹¹ 2.1 ends with the natural close of night, sleep, and dreams;¹² 1.9 with a dedicatory inscription that consigns the affair to the past;¹³ and 1.5 with a kind of coda¹⁴ that has its own ring composition (69–76). There remain 1.8 and 2.6. 2.6 may seem to resemble 1.8 in ending with a threat of divine retribution:

*et te poena manet ni desinis esse superba.
quam cupies votis hunc revocare diem!* 1.8.77–78

This poem, however, consists of several different arguments that all support one piece of advice, “you must surrender to Marathus,” and the threat of retribution punctuates it like a refrain (7–8, 28, 69–70, 77–78). The final threat is made more conclusive by its exclamatory form and the sudden deadline *hunc diem*.¹⁵ If the single threat of 2.6.53–54 achieves a strong enough closure, it achieves it by breaking out of the narrative begun in line 44,¹⁶ by suggesting the common close “ever after,”¹⁷ and by the hyperbole *pars quotacumque*;¹⁸ but it will close only lines 44–54, not the whole poem, unless 44–54 themselves provide a suitable close for the poem.

That lines 44–54 do not provide a suitable close has been maintained above on two grounds: the train of thought reaches no destination, and a stylistic

that in every poem “*exitus quietem affert et sedatiorem animi statum*” is too sweeping and concentrates too narrowly on the poet’s emotion. More helpful in many ways, albeit not concerned with classical poets, is Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End* (Chicago 1968). Like other poets she discusses, Tibullus often uses more than one closing device. What D. Esser says about Horace in his *Untersuchungen zu den Odenschlüssen bei Horaz* (Meisenheim am Glan 1976) seldom applies to Tibullus; his brief survey of other poets touches only on 1.7 and 2.1 (pages 144–145), and even there resemblances to Horace are not the first thing that meets the eye. On the ends of Lucretius’ six books see G. Jachmann, “Lucrez im Urteil des Cicero,” *Athenaeum* 45 (1967) 95–114 = *Ausgewählte Schriften*, ed. Chr. Gnllka (Meisenheim 1981) 158–177.

¹¹Not any prayer, of course, can end any poem, but if I were to explain why particular prayers end particular poems of Tibullus, I should come dangerously close to writing a book.

¹²Cf. Smith (above, n. 10) 172–182. The *Eclogues* furnish several examples of natural closure.

¹³Cf. Prop. 2.1.78, 4.3.72; Ovid *Am.* 1.11.27–28, 2.6.61–62, 2.10.38.

¹⁴Cf. Smith (above, n. 10) 186–195. In lines 1–66 we hear an argument between Tibullus and Delia, which he abandons in 67–68 in favour of hammering on the door. He could wait to find out whether that works and perhaps even try something else if it does not, like throwing stones at the window; but instead he turns sententiously on his successful rival.

¹⁵Cf. Smith (above, n. 10) 288, “terminal modification.”

¹⁶“Terminal modification” again (above, n. 15).

¹⁷Cf. Prop. 2.6.41–42, 2.32.61–62, 2.34b.93–94, 3.2.25–26, 3.9.59–60; Ovid *Am.* 1.3.25–26, 1.15.41–42, 3.15.19–20. Valckenaer’s *vives* (above, n. 7) would carry the suggestion more easily than *vivas*.

¹⁸Cf. Smith (above, n. 10) 182–186. 2.4 ends not only with a willing reaffirmation of the *servitium* unwillingly affirmed at the outset but also with a hyperbole increased by the

feature of lines 47–54 suits the middle of a poem. A third and final argument: surely the *lena* is not an important or respectable enough character to end the poem. In 1.5 Tibullus heaps four couplets of colourful curses on another *lena*, but not at the end of the poem (lines 49–56 out of 76). The priestess of 1.6.43–56, the witch of 1.2.43–56, the witch of 1.8.17–23, these characters all come and go in the course of their poem, to say nothing of miscellaneous husbands, mothers, wives, and sisters. The nearest thing to a minor character at the end of a poem is the rival of 1.5, addressed in the coda; but he is presumably no lower in station than Tibullus himself, Tibullus warns him here and now, we heard about him in line 17–18, and he is the immediate cause of the *discidium* mentioned in line 1.

The *Life* of Persius avers that he left the collection unfinished and *versus aliqui dempti sunt ultimo libro ut quasi finitus esset*. Perhaps a friend did the same for Tibullus; or perhaps he had only reached 2.6.54 when Death sent him to the Elysian Fields.¹⁹

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accumulation of subordinate clauses; the single word *bibam* splendidly completes the sentence (on resolution of syntactical suspension as a closing device see *id.* 77–78). The hyperbole *pars quotacumque* is much less striking.

¹⁹I inflicted the gist of this paper on pupils in Toronto and on audiences elsewhere. To them all, and to the referees, go my thanks for their suggestions, even those that I have been too obstinate to accept.