

## **The Tibullus Conversation**

Tom Bishop and Steve Willett

Albus Tibullus was a Roman poet probably born around 55 BCE and who died in 19 BCE at the age of around thirty-six. He wrote poems in elegiac couplets, like his younger contemporaries Propertius and Ovid, most of them on the subject of his various lovers, male and female. Two books survive, a total of only sixteen poems (more were attributed to him, but none of these are now generally accepted as his). Comparatively little is known about his life. He seems to have been from a wealthy Roman family of “equestrian” rank that suffered from the land confiscations of Mark Antony and Octavian during the civil wars following the collapse of the Roman Republic. He served in the Roman army under his friend and patron, Messalla, probably around the age of twenty-five, but withdrew from military life, which he seems to have strongly disliked, and retired to his family estate. His early death shocked his contemporaries. After his death his poetry continued to be read and praised by poets and critics, but it has not often been translated into English. The poem discussed here is the opening poem of his surviving collection, in which he speaks of the reduction of his family estate and sets himself to embrace simple, traditional activities and pleasures, setting aside in particular the call to advancement through military glory.

I.

DIVITIAS alius fuluo sibi congerat auro  
et teneat culti iugera multa soli,  
quem labor adsiduus uicino terreat hoste,  
Martia cui somnos classica pulsa fugent:  
me mea paupertas uita traducat inerti,  
dum meus adsiduo luceat igne focus.  
ipse seram teneras maturo tempore uites  
rusticus et facili grandia poma manu:  
nec Spes destituat sed frugum semper aceruos  
praebeat et pleno pinguia musta lacu.  
nam ueneror, seu stipes habet desertus in agris  
seu uetus in triuio florida sertis lapis:  
et quodcumque mihi pomum nouus educat annus,  
libatum agricolae ponitur ante deo.  
flaua Ceres, tibi sit nostro de rure corona  
spicea, quae templi pendeat ante fores;  
pomosisque ruber custos ponatur in hortis  
terreat ut saeua falce Priapus aues.  
uos quoque, felicitis quondam, nunc pauperis agri  
custodes, fertis munera uestra, Lares.  
tunc uitula innumeros lustrabat caesa iuuenos:  
nunc agna exigui est hostia parua soli.  
agna cadet uobis, quam circum rustica pubes  
clamet `io messes et bona uina date.'  
iam mihi, iam possim contentus uiuere paruo  
nec semper longae deditus esse uiae,  
sed Canis aestiuos ortus uitare sub umbra  
arboris ad riuos praetereuntis aquae.  
nec tamen interdum pudeat tenuisse bidentem  
aut stimulo tardos increpuisse boues;  
non agnamue sinu pigeat fetumue capellae  
desertum oblita matre referre domum.  
at uos exiguo pecori, furesque lupique,  
parcite: de magno praeda petenda grege.  
hinc ego pastoremque meum lustrare quot annis  
et placidam soleo spargere lacte Palem.  
adsitis, diui, neu uos e paupere mensa  
dona nec e puris spernite fictilibus.---  
fictilia antiquus primum sibi fecit agrestis  
pocula, de facili composuitque luto.---  
non ego diuitias patrum fructusque requiro,

quos tulit antiquo condita messis auo:  
parua seges satis est; satis est, requiescere lecto  
si licet et solito membra leuare toro.  
quam iuuat immites uentos audire cubantem  
et dominam tenero continuisse sinu  
aut, gelidas hibernus aquas cum fuderit Auster,  
securum somnos imbre iuuante sequi !  
hoc mihi contingat: sit diues iure, furorem  
qui maris et tristes ferre potest pluuias.  
o quantum est auri pereat potiusque smaragdi,  
quam fleat ob nostras ulla puella uias.  
te bellare decet terra, Messalla, marique,  
ut domus hostiles praeferat exuuias:  
me retinent uinctum formosae uincla puellae,  
et sedeo duras ianitor ante fores.  
non ego laudari curo, mea Delia: tecum  
dum modo sim, quaeso segnis inersque uocer.  
te spectem, suprema mihi cum uenerit hora,  
et teneam moriens deficiente manu.  
flebis et arsuero positum me, Delia, lecto,  
tristibus et lacrimis oscula mixta dabis.  
flebis: non tua sunt duro praecordia ferro  
uincta, nec in tenero stat tibi corde silex.  
illo non iuuenis poterit de funere quisquam  
lumina, non uirgo sicca referre domum.  
tu manes ne laede meos, sed parce solutis  
crinibus et teneris, Delia, parce genis.  
interea, dum fata sinunt, iungamus amores:  
iam ueniet tenebris Mors adoperta caput;  
iam subrepet iners aetas, nec amare decebit,  
dicere nec cano blanditias capite.  
nunc leuis est tractanda uenus, dum frangere postes  
non pudet et rixas inseruisse iuuat  
hic ego dux milesque bonus: uos, signa tubaeque,  
ite procul, cupidis uulnera ferte uiris,  
ferte et opes: ego composito securus aceruo  
dites despiciam despiciamque famem.

Tibullus I.i  
Translation by Steve Willett

Let some other heap up his riches in yellow gold  
and hold vast acres of cultivated land,  
let constant fighting terrify him as enemies draw near,  
the trumpets routing his sleep with battle calls:  
but may my modest poverty lead me through a quiet life  
so long as my hearth glows with a constant fire.  
I myself would plant the tender vines in their due season  
and, with a peasant's ready hand, tall fruit trees,  
and Hope would never fail me, but always pour out heaps  
of grain and oily must to fill the wine vat:  
for I worship garlands on the solitary stump in the field  
or on an ancient stone amid the crossroads,  
and from whatever fruit the new season ripens for me  
an offering's laid before the farming god.  
Golden Ceres, for you my farm presents a spiky wreath  
of wheat to hang before your temple doors,  
and in my fruit gardens the red guardian, Priapus, is set  
to terrify the birds with his cruel sickle.  
You too, my Lares, the guardians of a property  
once happy, now poor, accept your gifts;  
then a slain heifer purified innumerable bullocks,  
now a lamb is sacrifice from meager lands:  
a lamb shall fall for you, and round it the country youth  
will cry, "Hurrah, give us crops and good wine!"  
If only now, now at last, I can live content with little  
and never be consigned to endless marches,  
but escape the rising Dog-star beneath the shadow  
of a tree beside a brook of sliding water.  
I'd not be ashamed to take a hoe in hand sometimes  
or snap the tardy oxen with a goad;  
nor would I mind to carry home a lamb or baby goat  
deserted by its own forgetful mother.  
But spare my paltry little flock, you thieves and wolves:  
you'll have to snatch your spoil from greater herds.  
For here I'm always sure to purify my shepherd every year  
and sprinkle milk upon our kindly Pales.  
Stand by me, gods, and do not scorn the gifts that come  
from humble table or clean earthenware:  
earthenware the ancient countryman first made himself,  
drinking cups he molded from the pliant clay.

I myself do not miss those ancestral riches and revenues  
that garnered harvests brought my antique sire:  
a little crop is quite enough, enough if I may sleep in a bed  
and rest my limbs on their familiar couch.  
How delightful, lying abed, to hear the boisterous wind  
and fold my mistress in my tender arms  
or, when the wintry South Wind scatters freezing sleet,  
to pursue sleep in safety with a helping fire.  
This be my fortune: let him be justly rich who can bear  
the fury of the *sefa* and desolate rains.  
O sooner let the world's gold and emeralds perish  
than any girl bewail my long campaigns.  
It suits you, Messalla, to wage war by land and sea  
so that your house may boast the enemy spoils.  
But the chains of a beautiful girl hold me captive,  
and I sit, a janitor, before her cruel doors.  
I do not thirst for glory, my Delia; so long as I'm  
with you, I seek renown as sluggish and inert.  
May I look on you, when my final hour has come,  
and hold you with my faltering hand as I die.  
You will weep for me, Delia, laid on the bed of burning,  
and give me kisses mixed with bitter tears.  
You will weep: your breast is not encased in callous  
iron, no flint sits in your tender heart.  
From that funeral procession no youth will ever  
carry, nor any maiden, dry-eyes home.  
Do not wound my spirit, but spare your unbound  
tresses and spare, Delia, your tender cheeks.  
Meanwhile, so long as the Fates permit, let's join in love:  
soon Death will come with shadow-shrouding head;  
soon sluggish age will creep upon us, unfit to love,  
to whisper blandishments with grizzled hair.  
Now Venus' levity is our duty, when it's no shame  
to shatter doors and a joy to intrude brawls.  
Here I'm a brave leader and soldier: you, eagles and trumpets,  
vanish away, bear wounds to ravenous men,  
and bear them wealth: I, secure upon my heaped-up store,  
look down on hunger and look down on fame.

Tibullus  
Book One

Translation by Tom Bishop

I.

Let someone else enrich himself  
amassing military pelf  
in golden yellow piles,  
or planted miles.

His penalty is constant sweat,  
the helmet and the bayonet,  
the bugle's fearful warning,  
midnight for morning.

For me, I trust my little means  
will lend a life of idle scenes,  
while home fires make my path  
and constant hearth.

Myself will plant the tender vines  
when ripened season offers signs,  
and apple stems demand  
a country hand.

Nor will Hope refuse my suit,  
but furnish heaps of timely fruit  
with wine-must rich and fat  
to fill the vat.

For I revere the ancient stock  
still standing in the field, the rock  
beside the road once set  
and flowered yet;

and what the growing year may grant  
in fruit or nut from tree and plant  
I offer from my gains  
to the god of grains.

Golden Ceres, this entwined

wheaten garland I will bind  
(my land yields plenty more)  
on temple door,

and Priapus, the crimson guard  
in apple-groves, won't find it hard  
to frighten crow and rook  
with his rude hook;

so you as well, the gods that wait  
on this once wide, now shrunk estate,  
accept the gifts I bring  
in offering:

though once a slaughtered calf preferred  
would purify the teeming herd,  
now one poor lamb is all  
this farm can call.

A lamb in sacrifice shall die,  
and round her, local lads and I  
shall shout, "Oh gods of mine,  
send grain and wine."

But meanwhile, I am quite content  
to live on little, no more sent  
forever down the long  
road soldiers throng,

and I'll avoid, in shady nooks  
of trees by banks of flowing brooks,  
the summer's rising heat,  
the Dog-star's threat.

I shall not feel ashamed at times  
to hoe the earth beneath the vines,  
or use the stick to goad  
bullocks on the road;

nor will I scorn to take in arms  
and carry home secure from harms  
abandoned kid, or lamb  
left by its dam.

Wolves and thieves alike, I pray,  
exempt my paltry herd from prey:  
go plunder surplus stock  
from some fat flock.

Here every year I consecrate  
my single shepherd, and placate  
Pales, the shepherd's god,  
with milk on the sod.

Be near me, gods, and don't despise  
such gifts as poverty may prize  
from table's homely fare  
or earthenware.

Ware such as this in former time  
the rustic artisan would prime,  
and shape the ancient way  
a bowl of clay.

I do not seek the riches or  
prosperity my fathers saw,  
when former fields were reaped  
and harvests heaped.

A little land's enough for me;  
enough, to slumber peacefully  
and press a simple bed  
with my tired head.

How much delight to hear the rough  
flaws and gusts that seek to bluff  
my love and me reclined,  
our arms entwined,

or, when the winter wind shall blow  
freezing skies and bitter snow,  
a fire will soothe us best  
in careless rest.

This is the way I'll live; whoever  
can brave the barren winter weather,  
the sea's furious blight,  
gains wealth by right.

But rather than my girl should weep  
when far from home such travels keep  
me from her, leave to fools  
all gold and jewels.

For you, Messalla, it makes sense  
to war and reap such recompense  
from land and sea; returned,  
flaunt what you've earned.

But I am caught in amorous chains  
by which my lovely girl constrains  
her slave to sit and wait  
before her gate.  
I have no need for warriors' praise:  
if I may only spend my days  
with Delia, let them brand  
me weak, unmanned.

And let me see you when at last  
my final hour is ebbing fast:  
I'll stare as close you stand,  
and grasp your hand.

Then, Delia, weep for me as I  
upon my firebound bier shall lie,  
and mix each tear with this  
dejected kiss.

Then weep for me: your love's not penned  
in frigid steel, and in your tender  
heart abides no hint  
of rigid flint.

No single youth or maiden shall  
carry from that funeral,  
no matter how they try,  
an unwashed eye.

Only beware you don't distress  
my spirit, Delia, by excess  
of grief, tearing your hair  
or cheek so fair.

Til then, since fate allows us time,  
let's link ourselves in love and rhyme:  
for soon through darkness led  
comes Death's veiled head.

Too soon lame Age creeps up, and then  
Love's improper for old men;  
seductive words are rare  
from graying hair.

So now's the time to exercise  
capricious love and not despise  
smashing doors to stage  
a quarrel's rage.

Now, general and soldier, I  
command you, flags and trumpets: Fly,  
fly far, deal wounds to men  
who strive to win.

Deal riches too; and I, meanwhile,  
secure atop my modest pile,  
will scorn both monied might  
and hunger's bite.

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## A conversation about translating Tibullus

Between Tom Bishop and Steve Willett.

TOM:

Dear Steve,

A happy serendipity the other day to discover through a Listserv on a completely different topic that you and I had both translated Tibullus. Having looked at each other's versions of the first poem in his surviving work (1.1), it seemed an interesting exercise to discuss our quite different approaches to translating it. We've both done translating work from Latin before, mine on Ovid's *Amores* and yours on Horace as well as Tibullus. The progression from the Ovid to Tibullus in my case is logical enough, since they both wrote love elegy about the same time (Tibullus was slightly older, and Ovid refers to him in the *Amores*). But what interested you about his work, apart from the fact that it's not well known outside classicist circles?

STEVE:

Several years ago I was reading Ovid in McKeown's monumental and monumentally expensive edition. I found it less and less satisfying. Most of the *Amores* struck me as dramatic fantasies, the product of a lively imagination and very little amour given Ovid's marital history. Peter Green's take seems about right. I also found the language rather too clever, self-aggrandising and calculating in emotional effect. When I taught *Amores* 1.5 [sex on a hot summer afternoon] to my Latin Seminar in Japan, the students actually found it rather violent at the start and boring at the end, which is certainly not how American students find it. Erotic culture in Japan is far more governed by codes of social behavior and oblique expression of emotion. The very idea of tearing the clothes off one's lover, let alone a Geisha, would be abhorrent. Looking at Ovid through Japanese eyes did not enhance him to me. I turned for a break to Propertius, which I began translating just for fun, and that seemed to lead naturally to Tibullus. He is the master of restrained understatement, imbuing his elegies with the sort of complex simplicity that is about as hard to describe as Mozart's music. Ovid sometimes strikes me like Beethoven in one of his unbuttoned moods, all verbal fireworks and sharp contrasts. Tibullus' elegies have the kind of fluid, organic, seamless structure that Ovid rarely achieves. These characteristics endeared him to the Romans, certainly to Quintilian, but they will probably prevent him from ever developing a wide audience—at least in Latin. American students heartily dislike reading him because he is so much more difficult to construe than Ovid. I personally put Propertius just behind Tibullus, whose early death was one of the great losses for Augustan poetry.

TOM:

I suspect we might differ on the value of Ovid's *Amores*, since I'm happy to be swayed by a well-executed dramatic fantasy if its imagination is really lively enough,

and Ovid's is certainly that. I always felt Ovid was Augustan Rome's Oscar Wilde, both of them lampooning with relentlessly ironic self-performances the sincere imperial hypocrisy all around them. And suffering a similar fate for their trouble. But that's another story. As is Japanese response to Latin erotic poetry—a fascinating topic in itself. But what you say about Tibullus raises an issue I thought we could take up. Quintillian did rate him highly—though he said others preferred Propertius (and Ovid was naughtier and Gallus sterner)—but the terms he used, *tersus atque elegans* (which I guess one would make as “refined and tasteful” or perhaps “polished and discerning”), throw down a real challenge to translators. It's bad enough describing Mozart's music, but trying to orchestrate it for another ensemble—a gamelan orchestra perhaps?—sounds like a thankless, if not foolhardy, task (Ovid seems to me more like Ravel than Beethoven, as long as we're making music together). How does one make a poetry committed to restrained understatement and complex simplicity over into another language—especially when, as I think is almost certain—many echoes and allusions that once gave the understatements their own kind of undersong have now gone so *far* under that they're beyond our recall? At what point does understatement become inaudible? How about we take the question of what metre to use, since I know you've thought a lot about this?

STEVE:

Even with the best commentaries, and that means Maltby and Murgatroyd for Tibullus, we inevitably miss some undertones that were clear to a contemporary Augustan audience. The passage of time dissolves references, not only in poetry, but in the mass media, notably situation comedy. In less than a century, the poetry of Yeats, Pound, Stevens and Eliot already presents serious referential problems for university students. I am, however, more optimistic than you appear to be about Tibullus: most of what he tried to convey is generally comprehensible with the help of good commentaries, semantic research and comparative reading of other contemporary elegiac poets. The choice of what versification to use in translation is decisive: it helps or hinders the translator in bringing those pesky undertones into some clarity. When I was translating Horace, for example, I found that accentual templates of his Aeolic stanza forms were more successful in bringing the odes to English than the typical flabby, verse libre that lacks point and rhetorical momentum. I learned the art, which is really quite excruciating, from German poets and translators who worked from the renaissance to the nineteenth century. Accentual templates fare somewhat better in German because it's more polysyllabic than English, which may explain their popularity—even Thomas Mann tried his hand at them in a covert way. When I started translating Propertius and then Tibullus, I naturally turned to the German accentual elegiac couplet, called the Distichon, reading Matthias Claudius and Schiller for examples. I found that English requires too many forced readings to work well in such a short form, so cast about for something more flexible. For the hexameter I simply adopted Lattimore's six-beat accentual line in his “Iliad” and “Odyssey.” For the pentameter, I used a standard iambic pentameter with all the usual variations, often pushing it into what the Russians call a *dolnik*, an iambic rhythm

with 30+% bi-syllabic intervals between ictuses or nominal stress positions. I found this provided a sufficient contrast between the two meters and allowed me to capture Tibullus' couplet structure with a high degree of accuracy and sometimes capture it with his emphatic words positioned in English as they are in Latin. Even a rough imitation of his couplet structure brings out much more of his subtle tones and resonances than either free verse or standard English metrical and verse forms. While a few good poets like James Michie have done some marvelous work with Horace using those stanza forms, most seem to me unqualified failures due to the extreme distortions of structure, imagery, tone and rhetoric. The English forms do have the advantage of being comfortable and permitting a certain degree of contrast, pace and point, but the price for this seems to me far too high.

TOM:

I adopted something like this solution for Ovid's elegiac couplets. But one notable problem for me was the relative looseness of the Lattimore hexameter. In English, hexameters are always in danger of breaking into equal halves, and the effort to avoid this bias can be as constraining as is succumbing to it. This is never a problem in Latin, as you know—paradoxically, it's Latin pentameters that tend to the formulaic (all those final disyllables!). But Latin verse was tighter than the results of the procedures you outline tend to seem in English. A really expanded *dolnik* pentameter can easily end up reading as a strict alexandrine, which messes up the alternating movement one is trying to achieve. Ovid's performing voice can carry a lot of this, but I found with Tibullus the voicing wasn't so distinctive, so I was drawn to find alternative ways of giving momentum and point. His meter just didn't seem to me as quiet as English was inclined to make it, so I went looking for some other way to register my sense of composition and conversation within a tradition of writing. What I came up with was more Michie's solution for Horace—a stanza form deliberately recalling seventeenth century English lyric that treats topics similar to Tibullus, and that thought of itself as directly carrying on the Roman elegists' work. That way, importing ventriloquial echoes of Herrick and Suckling and others, I thought I could graft in a resonance in English that might make up for lost Latin and Greek ones that no contemporary English reader can be expected to have. But perhaps we should look at an example or two we might comment on directly?

STEVE:

OK. I've chosen one passage for a comparison of our different approaches to translating Tibullus: lines 41–50 from the first elegy in Book I. This is an introduction to the series, which ended sadly with Book II on the poet's early death, and touches on all the main themes of elegies. The first is your version, Tom; the second is mine:

I do not seek the riches or  
prosperity my fathers saw,  
when former fields were reaped  
and harvests heaped.

A little land's enough for me;  
enough, to slumber peacefully  
and press a simple bed  
with my tired head.

How much delight to hear the rough  
flaws and gusts that seek to bluff  
my love and me reclined,  
our arms entwined,

or, when the winter wind shall blow  
freezing skies and bitter snow,  
a fire will soothe us best  
in careless rest.

This is the way I'll live; whoever  
can brave the barren winter weather,  
the sea's furious blight,  
gains wealth by right.

This is cast in stanzas rhyming aabb with a highly regular iambic meter. The first two lines are tetrameters, the third is a trimeter and the last a dimeter. Each stanza must compress two Latin couplets consisting of a hexameter and a pentameter into four very short lines, truncating the images and trivializing the tone to the point that Tibullus, who is quite serious in this programmatic elegy, fades mostly from view. The sing-song rhymes, while very clever in most cases, do indeed give a good flashback to seventeenth century cavalier poetry, but that is an extremely misleading impression. I might also add that the rhyme in "I do not seek the riches or / prosperity my fathers saw" appears to represent a common Oxbridge mispronunciation or verbal tic (Auden for example had it). Personally I find this kind of rhyme so contrived it borders on the bathetic. We should remember that Tibullus was a member of the equestrian class, as were all the Augustan poets, and served with distinction in the military campaigns of his patron, Messalla. He lost much of his ancestral estate through land confiscations for Augustus' decommissioned soldiers. The same happened to Vergil's estate. Tibullus knew war first hand, hated it (as Elegies I.3 and I.10 show) and thus his love of peace and a simple rural life rests on hard experience. There is nothing trite or feigned in his picture of working on an impoverished farm and relishing sleep with his mistress on a freezing winter night. Anyone who cares to make a careful comparison of my version with Tom's, can see the massive reduction of Tibullus as he's forced through the stanzaic grinder. The hexameter is minced to a4a4 (two a rhymes in tetrameter) and the pentameter to b3b2. The question that any careful reader needs to ask is simple: does the familiarity of seventeenth century cavalier poetry—assuming most readers today even know the poetry of that era—worth

the hash of a great poet.

I myself do not miss those ancestral riches and revenues  
that garnered harvests brought my antique sire:

a little crop is quite enough, enough if I may sleep in a bed  
and rest my limbs on their familiar couch.

How delightful, lying abed, to hear the boisterous wind  
and fold my mistress in my tender arms

or, when the wintry South Wind scatters freezing sleet,  
to pursue sleep in safety with a helping fire.

This be my fortune: let him be justly rich who can bear  
the fury of the sea and desolate rains.

TOM:

Well, that's certainly a strong contrast of our work, Steve. There are a couple of points that need correction though. First, each of my quatrain stanzas is a translation of a single elegiac couplet of Tibullus, so that my version has exactly twice as many lines as the original and your translation do. Four lines of English seemed to me enough space to render two lines of Latin. As an alternative measure of relative "cramping", I might point out that my quatrains have roughly the same number of syllables in each as your couplets—26, 26, 25, 25 in my first four above, as against 26, 27, 24 and 24 in yours. So I don't feel that I've given myself any less room than you, though I've certainly disposed it differently. I suppose readers will have to judge for themselves about the rhyming you so dislike—as you invite them to. I will defend the rhyme of "or" with "saw" though—it's simply the standard pronunciation in my dialect, and in many other English ones also. As to its Oxbridge filiations, I couldn't say, never having spent much time in England. If it sounds contrived to you, so be it. But it wouldn't to many millions of other speakers.

I wouldn't want to press the echoing of seventeenth century metrics too far as a justification for what I've done. If Marvell and others echo in the ears of readers, that's all good. But I hope the verse movement conveys a certain mood even without specific recollections. What I was after was the sense I find in the Latin elegiacs of a shortening, or perhaps a "falling away" in the second line. Ovid makes a joke about this at the opening of his *Amores* when he says he started out to write epic hexameters, but a mocking Cupid stole one of his feet away—erotic elegiac as a lesser, specifically truncated achievement is the burden here. Trying to get that sense of diminution—which is one thing this opening poem is about, since Tibullus's family lands have been diminished by the Civil Wars and his career expectations by his

giving up soldiering—was what lead me to think of a progressively diminishing stanza. Rhyme then helped to hold the pattern together, and to keep the contrast going between the hexameter of the Latin, represented in the first rhyming couplet, and the pentameter, rendered in the second rhymed pair, which also repeats in little the elegiac pattern of a longer and a shorter line. More complex formally than Tibullus certainly, but I hope not trite or glib simply because the movement is more explicitly laid out (I don't find Herrick either of those things, though I think you may).

I admire the sobriety and even tone with which you have brought these same lines over into English in your own version. Metrically, though, you'd have to admit it's looser with its own form than the Latin is. The line "to pursue sleep in safety with a helping fire" is cutting dangerously close to an English alexandrine, especially when the other pentameters are so regular. And sticking very close to Latin nuance forces you to features of English diction that sound a bit remote from a contemporary ear: "I myself do not miss" is a trifle clunky, and "This be my fortune: let him be justly rich"—absolutely correct as to the subjunctives—is getting positively archaic. And if I had called my own grandfather "my antique sire" he would have either laughed at me or cuffed me—unlikely to have been the Roman response, I think. These seem to me to be drawbacks of your approach that derive from an entirely laudable desire to represent what's in the Latin as closely and accurately as possible. But I have to wonder whether they make an altogether convincing poetic utterance in English. It was that concern in the first place that lead me to try a more complex metrical pattern for Tibullus, whose voice seemed to me to get excessively diluted in a more "straight" rendering, a risk I think you don't quite avoid. Is it worthwhile looking at another passage?

STEVE:

Thanks for correcting my careless mistake. I should have paid more attention to the line count. This is the price of writing in haste. From my experience reading English poetry, rhymes like "or" with "saw" mostly occur in satire and comic verse. That's how Auden employed them. I haven't read enough New Zealand or Australian verse to know much about the semantic aura created by such dialectical rhymes. Outside the main English poetic tradition in satire or comedy, they certainly grate on me. I have an intrusive "r" in my midwestern English pronunciation that runs back to the colonial era. You can hear it frequently in television news readers or pundits from the midwest. Most speakers are completely unaware of it. I would never, however, try to exploit it in a serious poem or translation.

Your stanzas have certainly not given you significantly less room than my couplets, even with the short meters, but the requirements of rhyme and meter do force you to pad your lines and obscure the force of the pentameter. Consider these two examples, yours first, then mine:

How much delight to hear the rough

flaws and gusts that seek to bluff  
my love and me reclined,  
our arms entwined,

or, when the winter wind shall blow  
freezing skies and bitter snow,  
a fire will soothe us best  
in careless rest.

How delightful, lying abed, to hear the boisterous wind  
and fold my mistress in my tender arms

or, when the wintry South Wind scatters freezing sleet,  
to pursue sleep in safety with a helping fire.

The whole point of both Latin couplets is to foreground the pentameters, the first providing the *mise-en-scène* with the two lovers in a warm bed and the second accenting the peaceful, fire-lit room with (we can imagine) shadows dancing on the walls as Tibullus falls asleep safe from the wind-blown sleet. One can't of course be sure that the second couplet is a continuation of the first or that Delia is still there. The two couplets may very well depict a season change, with the first set in late autumn on the verge of winter and the second in deep winter. Please notice that the first couplet only describes the wind. It says nothing about “rough flaws,” and I have no idea what “bluff” means here. If you are taking “bluff” in any of its various meanings “to deceive,” that makes no sense and has rhyme necessity written all over it. Again in your second quatrain, you add “freezing skies and bitter snow” to Tibullus’ much simpler description, which I caught with good Coleridgean *enargeia*. More importantly, your trimeter-dimeter lines—which, as you say, represent the Latin pentameter—completely fail in my opinion to suggest the descriptive power that Tibullus took great pain to concentrate by its rhetorical placement. They have a jingle-jangle effect for me that is quite distracting. There is certainly some contrast between a slightly longer couplet and a slightly shorter couplet in your quatrains, but it’s more like shrinkage from a tetrameter to a dimeter than a strong contrast. The rhyme pairs override the effect you wanted since we focus on the couplets as separate units, not as parts of an organic whole.

Something more needs to be said about your understanding of the elegiac couplet. Ovid’s joke about Cupid taking a foot from his hexameter to form the pentameter is pretty flat and not an accurate way to describe the pentameter. Diminution is even less an accurate way to describe it. We can represent the pentameter schematically like this,

/ x x | / x x | // / x x | / x x |

where / = long syllable, x = a short syllable and || the caesura. The pentameter is not missing a foot; the hexameter has been contracted into two distinct metrical units joined—rather than separated I would argue—by a caesura. You can hear the effect in William Watson’s “Man and his glory survive, lost in the greatness of God.”

The elegiac couplet is a Greek invention, and the Greeks were wiser than the Romans by not confining one sentence to each couplet. They regularly enjambed over many couplets. The Roman elegiac couplet can, if mishandled, be exceptionally heavy, clumping along couplet after couplet. Furthermore, the Greek elegiac couplet was not primarily for erotic verse. It was so musical, so flexible and so powerful for rhetorical point, resolution or emphasis in the pentameter that it enjoyed myriad uses for every imaginable topic. Ovid knew that very well. I’m not sure if you’re interpreting Ovid here or expressing your own view, but the notion that “erotic elegiac as a lesser, specifically truncated achievement is the burden here” is misleading. There is nothing “truncated” in the pentameter as if something had been amputated: it’s a distinct metrical form and the heart of the elegiac couplet’s power. If you mean that elegy is a lesser form than epic, the ancient world would have agreed with you long after anyone had even approached the accomplishments of Apollonius of Rhodes or Lucan. I would also dispute the claim that your quatrains are more formally complex than Tibullus’ elegiac couplets. Yours are extremely simple, metrically regular stanza even if four lines long; Tibullus’ are complex in the free deployment of words under the guidance of formal rhetorical structures within two different but echoing rhythmic lines governed by very strict metrical rules as the Romans understood them.

I completely confess to not writing Latin quantitative couplets. German accentual templates for quantitative forms can work and have worked historically for centuries, but they are deucedly hard to master in English. The line you mention as cutting dangerously close to the English alexandrine is actually a standard iambic pentameter with what Derek Attridge calls a rising inversion at the start and a promotion toward the end:

to pursue sleep in safety with a helping fire

x x // x / x x x / x /

Shelley and Keats both made heavy use of rising inversions and falling inversions (/ / x x). The run x x x, where the middle syllable would normally be stressed, is extremely common in all English accentual-syllabic verse. The line is quite common; one must just understand the heritage of variations in accentual-syllabic verse.

Here we have a serious difference on translation philosophy. I believe in trying to render as much of the original language as possible in a metrical form that does not do extreme violence to the metrical form of the poem. I also prefer foreignizing translation to domesticating translation in both poetry and prose. In domesticating translation, the translator tries to make the foreign language sound (by any deceptive

means possible) as if it had originally been written in the target language. Foreignizing translation, by contrast, wants to make the reader realize that he is not confronting something from his own language but from a very different culture with very different ways of thinking. That's the only way to gain some deeper understanding of the other culture, especially of its poetry. As a consequence, a foreignizing translator tries to keep as much of the original language as possible including references, mythology, historical allusions and culturally specific emotional ambience. The great foreignizing translations like Hobbes and Lattimore of Thucydides or Macaulay of Herodotus or Schleiermacher of Plato or Lattimore and Grene of Greek drama or Lattimore of Pindar or ... many others have stood the test of time. The utter parodistic bilge that Slavitt and Bovie gave us in their anthologies of Plautus and Greek Drama died before the ink dried on the pages. I consider myself a mild foreignizing translator who does not mind subjunctives and some non-colloquial English if it gives the real tone of the original. You are in your Tibullus a pure domesticating translator. It would be interesting to see a passage from your *Amores* in order to compare that with the way you and I handle the couplet form.

As for more comparisons between our versions of I.1, please select whatever you think appropriate.

TOM:

So first you accuse me of compressing Tibullus, and now, on closer inspection, of padding him; it seems I can't win either way! It may be that my version is simply too light for your sense of Tibullus, so that you tend to parse its use of rhyme in terms of comedy and satire. I don't myself think that light verse, hard enough to define, need be trivial. Often the question of its lightness is part of the central matter of the poem. Tibullus, for one, seems to be recommending a certain lightness of mood and stance in relation to the very Roman questions of Ambition and Power, which his poem seeks to put aside, if not quite put down, in both senses. "Let someone else enrich himself / Amassing military pelf" in my version, or "Let some other heap up his riches in yellow gold" in yours. And the last thing I wanted was to give the impression that Latin verse is so very sage and serious, a trap I feel you may sometimes fall into. Elegiac verse doesn't easily accommodate that kind of grandeur—this was Ovid's point about his using it: Cupid kept stealing a foot off his epic hexameters, so he had to make do with the lesser verse and the lighter topic. Lesser and lighter being the point of the joke, since he wasn't yet up to the Big Push of epic metres and subjects. (I'm sure I trust Ovid's sense of what a joke is in Latin verse, and I think I do get the joke, though I'm not altogether sure you do). And surely diminution *is* part of the burden of Tibullus's poem, for which we might at least entertain the possibility that the elegiac metres are deliberately suited (and yes, of course they are superbly worked out). That is, the "lesserness" of the metre (arithmetically, generically) is a way of troping, coming to terms with, working out, even redeeming, the "lesserness" of his life situation: giving up military glory,

learning to live in the old way on reduced means and land with just his fire, his little flock, and maybe his girl. “Shrinkage”, as you call it, is what Tibullus is trying to justify to himself.

It’s a dull task to attempt to explain an attempt at wit, of course, but I feel I ought to try with “bluff.” And not to get stuck on these few stanzas, but the distinction between bad weather that is merely windy and winter snow is fully maintained in my version, as in yours. I don’t know why you object to “rough flaws”—flaws are simply squalls of wind, transparently there as *immites uentos* in Latin. They don’t have to have snow in them. “Bluff” is a portmanteau, as Humpty-Dumpty would have said, which tries to develop further the implications of *immites* through the idea of roughness (“big, surly, blustering” as Johnson defines bluff) and hence to empty, windy bullying—which fails on us of course, because there we are nicely indoors cuddling. Since *immitis* means “not *mitis*”—not mild, soft, gentle—and can have a decidedly moral overtone in Latin, I thought I’d suggest a personified wind as a big blusterer, a Bluff King Hal. Your “boisterous” gets some of this too, in a quieter voice. But if you don’t like it, so be it.

Your mini-lecture on Latin elegiac metre is very useful, though a trifle dour and pofaced (like your translation?). You do let your “standard iambic pentameter” drift towards the hexameter occasionally though, you know, for all that you say you don’t. The line above is, yes, a regular somewhat loosened pentameter, though it wouldn’t do to string too many in a row (I only said it was “dangerously close”), but a later line is even closer, the second of:

I do not thirst for glory, my Delia; so long as I’m  
with you, I seek renown as sluggish and inert.

This time it’s clearly parsable as an alexandrine. Well, and fair enough, if it’s a Pope-like trick of producing a “sluggish and inert” line to match metre to matter. But Tibullus would never have over-run his pentameter to do that. The paradox of seeking renown for being the reverse of heroic is nicely caught here too, perhaps rather better than my own:

I have no need for warriors’ praise:  
if I may only spend my days  
with Delia, let them brand  
me weak, unmanned.

But the Latin doesn’t speak of his “thirst for glory,” a cliché in English to my ear at least. It just says, literally, “I do not care to be praised”—yes, my warriors aren’t there either. My point is that, for all your insistence on staying close to the Latin, you’re still not above straying when you see an effect you want, like the longer line here. We just stray different distances for different effects. And sometimes I think you stay too

close for comfort. For instance, you can't resist the little Latinate joke on the translation of *ianitor*—the Roman slave who sat chained at the door of the house:

But the chains of a beautiful girl hold me captive,  
and I sit, a janitor, before her cruel doors.

It's funny if you know the Latin word, but if you don't, the image is simply bizarre—a lover sitting with sponge and bucket in front of the house. Modern readers can't see that the chains bind the lover to the gate, since our janitors aren't chained up (they couldn't do their jobs if they were). My version is:

But I am caught in amorous chains  
by which my lovely girl constrains  
her slave to sit and wait  
before her gate.

which loses the specific job (and the cruelty of the doors, I notice), but at least doesn't hand Tibullus a mop!

I agree that our ideas of translation are very different here, maybe so in an exemplary way (at least I hope so for our readers). You think I lose too much in “domesticating” the poem and dilute or divert too far the force of the original, whereas it seems to me you run the complementary risk of producing the sort of translation that is ideal for people who don't need one.

STEVE:

1. Any translator who turns a quantitative couplet into a four-line rhymed quatrain is padding by definition. I scoured all of your Tibullus I.1 for superfluous verbs and adjectives inserted to meet the necessities of the chosen versification, but I'm not going to waste my time listing them. To me that approach is simpliciter not translating in an honest way, although I give all due praise for the constraining effort.

2. Tibullus has a light touch when necessary, but since we have confined ourselves to I.1, the programmatic introduction to Book 1, we don't confront his great antiwar poems in I.3 and I.10. To put those into your hackneyed tinkling quatrains would be a major betrayal of translation. I've published mine. If you have yours ready, give us some samples.

3. I think Tibullus was quite serious about his contempt for the *cursus honorum*, wealth and glory. That shines through his verse without any comic strain. He paid a price for his choice, knew the price and perhaps fortuitously died young.

4. The idea that the elegiac distich can't reach sublimity is the apparent result of not

reading enough elegy, particularly in Greek. As a form, nothing limits it from the most moving and intense expression of emotions, emotions quite equal to epic hexameter in power. I could cite Propertius here, and would if you'd like to see some of his elegies in my versions, but all one needs do is read Callimachus to disprove your point. Ovid was dissembling about elegy for his own rather modest project. As a metrical form, the elegiac couplet is probably the most perfect poetic container ever devised in the West for the full spectrum of emotions and experiences. It still works in German if with reduced effect.

5. You are using "bluff" as a verb, so its other meanings as adjectives are irrelevant. The wind is not bullying the lovers, who are quite safe and secure, it's wracking the outside environment. I will, however, give you good credit for the attempt to exploit the metaphor.

6. You dwell again on one of my supposed alexandrine pentameters:

I do not thirst for glory, my Delia; so long as I'm  
with you, I seek renown as sluggish and inert.

Let's scan the line to what's happening: x /, x / x / x l x x x /. It has five stresses, but the key is the run of xxx at the end. IF I intended the promotion of the middle x in xxx, then yes, the line would be an alexandrine. But promotion is a metrical performance issue based on the competence of each reader. That imaginary competent reader can choose or not choose to perform the promotion of x to /. I assumed that competent readers could make the decision to read a very slightly loose pentameter rather than an alexandrine. Since nearly all my pentameters are standard, the empirical choice would be to perform it as a pentameter. I did not, therefore, break the pentameter and accurately expressed Tibullus' meaning.

7. I plead guilty to "janitor." Aside from the fact that this translation was submitted to a Classical journal, where the readers would understand the allusion, the various contextual meanings quite fit the Latin. The problem, of course, is that ignorant readers don't know the contextual meanings. This, however, is a problem when reading any poetry that plays with complex semantic echoes like the poetry of Celan, Mandelstam, Akhmatova and above all Leopardi. I can't take account of ignorant readers, so I give you the point.

8. I agree that a price must be paid for foreignizing translation, though I'm on the liberal end of the spectrum. Having done a lot of verse translation in Greek, Latin, Italian, German, Russian and Japanese, I find that the best approximation to the original is the approach that shows the greatest respect for the full otherness of the poem. The reader should never think that this is something out of his own culture.

TOM:

It looks like this conversation has worked its way towards an end, and I think our respective positions will now be clear to readers. So I'll just respond briefly to your points where I have something to say, and we can call it a day.

Some amplification is required by the choice of metre, yes, but some accommodation will be needed by any translation. Even your couplets that stick close to the lie of Tibullus include additional material (that "thirst for glory"?). As for "honesty", it depends, I suppose, to whom one is trying to be honest. You translate to stay as close to Tibullus as possible, and rely on readers to make up the difference from what they know of Latin verse. In the process you risk writing a sort of advanced crib. I wander further and risk losing touch with Latin, but I think I stand a better chance of enlisting "ignorant readers" into the cause of finding ancient verse lively and appealing.

You raise a good point about the suitability of my metre for a whole book. No, I don't think all of Tibullus would go well into it, and that's a problem for a project to translate all of him, since he always wrote in elegiacs. My opening for his next poem, for instance, tries a different lyric metre, though it again explores the longer / shorter alternation of the couplet we've talked about:

Pour it neat, beat down my budding grief  
till heavy eyelids close;  
let no-one stir this liquor-beaten head  
from maudlin love's repose.  
A cruel watch is set upon my girl,  
her door is shut and bolted.  
May rain rain down upon it, Jupiter  
with thunderbolts assault it.

You won't like the rhyme, I think, but it's a response to the casual match of *sopor* ("sleep") and *amor* ("love") at the ends of Tibullus's first two couplets. I just can't get a concise enough voice for Tibullus into longer lines, though, even at his most serious. They get too flabby.

As for "bluff"—again: when reading poetry, I find I balk at declaring overtones from other parts of speech "irrelevant." I take the view that such things amplify what's going on in a word, and make it more interesting. Pope and Johnson criticised this sort of thing in Shakespeare, but I know which side I'd choose.

I recently read an article by Mary Beard (in the NYRB) talking about the survival of reading and studying the ancient world. She said something I noted down as relevant to what we are both trying to do, in our different ways, with Tibullus:

The study of the classics is the study of what happens in the gap between antiquity

and ourselves. It is not only the dialogue that we have with the culture of the classical world; it is also the dialogue that we have with those who have gone before us who were themselves in dialogue with the classical world.

("Do the Classics have a Future," *New York Review of Books*, January 12, 2012).

We could see our conversation as a dialogue about those dialogues, if you like, and how best to extend them to those who might want to join, or at least listen in. Thanks for a stimulating and trenchant exchange!