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Senior Thesis

Those Who Lie Like Truth:

The Modern Idea of "Confessional Poetry" and Catullus, Propertius, and Tibullus

I. Introduction

Confessional poetry reached a peak of popularity in the late twentieth century. Although poetry with confessional elements has always existed, the 1950s and 1960s gave rise to poets who made confessional poetry a mode that was to be studied, criticized, and imitated. The twentieth century idea of confessionalism first arose regarding Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*, published in 1959. Confessional poetry is not simply a product of the twentieth century; "there have always been confessional poets." While the mode was first defined in criticism regarding Lowell's book, the mode can be found in earlier collections by Emily Dickinson, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Walt Whitman, for example. I believe, in fact, that there were such confessional poets in the first centuries BC and AD. The confessional arose within Latin poetry with Catullus, and then the mode grew and changed with the work of two of his successors, Propertius, and Tibullus.

The hypothesis that such poets were predecessors to the confessional poets of the twentieth century need not rely on any biographical reconstruction of their lives. While the emotions and events in the poems may inspire one to believe them as fact, it can be dangerous to do so. Phillips reminds us, "While a confessional poem is one which mythologizes the poet's personal life, it has its elements of fancy like any other. It does not constitute, certainly, a mere recitation of fact for fact's sake, nor should the "facts" recited be mistaken for literal truth." It is this appearance of truth that makes such poetry effective, and there is not a need to go beyond that in this argument. Yezzi elaborates, "By relying on facts, on 'real' situations and relationships, for a poem's emotional authenticity, the poet makes an artifice of honesty. Confessional poems, in other words, lie like truth." Catullus, Propertius, and Tibullus indeed lie like truth.

II. What is Confessional Poetry?

The decades of the fifties and sixties brought forth many confessional poets, who seemed to be embarking on unmarked territory. Poets like Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath and John Berryman almost seemed to be creating a mode while readers watched. They dealt with subjects that were not exceptionally common in contemporary poetry, such as divorce, mental illness, and sex. Rosenthal wrote that the new brand of confessional poetry also "mirror [s] something that has been going on for a long time — the discrediting by many people of traditional concepts of a nobly disciplined life." In spite of the realization that confessional poetry has always existed to a certain point, literary critics in the post-Eisenhower years greeted the poetry of Sexton and Plath as though it was something they had never seen before.

Clearly, the twentieth century confessionalists owe a debt to those who came before them. Phillips notes that "Sappho, Catullus, Augustine, Rousseau, Rilke, Baudelaire, Whitman, countless others through the ages have written with the Self as primary subject, the Self treated with utmost frankness and lack of restraint." It is this focus on the self that sets Catullus among the ranks of the confessionalists. "A true confessional poet places few barriers, if any, between his self and direct expression of that self, however painful that expression may prove."

Confessional poetry is a multi-faceted mode; many critics have weighed in on what "confessional" means. David Yezzi tells us that the mode's distinguishing characteristic "is the rawness of its address and the incorporation of guilty personal detail for emotional effect." Charles Molesworth tells us that "to return to the feel of reality, to restore some sentiment of being, even at the cost of hellish pain, stood out as a major confessionalist goal." Rosenthal and Gall say that in confessional poetry, "the harsh candor is often mixed with affection; and love and contempt — whether towards oneself or others — often seem alternative forms of one another." Rosenthal discusses "the confessional impulse," an impulse to reveal and share things that one does not ordinarily talk about. This impulse is one to which the poets I will discuss often succumb. Confessional poetry, while egocentric, is not exclusively so. In fact, confessional poetry gains its power from its ability to affect its readers. "The power of such poems is directly related to their overwhelming need to create empathy in the reader and so recruit him to recognition of their inmost emotional discovery." It is not enough to say that confessional poems are "emotional." While they are indeed emotional, they are much more than that. Confessional poetry does not simply touch upon emotion, or look at emotion through an examining eye; rather,

confessional poetry allows emotion to drive poems, permeating each poem with an air of necessity -- the necessity of conveying and aiming to understand emotion through confession.

The confessionalists of the twentieth century share common characteristics with the Latin poets who will be discussed. Confessional poetry often features protagonists who are afflicted and alienated, and Catullus, Propertius, and Tibullus are afflicted with the struggles of love. Such protagonists are exceptionally willing to share their pain with their readers through plain language that the reader can understand. In the case of Catullus (87 or 84 - 54 BC), the confessional is at its most raw; he is often angry, and other times despondent. Modern poets like Anne Sexton and Robert Lowell wrote poems that share similar emotion, rawness, and blatancy with Catullus. Their confessions often read like emotional ramblings, as though they are simply too upset to check themselves. Propertius (50-1 BC), a later poet than Catullus, rejects this aspect of the confessional. Instead, he distances himself from his emotions by using mythological tales to place his feelings. Propertius takes a step away from the confessional mode as we know it in the twentieth century, in spite of his obvious knowledge of Catullan style. At times, the poetry of Propertius is raw and tortured, yet his fervor is more contained, more structured and thus less confessional.

Tibullus, however, writes poetry that is more confessional than Propertius's. Tibullus uses irony and sarcasm to give the reader a view of his tortured experiences. Additionally, he creates for himself a vivid fantasy world, where his emotions have more freedom to be expressed than they do in reality. In this vein, he is an Anne Sexton to the ancients. Sexton often employed both irony and fantasy to express her vivid, and often tortured emotion. Propertius's elegies are restrained, traditional, and while not conservative, they take a step away from Catullus and the confessional. Tibullus, however, leaps back into the Catullan mode and the confessional, and manages to create his own niche within it through his use of deft irony and remarkable fantasy.

In order to understand the mode of the confessional, it might be useful to look at two examples of the mode from the twentieth century. Sexton's confessional repertoire is enormous. I chose a poem from her corpus that I found to be most useful for this context. It comes from her collection entitled *Love Poems*, and is entitled "For my Lover, Returning to his Wife." There are other poems of hers that are more famously confessional, but the closeness in subject matter between this poem and the works of Catullus, Propertius, and Tibullus could not be ignored. In the collection *Love Poems*, Sexton explores an affair from beginning to end, and "For my Lover" comes in the middle. It is a poem filled with irony and understatement. Sexton addresses her lover

and discusses his wife. Sexton often uses simple images to illustrate her point. His wife is "as real as a cast-iron pot" and the narrator is "a bright red sloop in the harbor" (8, 10). She readily admits, "I have been momentary" (9). This straightforward confession almost seems too straightforward to be the crux of the poem, but it is, and it is this apparent honesty that characterizes confessional poetry. The ironic tone Sexton gives the poem, the resignation, helps show the reader the intensity of her pain. In aiming for stoicism, she reveals all of her pain to the reader. Note the ending of the poem:

She is so naked and singular.

She is the sum of yourself and your dream.

Climb her like a monument, step after step.

She is solid.

As for me, I am a watercolor.

I wash off. (43-48).

Through metaphor ("I am a watercolor"), Sexton makes it clear to the reader that she is deeply afflicted. The wife is permanent, the speaker is temporary. Such a clear admission of this status is deeply confessional. By allowing her mind to wander and wonder about her lover's wife and her activities, the poet has created a mythical life for the wife, and the poem acts both as a means for mental escape and as a justification for her loneliness. By creating a mythological life for the wife and her lover, Sexton elicits sympathy for her reader. She also escapes her own pain by deferring attention to the situation elsewhere, in this case to the wife's household tasks, "She sees to oars and oarlocks for the dinghy, / has placed wild flowers at the window at breakfast, / sat by the potter's wheel at midday" (15-17). This mythology has a dual purpose, it briefly distracts the reader from the pain of the speaker, but it ultimately emphasizes it by underscoring how deeply the speaker is dwelling on the pain. The creation of a mythological life for those involved in her situation only strengthens the speaker's pain.

III. Catullus: Latin's First Confessional Poet

Catullus, like his twentieth century progeny, deals with matters of the heart vividly. He is able to convey emotion distinctly through an unlikely combination of candor and restraint. Phillips is careful to make a distinction between the confessional and uncontrollable streams of consciousness: "This is not to say that confessional poems are wild, unchecked emotional outbursts. Few are." Catullus does not give into temptation. As Yezzi writes, "the trick in poetry is not to succumb to an imitation of inner chaos but to render it as precisely as possible from the outside, to view it through a wider angle than the poet's own myopia." Robert Phillips gives a detailed list of characteristics of confessional poetry. The three characteristics that are most useful in defining certain poems of Catullus's work as confessional are:

1. Confessional poetry's emotional content is personal rather than impersonal.
2. Confessional poetry is therapeutic and/or purgative.
3. Confessional poetry often portrays unbalanced, afflicted, or alienated protagonists.

Catullus often deals with personal emotional content. Rather than taking on a persona that is a character separate from the poet and named as such, like T.S. Eliot's Prufrock in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," Catullus speaks as himself, and often to himself and about himself. The depth of his feelings is often conveyed clearly, without using devices like personas to distance himself from his audience. In a sense, a poet always takes on a persona in every poem, but in Catullus's poems, through his use of self-address, the persona is more personal than it might otherwise be. His struggles involve his love for Lesbia, and the heartache that overwhelms him is expressed in "lines that for emotional impact and immediacy have no parallel in ancient literature." One poem from the body of Catullus's work that helps illustrate this idea of intensely personal content is 85:

Odi et amo. quare id faciam, fortasse requiris.

nescio, sed fieri sentio et excrucior.

85 is exceptionally powerful, and this power lies in the strong verbs that Catullus uses in the poem. The antithesis between "I hate" and "I love" is so strong that without strong verbs to follow it could absorb the audience and detract from the remainder of the poem. However, Catullus

follows that strong statement with, "*Quare id faciam, fortasse requiris*" (1). He is thus immediately able to draw the reader back to the sentiment he is trying to convey. He keeps the focus on him by saying, "How do I do that?" and then shifts it to the reader, almost reading our minds by saying, "you ask." (1). By starting the second line of the epigram with "*Nescio*," he reveals the narrator's confusion. The narrator is so sure of his ignorance of his own emotions that he has no qualms admitting it. Four of the six words of that line are verbs, and the whole of the poem is verb-centered and verb-dominated, placing continuous focus on the speaker. The most powerful of all the verbs is the final verb, "*excrucior*" (2). This last word, which may be translated as "I am tormented greatly" or even "I am tortured to death," is the touchstone for the whole epigram.

"*Excrucior*" is not just the last word; it is a one-word summary of the entire poem. It is passive, not "she tortures me" or even "it tortures me," but "I am tortured." The epigram is cyclical. First, we hear "*odi et amo*," a tortured antithesis. Then, at the end of the poem "*excrucior*." The poet explains his predicament, and then the helpless attempt at understanding his conflicting emotions, "*Nescio, sed fieri sentio et excrucior*." His inability to solve his predicament begs the reader to read the epigram again for some hope of resolution.

In 85, Catullus is trying to deal with the situation by stepping back and analyzing it, and this technique is a very familiar one in confessional poetry, "To return to the feel of reality, to restore some sentiment of being, even at the cost of hellish pain, stood out as a major confessionalist goal." Torture, too, is a theme of confessional poetry, and poem 85 is an excellent example. "This sense of eternal torture is one of the motivating forces behind any confessional art."

Another confessional characteristic of some of Catullus's poems is their purgative nature. Phillips says:

Nevertheless, as its name implies, confessional poetry springs from the need to confess. Each poem is in some way a declaration of dependence. Or of guilt. Or of anguish and suffering. Thus, the writing of each such poem is an ego-centered, though not an egocentric, act; its goal is self-therapy and a certain purgation.

Many of the Lesbia poems that Catullus wrote are ego-centered in this way. Two that are especially purgative are poems 87 and 76. Poem 87 is another short poem:

Nulla potest mulier tantum se dicere amatam

vere, quantum a me Lesbia amata mea es.

nulla fides ullo fuit umquam foedere tanta,

quanta in amore tuo ex parte reperta mea est.

In 87, Catullus is addressing a problem he has with the change in his relationship with Lesbia. He claims not to love her, rather he loved her, "*quantum a me Lesbia amata mea es*" (2). He feels that "*Nulla potest mulier tantum se dicere amatam / vere, quantum a me Lesbia amata mea est*" (1-2). Since no woman can say a man loved her as much as Lesbia was loved by him, why is it that they are not together? This statement is a forceful one, as described by Eve Adler: "The assertion that no woman had been or would be loved as much or as truly as Catullus loved Lesbia, if it is to yield its full meaning, must simply be taken at face value rather than as a vague general expression for 'I loved her very much.'" The sheer force of this statement makes it utterly purgative.

In the second half of the poem, Catullus compares their love to a contract, or bond (*foedere*). In doing so, he emphasizes her betrayal. Not only did she let him down; she also failed to fulfill her end of the contract. Catullus seems to be purging himself of pain all the while trying to absolve himself of any guilt regarding the dissolution of the relationship. The statements he makes could easily be defined as hyperbolic; and often therapeutic statements carry a certain measure of hyperbolic weight. Other people probably were loved as much as Lesbia, and there were probably equally strong contracts. Nevertheless, Catullus says that his love was the greatest, and the impossibility of this fact emphasizes the purgation. The poet appears to honestly believe what he says, and such a belief comes from deep within.

Poem 76, too, is purgative. Catullus begins with sentiments like those in poem 87, once again mentioning "*foedere*" (3). A resolute Catullus addresses another Catullus, reminding him that he will at some point be rewarded for the loyalty and love that he showed to Lesbia. Lines 13-16 present a despondent, desperate Catullus:

Difficile est longum subito deponere amorem;

difficile est, verum hoc qua lubet efficias.

Una salus haec est. hoc est tibi pervincendum;

hoc facias, sive id non pote sive pote. (13-16)

The short sentences and simplicity of language serve to drive home the speaker's point: It is difficult to put down a long love all of a sudden. It is also something that must be done. This is the one source of health. You have to do this whether you can or not. These sentences, which are spoken by the speaking Catullus to the silent Catullus, purge the author's thoughts in an unorthodox way. By framing his confession in admonition, the narrator emphasizes his affliction within the poem. Here, "the speaker's voice . . . resonates with confusion and tentativeness."

Poem 76 also gives us an excellent example of an afflicted protagonist, another characteristic of confessional poetry. Late in the poem, in a prayer to the gods, the poet describes how this affliction of lost love manifests itself physically, "*eripite hanc pestem perniciemque mihi, / quae mihi subrepens imos ut torpor in artus / expulit ex omni pectore laetitia*" (20-22). He compares this heartache with a deadly disease and describes it as a paralysis that takes over his body. He readily admits that he is not well, "The admission of helplessness implied in the appeal to the gods, as well as the speaker's frenzied emotional tone expresses the lover's characteristically wretched condition."

Poem 76 features a severely afflicted protagonist, and this aspect of the poem seals its designation as confessional. "Generally it [confessional poetry] consists of balanced narrative poems with unbalanced or afflicted protagonists." The affliction is intense and Catullus feels free to share it with his audience. The poetry is an outlet for the sickness, a sickness that has caused Catullus to feel truly awful. "Starting as *pestis perniciesque* it is next *torpor* and finally ends as *taeter morbus*, "foul disease," a phrase which can describe only a hideously ugly state of mind."

There is a sense within the poem that as Catullus becomes more aware of his predicament, the reader does as well, and it is through the confession that Catullus gains such awareness. "Not only is Catullus torn by two opposing, and to him antipathetic, emotions, and thereby subjected to unbearable tension; he seems to sense, too, that there is something fundamentally unsound in the

conflict itself." He is unwell, maddened, tortured, and the two versions of him within poem 76 serve to broaden both his understanding and our understanding of the self. Eve Adler explains:

For the entire person of whom "Catullus" and the speaker are fragments, the ruthless revelation of their mutual dishonesty and helplessness is the only act of unification there can be. Their mutual dishonesty and helplessness are irreducible facts, and there is no conquest of the one by the other, no absorption of the one into the other, no judgment in favor of the one over the other; there is only the stepping out of them to another place where, without being reconciled at all, they are included. The other place is self-revelation — not self-exhortation, self-improvement, self-condemnation, but the clear vision and full expression of the self-division that is the actual case.

It is this self-revelation or "rawness of address" that often identifies confessional poetry. Catullus often reads more like a Lowell or Plath than he does a Horace or Ovid.

Poem 76 is an excellent example of a place where Catullus's voice resonates with the confessional tone.

Another poem with an exceptionally afflicted protagonist is poem 72. Catullus tells us that Lesbia once told him that she loved him above anyone, including Jove, "*Dicebas quondam solum te nosse Catullum, / Lesbia, nec prae me velle tenere Iovem*" (1-2). Catullus continues, reminding both Lesbia and the reader that he loved her deeply, more deeply than he might love a casual fling, "*Dilexi tum te non tantum ut vulgus amicum, / sed pater ut gnatos diligit et generos*" (3-4). This sentiment acts as an antithesis to Lesbia's hyperbolic statements. Catullus loved her not only as a lover, but also as a father loves his sons and sons-in-law. This revelation is not a simple one; rather, it is one of great weight. He follows it with "*Nunc te cognovi: quare etsi impensius uror, / multo mi tamen es vilior et levior*" (5-6). He is revealing his true feelings about her, and these feelings act as a stark contrast with the sentiments we heard from him regarding his love for her in the poems about the earlier days of their love.

The poem ends: "*Qui potis est, inquis? Quod amantem iniuria talis / cogit amare magis, sed bene velle minus*" (7-8). The poet reinforces the strength of his sentiments by saying, "how is this possible?" you ask." This recalls the "*quare id faciam fortasse requiris?*" of poem 85. Such questions remind a reader who is not already wondering how this is done to question such strong

statements. In 72, however, Catullus answers the reader's question. He tells us that it is because such hurts force a lover to love more but to like less. Such a use of understatement is a hallmark of confessional poetry. It is oxymoronic to love someone more and like them less; normally, liking is an essential part of loving. Catullus is masking his pain with irony. The tone of the statement is almost vengeful, "I still love you, Lesbia, but I don't **like** you, you meanie." In spite of that reading, Catullus's pain is still clear; he is suffering. "[Confessional poems] employ irony and understatement as a means of attaining artistic detachment." This poem, and the agony contained in it, is dramatically confessional.

The epitome of confessionalism in the Catullan canon is poem 8:

Miser Catulle, desinas ineptire,

et quod vides perisse perditum ducas.

Fulsere quondam candidi tibi soles,

cum ventitabas quo puella ducebat

amata nobis quantum amabitur nulla;

ibi illa multa cum iocosa fiebant

quae tu volebas nec puella nolebat,

fulsere vere candidi tibi soles.

Nunc iam illa non volt: tu quoque, impotens, noli,

nec quae fugit sectare, nec miser vive,

sed obstinata mente perfer, obdura.

Vale, puella! Iam Catullus obdurat,

nec te requiret, nec rogabit invitam.

At tu dolebis, cum rogaberis nulla.

Scelestia, vae te! Quae tibi manet vita?

Quis nunc te adibit? Cui videberis bella?

Quem nunc amabis? Cuius esse diceris?

Quem basiabis? Cui labella mordebis?

At tu, Catulle, destinatus obdura.

Wretched Catullus, you should stop playing the fool

And what you seem to have spent in vain, reckon it lost.

The sunny days once shone brightly for you,

When you kept going where your girl led you

Loved by us as much

as no one will be loved;

There when many jokes took place

Which you wanted and the girl did not not want,

Indeed, the sun shone warmly for you.

Now she does not want, you, helpless, also do not want;

And do not follow her who flees you nor live sad

But endure with resolute mind, stand firm.

Goodbye, girl. Now Catullus stands firm,

he will not seek you, he will not ask you, unwilling.

But you will be sad when no one asks for you.

Wicked woman, alas for you! What life remains for you?

Who will visit you now? To whom will you seem beautiful?

Whom will you love now? Whose will you be said to be?

Whom will you kiss? Whose lip will you bite?

But you, Catullus, stubborn, stand firm.

Poem 8 possesses many characteristics of confessional poetry. The poem is fraught with personal emotional conflict. It is purgative and therapeutic, with an afflicted protagonist holding the poem together. In it, the self is "a poetic symbol around which is woven a personal mythology."

Catullus begins by immediately addressing himself, "*Miser Catulle*," (1). He keeps the focus on the personal throughout the poem. Even when he is discussing his girl and her current actions, he does it by making her a referent for his own pain, "*At tu dolebis, cum rogaberis nulla*" (14). He tells Lesbia that she will be sad when no one asks for her, but this statement is simultaneously projective and reflexive, since it suggests to the reader that Catullus, too, will be sad when no one, specifically Lesbia, asks for him.

The rapid string of questions in lines 15-18 serves to illustrate that the poet's thoughts have a sense of urgency. "Some disciplined poets, when writing in the confessional mode, produce works which appear to have come out all in one rush — one breathless, reckless outburst." The limping iambic meter of poem 8 adds to this effect. Additionally, all of the lines but one are end-stopped in some way, and the pauses add to the oral impact. The adjectives Catullus uses to describe himself only increase our knowledge of the emotions behind the poem. He is "*miser*," "*impotens*," and "*miser*" again. He considers his current state to be wretched, and is clearly bewildered.

The use of voice in poem 8 also underscores the emotional content. Catullus refers to himself once (5) but the rest of the time either addresses himself or speaks of himself in the third person. This technique allows us to see his emotional frustration from every angle. Eve Adler says, ". . . the kind of self-address and third-person usage which function in c. 8 both as dramatic means towards and as the irreducible contents of self-revelation recur frequently and purposefully in

Catullus' personal poems." The superficially impersonal third-person voice becomes the opposite in poem 8; it serves to personalize the protagonist to a greater extent than the first person would allow. Knowing that there are two Catulluses in conflict makes the poet's agony more apparent. What M.L. Rosenthal wrote about Robert Lowell could easily be applied to Catullus, ". . . these sequences constitute a poetry of struggle, primarily at the level of holding on to identity, self-regard, and normal sanity."

Poem 8 is not only a representation of personal conflict but also a highly purgative poem. What Robert Graves says regarding lyric poetry could be applied directly to poem 8:

The pathology of poetic composition is no secret. A poet finds himself caught in some baffling emotional problem, which is of such urgency that it sends him into a sort of trance. And in this trance his mind works, with astonishing boldness and precision, on several imaginative levels.

The simple admission that "*Nunc iam illa non volt*" is thoroughly purgative; a reader can imagine Catullus saying such a sentiment out loud for the first time and thus in hearing it having it become real. Nevertheless, the poet is taking steps toward coming to terms with his heartache and struggle. This therapeutic nature of Poem 8 only adds to its confessional qualities.

Finally, Poem 8 is confessional in that it features an afflicted protagonist. The affliction is expressed throughout the poem. He is "*Miser*," and the use of that word as the first word of the poem is significant. The reader does not have to wait to find out the protagonist's state of mind; it is contained in the poem's first two syllables. He is also weakened by this experience and calls himself *impotens*, powerless, impotent, and feeble. The speaker of the poem "believes that it is a decisive moral struggle." The contrast between speaker and addressee is stark, and the interaction deepens the tone and theme of the poem. The struggle of trying to retrieve a lost self is not a new one in Catullus's work, and understanding of the affliction widens as the reader encounters the other Lesbia poems.

Certainly, not all of Catullus's poems are confessional. Similarly, not all of Robert Lowell's or Sylvia Plath's poems are confessional. What caused them to be deemed confessional poets was the skill with which they navigated issues of the psyche. In his review of Lowell's *Life Studies* in 1959, M.L. Rosenthal said, "To build a great poem out of the predicament and horror of the lost Self has been the recurrent effort of the most ambitious poetry of the last century." Rosenthal

does not give enough credit to the ancients: what about the most ambitious poetry of the first century BC? Catullus was, as they say, ahead of his time.

It is often said that confessional poetry in the twentieth century grew out of "the awareness of the emotional vacuity of public language in America and the insistent psychologizing of a society adrift from purpose and meaningful labor" (Molesworth 163). That is, it did not arise solely from the poets who wrote it, but rather it was a product of the times. As a one of the *poetae novi*, Catullus, like Lowell, was on the edge of something new. "It happens we have seen in the present century a change in the course of English poetry as abrupt, superficially, as those brought about by the Catullan revolution." When Lowell's *Life Studies* hit the shelves in 1959, the collection was a beacon of new things to come, and Catullus was part of a similar shift in style in his time, away from epic-tragic and comic-satiric poetry towards "creating a Roman genre out of the Greek epigram."

There are certain aspects of confessional poetry that do not and cannot apply to Catullus's poetry. He does not write about mental illness, as many of the twentieth century confessional poets do. However, it is easily argued that in Catullus's time, there was far less understanding of depression and other mental ailments than we have today. Surely he was as close to writing about depression as anyone else in the time period.

Catullus certainly wrote confessional poetry. Many of the Lesbia poems are confessional in nature, and poems 8, 72, 76, 85, and 87 are prime examples of the emotional confessional within the body of Catullan poetry. He is able to navigate the border between affecting and melodramatic in his use of personal emotional content. His occasional ironic tone attempts to mask his pain, yet often ends up emphasizing it. Catullus is the epitome of the afflicted protagonist. He is "*Miser Catulle*," and he is wretched and sympathetically helpless. His confessional poems are powerful and evocative, and Catullus must be considered to be a predecessor of confessional poetry. The confessional poets of the mid-twentieth century were bringing the mode of confessionalism to the forefront, but they were renewed Catulluses, simply retracing his footsteps with renewed vigor and a twentieth century sensibility.

IV. Propertius and the "Confessional Impulse"

Many of Catullus's poems exhibit characteristics that would cause twentieth-century critics to call them confessional. What about his successors and closest followers? Robert Lowell was

considered by critics to be the first real twentieth century confessionalist. *Life Studies* was published in 1959, and Lowell had taught a poetry-writing seminar in 1958 that was attended by Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath, among others. Lowell's ground-breaking poetry clearly influenced both Sexton and Plath, and they utilized, as well as modified, the mode. Did Catullus's successors, Propertius and Tibullus do something similar?

Catullus's poetry is marked by personal emotional content and a persistent therapeutic mood; it often portrays unbalanced, afflicted, or alienated protagonists. Does Propertius's and Tibullus's poetry exhibit similar characteristics? Or, rather, is Propertius's and Tibullus's poetry confessional in different ways or perhaps not confessional at all? Propertius, like Catullus, writes lively poems about a lover, Cynthia. These poems often feature an afflicted, alienated protagonist like those in Catullus's Lesbia poems, and like others used by modern poets as described by Robert Phillips in his book, *The Confessional Poets*.

In spite of such alienation and affliction, in addition to self-mortification, Propertius's poems never capture the confessional fervor of Catullus's. Propertius is rarely reckless or rambling. He may be afflicted, and at times even tortured, but he is also more guarded. One of the ways Propertius keeps his emotion from carrying him away is by using mythology as a shield. By contextualizing his struggles and losses within mythology, he moves the reader's focus away from him and onto the familiar myths. Yet, while never reaching the Catullus's pinnacle of confessionalism, Propertius does write poems that lean towards the mode and one can see him succumbing ever so slightly to the "confessional impulse."

One of the more confessional of Propertius's poems is poem II.8. In it, he laments the lost Cynthia and even contemplates suicide and murder. He addresses a friend, then Cynthia, then himself, then Cynthia, then the friend again. It is the section addressed to himself that is the most striking:

sic igitur prima moriere aetate, Properti?

sed morere; interitu gaudeat illa tuo!

exagitet nostros Manes, sectetur et umbras,

insultetque rogis, calcet et ossa mea!

quid? non Antigoniae tumulo Boeotius Haemon

corrui ipse suo saucius ense latus,

et sua cum miserae permiscuit ossa puellae,

qua sine Thebanam noluit ire domum? (II.8. 17-24)

In this stanza, Propertius presents an afflicted protagonist, much like the protagonists of Catullus 8, 72, and 76. He has been alienated by Cynthia and unlike Catullus, actually takes the step of discussing suicide, a theme that is exceptionally common in the confessionalist poetry of the 1950s, 60s, and 70s: "*sic igitur prima moriere aetate, Properti?*" (17). He addresses himself, a common tactic of the confessionalists, including Catullus, and he asks, "is this therefore how you will die, Propertius, in youth?" However, the addition of the story of Haemon gives the poem an interesting twist. Haemon, the son of Creon, killed himself at the tomb of Antigone. As Camps says, "Here the story of Haemon suggest a new idea: union with the loved one in death."

Propertius's mental state certainly comes into question when he says, "*sed non effugies: mecum moriaris oportet; hoc eodem ferro stillet uterque cruor*" (25-26). He is now considering murder: if he is going to die, Cynthia must die too, "but you will not escape; you must die with me; let the blood of both drip from the same sword." Here there are no barriers of subject matter; the most private of thoughts are public. This lack of distance between the poet's self and the reader is a common hallmark of confessional poetry. Propertius also wants his addressee, Cynthia, to understand his pain, and the sentiments in the poem feel powerfully intimate. Even when he addresses his friend and himself, the words are still emotionally charged. Yet, the first person section, remains the cornerstone of the poem, in both theme and narrative. Georg Luck writes about poem II.8: "With a savage joy and a self-mortification that are highly characteristic of his personality, Propertius describes the final humiliation he expects to suffer from Cynthia." It is this repeated tone of self-mortification that aids in classifying poem II.8 as confessional..

Propertius makes significant use of mythological imagery in poem II.8. In doing so, he not only reaches out to his audience with stories that would be familiar to them, but he also manipulates the tales to compare himself with sympathetic protagonists. In the third stanza he writes, "*quid? non Antigone tumulo Boeotius Haemon / corrui ipse suo saucius ense latus, / et sua cum miserae permiscuit ossa puellae / qua sine Thebanam noluit ire domum?*" (21-24). Here, Propertius compares himself with Haemon who could not go on living without Antigone, and thus committed suicide at her grave. Later, in stanza five, "*ille etiam abrepta desertus coniuge*

Achilles / cessare in Teucris pertulit arma sua" (29-30). Propertius tells us that even the great hero Achilles was unable to fight after his wife was taken from him. In the last lines of the poem, Propertius reminds the reader that he is indeed inferior to Achilles, "*inferior multo cum sim vel matre vel armis, / mirum, si de me iure triumphat Amor?*" (39-40). This modest reminder comes too late for the reader to forget the imagery presented earlier in the stanza. As Phillips says, "It [confessional poetry] uses the self as a poetic symbol around which is woven a personal mythology." Here, Propertius mixes his personal mythology with the mythology of cultural icons, universal to his readers. II.8 is a poem stuffed full of confessional characteristics, and Propertius follows the path of Catullus toward the confessional, and although he may stop his journey sooner, the emotional impact of such a poem is significant.

Throughout Propertius's Cynthia sequence, the audience is kept informed of Propertius's state of mind. While he does not deeply ruminate on torture and confusion as Catullus did regarding Lesbia, Propertius nonetheless undergoes similar struggles. In poems I.8a and I.8b, Propertius first fears that Cynthia is going to go on a voyage, then rejoices when she decides to stay. He ends the poem with a declaration, a confession of sorts, that "*nam me non ullae poterunt corrumpere, de te / quin ego, vita tuo limine verba querar*" (21-22). No woman will be able to lure Propertius away from Cynthia, his devotion will be eternal, in spite of distance.

In I.8b, Propertius no longer addresses Cynthia; instead, he addresses his audience in such a way to suggest an internal monologue. The first line is joyous; "*Hic erit! hic iurata manet! rumpantur iniqui!*" (1). He does not restrain his emotion, he limits the barriers between his joy and the reader's understanding of it. Propertius then composes himself, allows the poem to take on a more somber tone. Here Propertius directly echoes Catullus 70: "*Nulli se dicit mulier mea nubere malle / quam mihi, non si se Iuppiter ipse petat*" (1-2) and 72: "*Dicebas quondam solum te nosse Catullum, / Lesbia, nec prae me velle tenere Iovem*" (1-2), when he says, "*illi carus ego et per me carissima Roma / dicitur, et sine me dulcia regna negat*" (31-32). Propertius's woman, like Catullus's, is willing to sacrifice riches and majesty for love.

Propertius is not afraid to be clear and honest about what he has to offer, "*illa vel angusto mecum requiescere lecto / et quocumque modo maluit esse mea*" (33-34). Such self-deprecation is a common occurrence in confessional poetry of the twentieth century. The relationship between the author and the author's inner self can often be a contentious one. In Propertius's and Catullus's poems whose subjects are volatile relationships with the women they love, the poets often indulge in self-deprecation, leading themselves to mull over failures. As Robert Phillips says of

confessional poetry, "personal failure is also a favorite theme." The failures tackled by the twentieth century poets range from love to parenthood, scholarship to career. For the Latin poets, their scope may have been more narrow, but the depth of feeling remains the same.

In Propertius's I.12, personal frustration once again surfaces. Unlike Catullus, who is rarely self-deprecating and consistently chooses to insult and blame Lesbia, Propertius finds fault with the gods: "*num me deus obruit? an quae / lecta Prometheus dividit herba iugis?*" (9-10). Later, he is frustrated with himself: "*non sum ego qui fueram*" (11). Here Propertius is dealing with the idea of two selves, or at the very least, an evolving idea of self: "I am not what I was." This sophisticated notion is not only confessional, but also is more retrospective than Catullus's harsh indictments of Lesbia. Catullus never pauses to question his motives, or the changes he undergoes. Propertius, however, realizes he has changed, much as when Anne Sexton asks, "Anne, / who were you?" (18-19).

Propertius certainly carves out his own confessional style. His elegies often have a tone of self-deprecation or self-mortification, and such blunt discussion of personal failure is a hallmark of confessional poetry. His poems often feature himself as the afflicted protagonist, and as with Catullus, the source of his affliction is his love, his Cynthia to Catullus's Lesbia. Also, he uses mythology to carve out his own personal mythology of the self. However, by aligning himself with the heroes and personalities of mythology, Propertius is able to project some of his emotion onto them, and thus moves away from the blatantly confessional that we see in poems of Catullus.

V. Tibullus and his Confessional Innovations

Tibullus, too wrote elegy. In many ways, he continued in the paths paved by both Catullus and Propertius. In other ways, namely though his use of fantasy and also irony and sarcasm, he broke away from his predecessors and took elegy to a new place through his style. His poetry often took on a confessional tone, yet the poems of his that can be called confessional differ from the short, tart, and agonized poems of Catullus, and the elegantly passionate work of Propertius. Guy Lee, in the introduction to his translation of Tibullus, elaborates beautifully:

He [Tibullus] expresses, I believe, a wider range of feeling: humor and high spirits on occasion, as we have seen, but nostalgia too and melancholy, tenderness (his favorite adjective is *tener*) and compassion, fear, hatred,

admiration, reverence -- the list is incomplete; it is enough to say that Propertius is the poet of passion, and Ovid of wit, Tibullus is the poet of feeling.

While I don't necessarily understand Lee's distinction between the passion of Propertius and the feeling of Tibullus, I do agree that Tibullus expresses many different emotions, often several within one poem. His elegies are often longer than those of Catullus or Propertius, and their greater length allows the poet to experiment with shifting mood and theme more than the other poets.

Tibullus, like Catullus and Propertius, presents stormy romantic relationships in his poems. However, unlike Catullus and Propertius, he focuses on more than one woman: Delia in Book I, and Nemesis in Book II, and also occasionally on a young boy, Marathus. It is the two relationships with women that yield the most confessional poems of the Tibullan corpus. I will be discussing the confessionalism within I.5, I.6, and 2.4. In these poems, we see Tibullus at his most "feeling," his most raw, and his most confessional.

In poem I.5, Tibullus's Delia is spending time with another man, and Tibullus is upset. The first distich sets up the scene nicely: "*Asper eram et bene discidium me ferre loquebar, / at mihi nunc longe gloria fortis abest;*" (1-2). We see Tibullus making an emotional transition away from being angry. Instead of raving, he becomes resigned. The first person owning of the former anger allows the poem to become a statement of the self from the very beginning.

He follows the opening distich with an epic simile. Tibullus becomes a top. The immediate image brought to mind by the simile is one of lost control, of confusion. Such an overwhelming confusion is a familiar theme in confessionalism, yet Tibullus decides to distance himself from it slightly by providing an image to aid in the explanation of his emotion. The longer poem allows Tibullus to make use of several different tones and moods within one poem, thus providing a more elaborate and detailed trip through his emotional state. Shortly into the poem, Tibullus is wistful, "*omnia persolui: fruitur nunc alter amore, / et precibus felix utitur ille meis*" (17-18). He calls the other man, his competition, *felix*, or lucky. Unlike Catullus, who chastises his competition, as in poem 79, Tibullus instead takes a more passive route and simply gives a wistful nod. Instead of calling the competition names, Tibullus simply calls him "lucky."

Tibullus goes on in I.5 to describe his dreams about how life with Delia was to be, and then follows that with an analogy between himself and Delia and Peleus and Thetis. Putnam tells us

that "such mythological comparisons are a trademark of Propertius, rare in Tibullus." One could say that this difference is directly related to confessional differences between the two poets: Propertius is restrained, Tibullus more open and honest. Tibullus follows that comparison with harsh words, full of ire that is hardly tempered. Here he is much like the twentieth century poet Anne Sexton, who once said of her poetry, "I hold back nothing." Suddenly, Tibullus is no longer Propertian, restrained and epic, and he becomes Catullan, unharnessed and reckless:

sanguineas edat illa dapes atque ore cruento

tristia cum multo pocula felle bibat.

hanc volitent animae circum sua fata querentes

semper et e tectis strix violenta canat.

ipsa fame stimulante furens herbasque sepulcris

quaerat et saevis ossa lupis;

currat et inguinibus nudis ululetque per urbem,

post agat e triviis aspera turba canum.

eveniet: dat signa deus. sunt numina amanti,

saevit et iniusta lege relictas Venus. (49-58)

Tibullus wants Delia's *lena* to eat raw meat and drink gore. He hopes that she starves and run about nude. Here, Tibullus is no longer trying to escape from his personal emotions; rather, he explains how he feels in explicit terms. He has clearly been alienated, that is the only explanation for such unbridled ire. It is as though we see him go through stages of loss in this one poem, first denial and then anger.

After anger, Tibullus begins trying to bargain with Delia. He asks, "*num donis vincitur omnis amor?*" (60). Here, Tibullus contradicts Vergil's "*omnia vincit amor*" with this new tack, "why is love conquered by a bribe?" Additionally, Tibullus reminds Delia about the benefits of loving a poor man. Tibullus's characterization of himself as a *pauper* gives his audience an insight into his

self-perception and also constructs a personal mythology for himself. By the last stanza, Tibullus has reached the acceptance point in his loss. He says, "*canimus frustra*," and it is easy to believe that he sings in vain. In poem I.5, Tibullus's pain appears to be real, and as David Yezzi writes about confessional poetry, if Tibullus is lying, he "lies like truth."

Poem I.6 is a different sort of elegiac poem. Julia H. Gaisser writes that a "single tone of irony is sustained throughout the poem." Such a tone is a common one within confessional poetry.

Phillips states that confessional poetry "employs irony and understatement for detachment."

Tibullus makes careful use of a very confessional juxtaposition: the careful line between detachment and personal emotional content. The ability to use both at the same time is necessary for good confessional poetry, otherwise it either becomes self-indulgent or too vague.

In I.6, Tibullus first addresses love, then Delia's husband, then his rivals, then Delia, then her mother, and finally Delia again. This structure allows Tibullus to open several windows for the reader to look through to gain a grasp of the poem. In the first stanza, Tibullus paints a portrait of Cupid: "*Semper, ut inducar, blandos offers mihi vultus, / post tamen es misero tristis et asper, Amor*" (1-2). This sets the stage for the rest of the narrative. Cupid is deceitful, like Delia, who was taught the art of deceit by the poet himself. Such deceit has left the poet *misero*, much like Catullus in many of his Lesbia poems. However, the ironic tone of Tibullus I.6 is different from the Catullan tone.

Tibullus then addresses Delia's husband, alerting him to her many tricks, tricks that were taught to her by Tibullus. In the fourth stanza, Tibullus himself admits that he is confessing to Delia's husband:

Saepe, velut gemmas eius signumque probarem,

per causam memini me tetigisse manum.

saepe mero somnum peperit tibi, at ipse bibebam

sobria supposita pocula victor aqua.

non ego te laesi prudens; ignosce fatenti.

iussit Amor; contra quis ferat arma deos? (25-30)

Here, Tibullus is dripping with irony, and in a sense, his words are modern. His confession, like many twentieth century confessions, is not meaningful. He asks to be forgiven for confession, ("*ignosce fatenti*") yet there is no hint of sincerity. Tibullus is self-aware, he knows that he is confessing, and the obvious sarcasm is more confessional than the confession itself. His ironic tone reveals that he cares more than he is trying to let on. He uses irony and sarcasm as defense mechanisms against his pain. Tibullus also compounds his "sin" by being exceptionally specific about what exactly his missteps were. David Yezzi writes about confessional poetry, "Through its enumeration of sins, the confessional poem emerges as a tragic self-portrait." While one could argue that Tibullus's irony keeps his story from truly being tragic, it is clear that his intention is to present a story of woe, regardless of believability. The poet wants the reader to be sympathetic to the protagonist, and to understand his trials.

His tone in 63-72 is distinctly less ironic. The tone of irony has not disappeared entirely, but when Tibullus says, "*laudare nec ullam / possim ego quin oculos appetat illa meos; / et, siquid peccasse putet, ducarque capillis / immerito pronas propriarum vias*", there is a hint of desperation that is not present in earlier sections of the poem. At the close of the poem, Tibullus asks Delia to remain faithful to him. Tibullus also compares Delia to an old spinster, one who must spin cloth alone because of her infidelity. Gaisser maintains that this, too, is ironic, and that "It might seem that Tibullus . . . is disclosing a change of heart towards Delia and that he remains too much in love to endure the idea of her being punished" This is true, it does indeed seem that way, especially upon first reading. In fact, here, Tibullus seems to be purging his emotions and his afflictions. However, upon "close inspection," his tone, while not overwhelmingly so, is as ironic and sarcastic as it is pathetic. As Gaisser says:

Tibullus sets up a situation or makes a statement that is apparently naive or sentimental. . . . Then, almost immediately, he begins to undermine his sentimental picture by juxtaposing it with incongruous or contradictory elements. The result is a very subtle, but nonetheless powerful irony.

Once again, it is this irony that marks I.6 as confessional. Charles Molesworth says that the confessional poetry of Sylvia Plath has "an ironic balance point that can tip either toward salvation or annihilation." The same could be said for Tibullus in I.6. The narrator of the poem walks the line between feeling wistful for his girlfriend and imploring the audience to empathize and mocking all of those involved so deftly that the irony is barely noticeable. He is either looking for salvation, or looking to annihilate everyone involved in his situation.

After I.6, Tibullus leaves Delia behind and instead focuses his romantic energy on a new woman, Nemesis. The poet's relationship with Nemesis was different from his relationship with Delia. It is a brief, intense relationship. The tone of the Nemesis poems is slightly more immediate than the Delia poems. Guy Lee says, Tibullus is the poet of feeling, and Nemesis perhaps inspires him to feel more than he did before.

One poem that is an excellent example of such feeling is II.4. In it, Tibullus mourns his enslavement to Nemesis. Once again, it is *Amor* who holds the reins. Like Catullus before him, Tibullus burns: "*uror: io, remove, saeva puella faces*" (6). It appears that Tibullus is abandoning the irony of I.6 for a new tone: affliction. He, like Catullus, is tormented: "*O ego ne possim tales sentire dolores, / quam mallet in gelidis montibus esse lapis!*" (7-8). He admits readily that he feels pain, and this confession is a departure from his sarcastic words of I.6. Of Tibullus's many emotions, it appears to be melancholy that is upon him. The poem ends with an excessive amount of self-pity:

quicquid habet Circe, quicquid Medea veneni,

quicquid et herbarum Thessala terra gerit,

et quod, ubi indomitis gregibus Venus afflat amores,

hippomanes cupidae stillat ab inguine equae,

si modo me placido videat Nemesis mea vultu,

mille alias herbas misceat illa, bibam. (55-60)

Tibullus explains all of the things he would drink, even the hippomanes from a horse in heat, if only Nemesis would look favorably upon him. Ball says about this section, "Thus, the concluding passage relates the extreme masochism displayed by the unhappy poet, a feeling that never seemed so pronounced even at the end of the Delia-poems." With Nemesis, Tibullus seems unable to muster up sarcasm and irony; instead, he reverts to the more Catullan form of affliction and alienation.

In his confessional poems, Tibullus demonstrates many distinct aspects of the mode. At times, he is reckless and rambling, as in I.5. In I.6., he is ironic and sarcastic, and his irony gives him

distance from his emotions. Finally, in II.4, he is once again afflicted, and distinctly alienated, echoing Catullus more than ever. Unlike Catullus's situations, however, Tibullus's situations are often fantastical and include impressive imaginary situations and scenarios. In addition, Tibullus contextualizes his emotions for the reader by speaking freely and allowing himself to get caught up in his emotion, unlike Propertius who chose to compare his emotions with situations in well-known mythology, bringing his emotions closer to the reader by casing them in familiar stories. Often he removes himself from the situation by detailing situations that are unlikely and all in his mind. This does not necessarily make him unconfessional; rather, the use of the fantastic is common in twentieth century confessional poetry. Robert Phillips says about some of Anne Sexton's love poems, "What is unquestionably Sexton's is the superimposition of surreal dream imagery upon the no less horrifying realities of modern life . . . The conventional love poem seems anachronistic." This reckless dream imagery is common in Tibullus, when he allows himself to indulge in nightmare fantasies that will never come true. Like Sexton, he is able to reassure himself by escaping to an imaginary world where he is worse off than he is in reality.

VI. Conclusion

In his book, *Catullan Provocations*, William Fitzgerald points out that "Classical scholarship is not given to the confessional mode, but in the case of Catullus a great deal of writing (novels, poems, and translations), much of it by classicists, is available to tell us what this author has meant to his readers, and it is clear that Catullus is the Rilke of antiquity." Like Rilke, the poetry of Catullus, Propertius and Tibullus inspires a certain intimacy with the audience. Whereas one might not initially see the confessionalism in their poetry, when one draws upon them for inspiration, the confessional impulse has influence.

It appeared in the middle part of the twentieth century that poets like Sexton, Lowell, and Plath were doing something new, something groundbreaking. In a sense, they were. Their work joined together in a collective song of confessionalism. The combination of the work of these poets, and others, made it appear that a mode had been born, when actually it had only been adopted by enough poets in a similar era to become widely recognized. Admittedly, what these poets were confessing were subjects that had not often been touched on before, subjects like suicide and mental illness. Nevertheless, what Sexton and the others did had been done before, almost two thousand years before, in the time of these Latin poets.

Catullus is the *genitor* of the confessional mode in antiquity. It is important to point out here that it is Saint Augustine who is usually given such a title, and while Augustine's originality in the area of prose confession is undeniable, his innovations were of a different nature from the poetic assertions of Catullus and the others. Catullus is exceptionally convincing in his affliction and need to purge his pain. Often he is able to make an unsympathetic character sympathetic. The reader sympathizes with the adulterous Catullus; much as the reader sympathizes with the adulterous Anne Sexton in her *Love Poems*. This is the undeniable power of the confessional poet: the unsympathetic becomes the hero or heroine.

However, just as not all successors to Lowell used his mode, Propertius does not adopt the Catullan method of confession. Propertius distances himself from the direct and blatant style of Catullus. Propertius does use self-mortification to his benefit, and he often tries to portray himself as sympathetically. Like the modern confessionalists, Propertius creates a personal mythology for himself. However, through his use of famous mythological characters, he transfers his emotions to mythological characters, thus distancing himself from his emotions. The distance between Propertius's emotions and his poems is much greater than the narrow distance between Catullus's emotions and his words.

In contrast, Tibullus continues in the Catullan confessionalist tradition, all the while tweaking it and molding it to enrich his own poetry. Tibullus is ironic. Catullus is as well, but Tibullus's irony is pervasive and powerful. Furthermore, in his lovelorn poems, Tibullus is fantastical and dramatic. He, like Anne Sexton, draws readers into his confessions by enticing them with stories from his imagination that make him more sympathetic. His poetry is raw, and he is afflicted, but like the modern confessionalists, he could easily be criticized for being too manipulative, too deft at reaching for the reader's heartstrings.

The three poets, Catullus, Propertius, and Tibullus, fit together well as a representative unit of the many facets of confessional poetry. It is important to note that it would be unfair to call any of the poets discussed, modern or ancient, only "confessional poets." All of these poets experiment with many styles, and only some poems of their collections qualify for discussion as confessional. Nevertheless, each of these poets writes confessional poems and develops his own confessional style.

Bernard Knox titled his review of Charles Martin's *Catullus*, "A Dangerously Modern Poet." Catullus is often read, mimicked, and translated. He is modern in many ways, and I believe the

most striking of these is his confessionalism. He is an exceptionally important predecessor to the twentieth century poets who brought the mode to the forefront. Moreover, the qualities that made some of Catullus's work confessional were qualities that were adapted by his successors, Propertius and Tibullus, to serve their own poetic purposes. While the breakthrough of confessional poetry in the post-Eisenhower period cannot be denied, it is detrimental both to modern readers and the ancient poets to deny the latter credit for forging the way towards the confessional in poetry close to two millennia before the mode had a name.

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