

## **PhD project: Poetics of *Romanitas* in the first century B.C : an identity challenged by the expansion of the Roman world.**

Research on the representation of *Romanitas* in the poetry of Catullus and Tibullus.

### SCIENTIFIC OBJECTIVES

The project proposes to study how « *Romanitas* », defined as an essentialized collective identity, is represented in a literary genre which is known as a « poetry of the Self », aimed at expressing the intimacy of the poetic subject: Catullus' pre-elegiac poetry and Tibullus' properly elegiac poetry. This poetic genre, inherited from Hellenistic poetry and adjusted to the Roman sensibility of the first century B.C., must have been considered by Roman poets as the most relevant manner to enunciate the dialectic relationship between the singular, unique identity of the poet which is generally considered as a « Anti-roman » marginal, and an essentialized collective identity, *Romanitas*, whose defining criteria vary considerably with the political changes of this tormented century. Indeed, after the political shifts of the late dying Republic and the emergence and expansion of the Augustan empire, the limits of the Roman world have been enormously extended. This sudden expansion of the space, which is now reachable and can be administered by Romans, connects and confronts different cultures around the Mediterranean area. Thus, the individual must build his identity torn apart between Roman norms and values, more and more strictly defined by Augustan conservative propaganda, and cultural influences from an oriental Elsewhere, which arouses both fascination and repulsion within the elegiac speaker. Therefore by investigating the specific poetic manner aimed at expressing the intimate quest of harmony between the Self and the expanding and instable Roman world, we plan to decipher the dynamics of identity transformation of *Romanitas* on the historical and geographical levels as well as on the sociological and anthropological levels in the first century B. C. Poetry provides to the poets Catullus and Tibullus, an opportunity to convey their subjective representation of this new space by imagining a new poetic language and manner of expressing the Self : the poet has to forge a poetics able to reveal a tripolar tension between the Self, *Romanitas* and the world, while trying to harmonize the three components of this triangulation. This is why our investigation seems inextricably linked to the history of the European area and to the way Europeans collectively and intimately define themselves during this period of multiple crises. It could also unveil unprecedented means to evoke *Romanitas* through the poetic writing of our poets' subjectivity.

### STATE OF ART

For the last century, two major interpretive directions in the reading of Roman elegy can be noted. In the post-war context, scholars (Paul Veyne, for example) refute any autobiographical reading: according to the structuralist scholars, when we read Catullus or Tibullus, we are not dealing with the true story of an actual felt love. Much more, this elegiac poetry fundamentally lacks sincerity: it would only present a fictitious world, filled with learned references such as it has been practiced by the Alexandrians. It means that elegiac poetry never matches the actual space and time. Nevertheless, it seems difficult to neglect the fact that the emergence of elegiac poetry coincides with a particular political context - the transition from Republic to Empire and the revolution of the perception of space - which has significant implications for the poetic works in charge of expressing the poet's subjectivity.

Since the eighties, American and English scholars have shown much more interest in the historical background which is well known for our two poets, and in searching for historical realities in their works: Wiseman's study of Catullus' poetry and Bright's research about Tibullus are representative of the scholarship that concerns this field of investigation. Furthermore, in France, scholars (like Thierry Barbaud) have taken a stylistic approach which encompasses anew the possibility of a sincere expression of individual sensibility without implying an autobiographical reading: the poets evoke their intimate experience of love and of the world by merging it with inherited Alexandrian poetic patterns. Although, this current of research does not highlight a close relationship between the determination of stylistic features and the renewed and changing definition of *Romanitas*.

Since the past quarter of the last century, poetic and anthropological issues of the representation of space have been explored quite intensively by scholars. New methods, analytic tools and concepts

have been developed: we even spoke of a “spatial turn of humanities”. It has been fifteen years since scholars have been using these new intellectual tools to investigate Latin poetry. However, these studies remain very global so that we could deepen this reflection by articulating “spatial poetics” with the issue of the intimate representation of *Romanitas*. Tibullus, in particular, has been somewhat underestimated by recent scholarship.

#### SCIENTIFIC APPROACH ENVISAGED

The poetry of Catullus and Tibullus could be read as an intimate inventory of this changing Roman world aimed at finding a relevant and harmonious way of life, both influenced by the temptation to embrace cultural features from the Orient and the more or less explicit will to comply with the new norms and values of *Romanitas*. It seems that this irreducible tension within the poetic voice has promoted the emergence of a new poetic expression, which is the personal poetry of the first century B.C., able to bring to light the inconstancy of the Self and to harmonize it: the unstable rhythm of elegiac couplet conveys the breaches crossing the poetic voice.

The comparison between Catullus and Tibullus seems very interesting because they both wrote at a crucial time: we count only forty years between the ends of their literary works. But *Romanitas* has been deeply reshaped between the agony of the Republic and the rise of Augustus, and the perception of space has been upset. These poets, each in his own way, express these changes very differently: Catullus delivers a poetry of movement and instability, venting his frustration, sorrow and anger, while Tibullus is desperately looking for peace, stability and harmony into a dreamed bucolic life alongside his *puella*.

The research needs to investigate poetic representations of space with contemporary historical and geographical sources. Thus, we will be able to extricate several representations of the same space, both mythological and historical. Then, it would be interesting to consider how these poets project Roman values and norms onto the foreign space and to what extent the Roman identity that they have assimilated determines their intimate perception and poetic figuration of the Other. Finally, the influence of the Other over the definition of the Self, as the poetic voice portrays it could be the ultimate point to explore. All these identity tensions that enhance the extraordinary expressivity of elegiac poetry may explain why the first century B. C. has been so propitious for the emergence of an intimate expression of the Self through poetic writing.

The identity anxieties expressed by Roman poets seem then very close to our current concerns. Studying elegiac poetry with a new perspective will provide a better understanding of what contemporary Europe is dealing with in the definition of its collective identity.