(Mis)reading the gnat: truth and deception in the pseudo-Virgilian *Culex*[*]

The *Culex* – the earliest and best attested of the purported minor works of Virgil, and the most outright in gesturing towards Virgilian authorship – poses a problem for modern classical scholarship. [1] Since at least the seventeenth century scholars have been preoccupied with the poem's authenticity.[2] Is it a piece of early Virgilian *iuuenilia*, as the ancient testimonies and mediaeval transmission of the text seem to assert, or a later production? If a later production, should we see it as a deliberate forgery, or as a poem severed in the course of transmission from its original author and helplessly swept up in Virgil's train?[3] The authenticity problem has proven persistent: as recently as the 1970s, scholars tried to claim the *Culex* for Virgil.[4] Even among those who think it non-Virgilian, the apparent consensus of anonymous late-Tiberian authorship has been contested by Otto Zwierlein's suggestion of M. Julius Montanus and Jean-Yves Maleuvre's, even more unlikely, of Augustus.[5]

In more recent years, however, authenticity studies have changed focus. Attention has shifted from pure *Echtheitskritik* – the busy philological work of athetising supposed interpolations, reassigning stray *adespota*, tying up the loose ends of the canon – to the literary and cultural *function* of the inauthentic text.[6] Irene Peirano's game-changing 2012 monograph, in particular, recasts these troublesome works as literary artefacts worthy of investigation in their own right. Rather than indict their authors for not only malicious but – worse! – incompetent forgery, and condemn their readers for being duped by such transparent deceptions,[7] she argues that we should allow for rather more sophistication. Authorial impersonations like the *Culex* seem to function as 'complex literary games of concealment and revelation in which readers are both teased into taking the text as authentic and simultaneously signaled its artificiality as a literary construct'.[8]

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In the case of the *Culex*, the prospect of a sixteen-year old Virgil dabbling in surreal neotericism is (just, almost, tantalisingly) believable.[9] The fun is in doggedly continuing to suspend disbelief even in the face of persistent and insurmountable challenges to that disbelief: a Virgil who sounds suspiciously Ovidian,[10] who hymns Octavius as a nine-year old *puer* (*Culex* 26, 37) but describes a gnat's tomb eerily reminiscent of Augustus' mausoleum,[11] who writes a pastiche of his three mature canonical works at the very beginning of his career.[12]

'The problem of the authenticity of the *Culex*, like the corpse of its heroic flea, simply will not die,' Glenn Most remarked in 1987: 'it returns to complain of ill-treatment and to haunt those who thought they had killed it.'[13] Thirty years after his piece so convincingly laid to rest any lingering belief in Virgilian authorship, and with the rehabilitation of pseudepigraphic and impersonatory texts well under way, the time is perhaps ripe to reassess how the poem self-consciously signals its peculiar form of overdetermined inauthenticity and simultaneous protestation of true-born Virgilian authenticity.[14] Taking Most's passing comment not just as a wry verbal flourish but as an insight into the relationship between the poem's contents and its nature, purpose and reception as a whole, I propose that the eponymous gnat and the poem's authenticity have more in common than their irritatingly recursive behaviour alone. From its opening salvo at the hypothetical hostile reader (*inuidus*, 5) and its exploitation of established metapoetic gestures in the proem, to the narrative structures and metaliterary self-positioning seen throughout the rest of the poem, the *Culex* repeatedly stages scenes of critical reading and interpretation falling somewhere between truth and deception, face-value and falsity. Reconsidering the gnat's narrative as an embedded 'poem within a poem', complete with its own narrator, audience and reception, provides insight into

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how the *Culex* models processes of reading (or rather, misreading) *within* the fiction, and thus how it prompts its own readers to approach it as a piece of literature.

Authorial games and flyweight critics

The first few lines of the *Culex* programmatically sketch out the simultaneous qualities of veracity and willing deception that characterise the poem as a whole. The first word is *lusimus*, a verb frequently connected to poetic composition in 'light' or 'low' genres. A certain neoteric or Alexandrian allegiance is certainly appropriate to the *Culex*. The poet overloads the proem with poetological keywords, 'all the tired clichés of Augustan neotericism', as David Ross has it:[15] *gracili modulante Thalia* in line 1; *tenuem*, the Catullan *araneoli*,[16] and *formauimus* in line 2; *docta* in line 3.[17] But the verb also refers to playing a part, or participating in a performance.[18] The poet declares that the conceit of Virgilian authorship is a temporary pose or *persona*, not true identity: 'I have played a role', that of *Vergilius iuuenis*. Already in the first lines of the poem the reader is encouraged to maintain a double vision: on the one hand, suspending disbelief, taking the proem as sincere metapoetic statement and reading the poem in line with established literary tropes; on the other, stepping back from participating in the poem's fiction and instead watching the authorial mechanisms at work behind the scenes. We must understand the quasi-titular *lusimus* as a conventional marker of generic affiliation and, at the same time, as an admission of authorial play, impersonation and even deception.[19]

The *Culex*-poet's openly impersonatory use of *ludere* in fact paradoxically strengthens the effect of his Virgilian impersonation. Virgil uses *ludere* of his own composition of the *Eclogues*: *ludere uersu* ('to play in verse', *Ecl.* 6.1), *carmina qui lusi pastorum* ('I who played shepherds' songs', *G.* 4.565). The verb was swiftly taken up as a codeword

for Virgil's earliest authorial efforts: within his lifetime, Propertius characterises his composition of the *Eclogues* and *Georgics* with *ludebat* ('he played', 2.34.85).[20] A few decades later, Ovid, justifying his own poetic transgressions, outlines Virgil's career:

> Phyllidis hic idem teneraeque Amaryllidis ignes
>   bucolicis iuuenis luserat ante modis.

<div align="right">(Tr. 2.537f.)</div>

> Before this [i.e. before the *Aeneid*], when he was young, this same man played in bucolic measures the passions of Phyllis and tender Amaryllis.

But even in Virgil's original usages, the verb *ludere* already has impersonatory undertones: who speaks as narrator in *Ecl.* 6, Virgil or Tityrus (6.4)? Who sang of *Tityre… patulae… sub tegmine fagi* ('Tityrus under the shelter of a spreading beech', *G.* 4.566) – the Virgil who now authors the *Georgics*, or Meliboeus, the character who originally uttered these words at *Ecl.* 1.1? The *Culex*-poet's use of *ludere* reads Virgil's in terms of authorial uncertainty, and rewrites it in the context of a supposedly 'early' work of dubious authorship: in other words, an impersonation of an impersonatory stance.[21]

At first sight, the tense of *lusimus* seems to mark a transition from playful *iuuenilia* to weightier genres, fitting in neatly with Virgil's own characterisation of his upwards poetic trajectory (cf. *lusi*, *G.* 4.565). The third line reinforces the break with the poet's past endeavours: *lusimus: haec propter culicis sint carmina docta* ('I have played: because of this, let the song of the gnat be erudite').[22] But the next line blurs the categories of 'playful' and 'serious', and muddles the distinction between past and present poetic activity. The poem's erudition, its learned nature, is to be achieved *per ludum,* 'through playing'. Of course, this commingling of *ludus* and *doctrina* in literary works is an old trope. As far back as Plato's *Symposium* Agathon could declare that he wrote a speech τὰ μὲν παιδιᾶς, τὰ δὲ σπουδῆς μετρίας, καθ᾽ ὅσον ἐγὼ δύναμαι, μετέχων

('mixing, as far as I can, the playful with the measuredly serious', 197e).[23] By the time of late Republican and early Augustan neotericism, the imbrication of the two poetic registers was near compulsory.[24] But even given this context, the *Culex*-poet's emphasis on *doctrina* is extreme. Not only does it receive further definition, but the coexistence of *ludus* and *doctrina* is vaunted as the sole criterion by which the poem should be evaluated:

> … culicis sint carmina docta,
> omnis ut historiae per ludum consonet ordo
> notitiaeque ducum uoces, licet inuidus adsit.
> quisquis erit culpare iocos Musamque paratus,
> pondere uel culicis leuior famaque feretur.
>
> <div align="right">(Culex 3-7)</div>

Let the *carmina culicis*[25] be erudite, such that the whole structure is playfully consistent with traditional subject matter and the words with the known style of leaders in the field, even if a hostile critic is present. Let anyone who is ready to blame my jokes and my Muse be considered lighter in weight and reputation than even the gnat itself.[26]

According to the proem, then, an 'erudite' quality in poetry consists of the adherence of the poem's structure and style (*ordo, uoces*) to existing literary tradition (*historiae*) and the familiar style of canonical authors (*notitiae ducum*),[27] and we are to judge the poem accordingly. And how do we judge it? Taking *lusimus* as an admission of impersonation, it turns out that in this definition of *doctrina* the *Culex*-poet has indeed sketched out the parameters of the poem's *imitatio*: the *Culex* follows not only a plot structure recognisable from literary history[28] but also the *ordo* of Virgil's literary career, from bucolic to georgic to epic; its *uoces* are almost entirely echoes of Virgilian and Ovidian phrases and diction. 'I have played a role, and so let the poem be erudite': the *Culex* achieves *doctrina per ludum*.

But *doctus* is a slippery term too. As well as denoting a sincere scholarly learnedness, it overlaps with *callidus*: 'clever', yes, but tricky and sly too.[29] We might think of

Plautus' perpetual *docti doli*,[30] or Ovid – self-proclaimed *doctus amator* (*Ars am.* 1.1f.) – and his characterisation of both love and poetry as intimately bound up in strategies of deceit.[31] To be *doctus per ludum* is to be not only 'erudite, albeit in light genre' but 'cunning through trickery'.

And looking back at line 3 we find another ambiguity, this time syntactical, at play in the term *culicis carmina*. *culicis* is usually understood as an objective or definitive genitive, denoting the theme or title of the work: 'the poem about the gnat', or 'the poem *The Gnat*'.[32] But it can also be construed as a subjective genitive, used not for the subject of the work but for its *author*: 'the poem of/by the gnat'.[33] Compare Martial's *Capitolini… carmina belli* ('poems about the Capitoline war', *Epigr.* 5.5.7) with *opus Maronis* ('Virgil's work', 3.38.8) or *libris Ciceronis aut Maronis* ('books by Cicero or Virgil', 5.56.5): in the first instance the genitive denotes the theme or title, in the others it indicates the author. The gnat is the only speaker in the poem other than the narrator; its enormous speech of 174 lines comes close to overwhelming the narrator's 240 (or 238, if the epitaph's *tacita uox*, 'silent voice', in 413f. is subtracted). Its narration is introduced with *cecinit* (209): this is unambiguously a *carmen*. Which song is it that the proem brands *doctum*, the *Culex* as a whole or the gnat's narration?[34] Can we trust the gnat any more than we can trust the elusive *Culex*-poet hiding behind the pose of *Vergilius personatus*? Is the *inuidus,* the hostile reader quick to censure, to be envisaged as an external reader with the *Culex* in his hands – or as a character encountering the *culex* within the poem?[35]

Dangerous misreadings

The proem invites us to equate the *culex* with the *Culex* and to keep our eyes peeled for deception and ambiguity; the remainder of the poem illustrates just how fraught an exercise 'reading the gnat' might be. At the first appearance of the gnat, the consequences of *mis*reading are brought sharply home. Our protagonist, the hapless goatherd, is suddenly and painfully woken from his afternoon nap by the bite of a gnat (184-7). Failing to recognise the altruistic gnat's good intentions – an attempt to warn the goatherd of the imminent threat from a monstrous snake (157-84) – he immediately squishes the poor insect:

> … cum prosiluit furibundus et illum
> obtritum morti misit, cui dissitus omnis
> spiritus et cessit sensus.
>
> <div align="right">(Culex 187-9)</div>

> At which he leapt forward, beside himself with rage, and crushed the gnat and
> killed it; the gnat's breath and life, entirely dispersed, stopped.

The goatherd then notices the snake on the verge of attack and kills it too (189-201), still dozy from his nap but therefore blessedly ignorant of the gravity of the situation: *erat tardus somni languore remoti | nec senis aspiciens timor obcaecauerat artus* ('he was dull from the drowsiness of the sleep he had just escaped, and so terror at the sight had not yet numbed [lit. 'blinded'] the limbs of the old man', 198f.).[36] But peace still eludes him: his sleep that night is disturbed by the vengeful *effigies… culicis* ('ghost of the gnat', 208), who complains at length of his unfair death and underworld torments (210-383) and demands that the goatherd provide him with proper burial so he may find rest in the abode of the righteous (*pia sedes*, 375).

This part of the plot rests on misinterpretation. The goatherd acted according to his understanding of the situation – but it swiftly becomes apparent that this understanding was partial and mistaken (*uix compos mentis*, 'scarcely in control of his mind', 191), and

his error leads to grave consequences for both the gnat and the goatherd. Not just the goatherd's cognition but his sight too has been compromised: even though terror had not yet 'blinded' him (*obcaecauerat*, 199), the gnat still bit him right in the pupil of his eye (184-7).[37] Here we see that long-established metapoetic turn whereby internal acts of interpretation or reading suggest modes of and models for external reading of the text itself:[38] what consequences await the reader of the *Culex*, when the goatherd's misreading of the *culex* is so grievous? Indeed, *furibundus* (187) might be a somewhat bathetic reference to another morally ambiguous murder, famously committed in a fit of rage prompted by an act of reading: Aeneas' killing of Turnus goaded by his interpretation of the *balteus*. Where the goatherd is *furibundus*, Aeneas is *furiis accensus* ('spurred on by rage', *Aen.* 12.946); though the goatherd's sight is partial and Aeneas is able to 'drink in deep with his eyes' the sight of the balteus (*oculis… hausit*, 12.945f.), both react with immediate responses to their perceptions of the situation.[39] The *Culex* replays this climactic moment of Virgil's epic, accentuating the pitfalls and ambiguities of reading and interpretation by explicitly depicting it in failure.

Disappearing into thin air

The gnat's visitation as *effigies* to the sleeping goatherd (208f.) and its lengthy *katabasis*-narrative (210-384) – the *culicis carmina* – are particularly important for the poem's thematisation of its own deceitful nature in the form of the gnat. True, the ghostly gnat is not suspected of falsity or deception by its internal audience: the goatherd is emotionally struck by the pathos of the gnat's tale (*nec tulit ultra | sensibus infusum culicis de morte dolorem*, 'nor could he bear any longer the sorrow for the gnat's death that flooded through his senses', 386f.), and answers its implicit request for burial (*modo*

sit dum grata uoluntas, | exsistat par officium, 'let there only be a grateful heart, an equal service rendered', 230f.) by building it a grandiose tomb (385-414).[40] Yet various elements of the gnat's apparition and subsequent narrative certainly lead a more sceptic listener to question its veracity.

What kind of ghost is the gnat? Any attempt one might make towards applying a typology of apparitions to the *Culex* is foiled by the fact that the gnat's ghost – in both appearing to the sleeping goatherd and also narrating its journey through the underworld – seems to conflate two types of encounter with the dead commonly found in classical literature. First, the apparition or dream, in which a living character encounters some immaterial semblance of another; second, the *nekyia* or *katabasis*, in which the living protagonist goes to a 'place of the dead' and encounters and speaks with the ghosts of the dead.[41] Both of these categories are characterised by uncertainty, unreliability and instability, in historical and religious accounts as much as in narrative literature.

Dreams and apparitions are difficult to pin down for precise categorisation: the encountering character might be awake, sleeping, or in a liminal state between the two;[42] and the apparition might be of a living or dead character, or one of ambiguous vitality.[43] Dreams and apparitions, as well as the messages they convey, can be true, false, or misinterpreted.[44] There is substantial ambiguity in the Latin terminology of phantoms and ghosts, too.[45] While *effigies* (*Culex* 208) and *simulacrum* refer primarily to false or fictional apparitions and *manes* (*Culex* 214) and *umbra* to the posthumous shade of one who was once living, overlap or unclear usage is frequent. A clear example of conflicting terminology reflecting the apparition's ambiguous state occurs at *Aeneid* 2.772, where Aeneas reports seeing *infelix simulacrum atque ipsius umbra Creusae* ('sad phantom and ghost of Creusa herself'). Is Creusa dead or alive? Aeneas (like Virgil) avoids clarifying.[46] It is characteristic of such apparitions that both their ontological status and

their messages lie somewhere between truth and fiction, and a substantial number are actively deceitful.[47] Significantly, literary treatments of such apparitions frequently foreground questions of narrative reliability, a tendency noted already by Cicero and compared to the actual effect of dreams outside literature: *haec, etiamsi ficta sunt a poeta, non absunt tamen a consuetudine somniorum* ('these examples, even though they have been fabricated by the poet, are not that far from the usual nature of dreams', *Div.* 1.42).[48]

Not only dreams but underworld encounters in general are in ancient literature fundamentally and overtly fictitious, and rest upon the inherently ambivalent act of narration.[49] Odysseus' *nekyia* (*Od.* 11)*,* the archetypal underworld encounter of the classical tradition, is notorious for the doubtful status of its truthfulness within the poem: it is among Odysseus' various conflicting and in some cases overtly fictitious narratives within the poem, and its wider context, the narration to the Phaeacians (*Od.* 9-12), is especially marked by fantasy.[50] The *Aeneid* redoubles this narratorial instability: the *katabasis* of Book 6 is variously propelled, interrupted, extended, echoed and prematurely curtailed by a host of different narrators and interlocutors, with fluctuating degrees of reliability and forthrightness.[51] Although Aeneas' visit to the underworld is ostensibly an uncovering of hidden knowledge – a 'cheat sheet' to eschatology, the nature of the universe, the mysteries of past, present and future – any revelations are in turn matched by reconcealments, *praeteritiones* and aporetic obscurity, and any epistemological certainty within the episode is disrupted on multiple levels.[52] Internally, the revelations granted to Aeneas, like the underworld's geography itself, are labyrinthine, riddling, and partial:[53] Dido's magnificently disdainful silence (*Aen.* 6.469-74), for example, or the contradictions between Palinurus' and the narrator's accounts of his death (5.835-71, 6.337-83). Such contradictions are frequent in post-Homeric

underworld narratives, perhaps in imitation of the prominent inconsistency in Book 11 of the *Odyssey* whereby Odysseus begins on the surface of the earth (*nekyia*) but by the end is walking in the land of the dead (*katabasis*).[54] Crucially, in the *Aeneid* these contradictions also highlight the fact that the *katabasis*-narration is a retelling, a re-narration: for the first time, Virgil returns to events that have already been described in the poem, and the discrepancies (and distortions) between versions told in different voices illustrate the dependence of the story on the teller.[55]

Particularly significant for this article is Virgil's characterisation of Aeneas' *katabasis* not only as narrative – self-reflexive, self-conscious, self-critical – but also as dream. Aeneas departs from the underworld via the Ivory Gate of *falsa insomnia* ('false dreams', *Aen.* 6.896)*,* and subsequently fails to recall any details of his *katabasis*. This peculiar feature has led several critics to suggest that the entire underworld sequence is a *falsum insomnium*, destabilising the entire episode's veracity within the poem and the reader's trust in the narrator with it.[56] Sergio Casali goes further: in his reading, the dreams' falsity spills out into the rest of the poem, staining not only the underworld of Book 6 but the poem as a whole.[57] The characterisation of the underworld as a dream or apparition goes the other way, too: the 'true dreams' that slip through the Gate of Horn to the world above are referred to as *umbrae*, 'shades' – or rather, 'ghosts' (6.894).

The gnat's apparition to the sleeping goatherd and its *katabasis*-narrative participate in and develop this tradition of epistemological, ontological and narratorial instability. It is particularly interesting that the gnat – a dream-apparition, and a dead shade in the underworld asking for burial – is promoted to become narrator of its own *katabasis*. This is unparalleled in ancient literature: just as dreams are reported to others by the one who experiences them, not by those who appear within them, so too are *katabaseis* typically

narrated by the living protagonist who returns to the upper world, or by an omniscient narrator.[58]

The gnat's narration, moreover, begins and ends with indications of the specifically fashioned or fictive nature of both the ghostly speaker and its speech. Before the gnat begins, the narrator introduces the ghost as an *effigies… culicis* (208). The term *effigies*, derived from *effingo*, frequently denotes something not only artificially created but spurious, imitative, ersatz − Andromache's pitiful faux-Xanthus (*Aen.* 3.497), for example, or Circe's incorporeal mirage of a boar (Ov. *Met.* 14.358f.).[59] The term is not inappropriate for a ghost or dream apparition, but connotations of deceit are not far from the surface.

Nearly two hundred lines later, the gnat closes its speech with something of a poetic cliché: *at mea diffusas rapiantur dicta per auras* ('but as for my words, let them be carried off into the far-spreading breezes', 384). Servius tells us that the image of 'scattering to the winds' is a standard idiom for paying no attention to something, which is clearly the primary sense here: the pessimistic gnat concludes that its words are in vain and its plea will go unanswered.[60] A few lines before, it characterised the goatherd's imagined response in similar terms: *haec immemor audis | et tamen, ut uadis, dimittes omnia uentis* ('you hear these words, unmindful, and still as you go you will abandon everything to the winds', 379f.).[61] But there are several further points of interest in the gnat's closing words. First, a minor point: the gnat is immediately proven wrong, as the goatherd is deeply affected by the gnat's narration and straightaway sets about making amends. Far from being *immemor* (379), he is emphatically *memor,* even painstakingly so (*memor* 394, *assiduae curae memor* 398). That the gnat's prediction turns out wrong does not, of course, mean that it is an unreliable or deliberately mendacious narrator: its despondency is a perfectly legitimate reaction to its ill-treatment and suffering, and it is

a pleasant surprise that the goatherd does in fact see his error and react accordingly. But if Virgil's underworld narrations have taught us anything, it is that discrepancies between a *katabasis* or dream and the external narrative are worth further attention.

More significantly, the gnat has chosen here a phrase with a rich and suggestive poetic heritage. The formula *diffusas rapi per auras* goes back to Homer as a striking image of evanescence and immateriality, particularly applied to phantoms and shades of the dead. The prototypical example occurs in Odysseus's *nekyia*, when he thrice tries to embrace the shade of his mother, but each time her immaterial ghost slips away 'like a shadow or in a dream' (σκιῇ εἴκελον ἢ καὶ ὀνείρῳ, *Od.* 11. 208).[62] In this epic context the formula in itself does not provoke doubt as to the phantom's ontological status; by the time it reaches Virgil, however, some more complexities have accrued from its reuse in philosophical writing. Plato's Cebes uses the image to express the impossibility of life or consciousness after death, when the soul dissipates 'like breath or smoke' (*Phd*. 70a: ὥσπερ πνεῦμα ἢ καπνὸς), and Lucretius takes up the same image with gusto, using it to illustrate the disappearance of souls after death, not to the underworld but out of existence altogether: *et nebula ac fumus quoniam discedit in auras* ('since mist and smoke disperse in the breezes', 3.436), or *dissolui… omnem animai | naturam ceu fumus in altas aeris auras* ('the whole nature of the soul is dissolved, like smoke, in the uppermost breezes of the aether', 455f.).

Virgil repeatedly uses the motif in his protagonists' sorrowful encounters with phantoms of the dead, rehabilitating it from its appropriation in philosophy to its original epic context: Eurydice (*G.* 4.498-502), Creusa (*Aen.* 2.790) and Anchises twice (*Aen.* 5.740, 6.700-2). But despite the Homeric modelling of these scenes, in each case the phrasing is markedly Lucretian,[63] undercutting the scenes' sentimentality and (in the case of the *Aeneid*) the legitimacy of the phantoms' advice with an intertextual paradox:

how can these phantoms be genuine, when they are described in terms that elsewhere indicate the impossibility of any form of posthumous existence?[64] As ever in Virgil's engagement with Lucretius, 'to repress by giving voice to the repressed necessarily lays the groundwork for its *unheimlich* return.'[65] Virgil's systematic 'remythologising' of Lucretius, restoring passages such as these to epic contexts, always runs the risk of the reverse process, 'demythologising' the *Aeneid*.

With this in mind, it is striking that the gnat uses this motif not only of its speech, but of its own nature. The gnat's words are to be 'swept away through the far-spreading breezes' (*diffusas rapiantur per auras*, 383); it narrates its own death and arrival in the underworld in synonymous terms, *rapior per inania uentis* ('I am carried on the winds through empty space', 212). The parallel of speaker and speech, author and work, is standard: after the gnat finishes speaking the narrator immediately recapitulates the same conceit, commenting *dixit et extrema tristis <u>cum uoce</u> recessit* ('it spoke, and sadly drew back along with its last words', 384).[66] But the precise motif used to create this parallel is uncomfortable. Much as the gnat encourages its audience to put credence in its actual bodily experience of the underworld – note *mea uiscera*, 'my vitals', in the next line (215) – the insubstantial, inconsequential, even ontologically impossible characterisation of the speech carries over to the gnat itself.

Indeed, the description of the gnat's descent to the underworld, *rapior per inania uentis*, seems to invoke another element of Lucretius' denial of the traditional conception of death and the underworld.[67] There is very little explicit discussion in ancient literature of how the souls of the dead were supposed to reach the underworld,[68] and therefore very few parallels against which to measure the *Culex*'s description.[69] It is striking, then, that not only does *per inania* carry specifically Lucretian connotations,[70] but that a phrase very similar to *rapior per inania uentis* appears in Lucretius during a remarkably

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apposite discussion of commonly-held suppositions regarding the underworld: [*aues*] *vacuum proper iam per inane… dispergunt animas* ('[birds] disperse their souls through this almost empty space', *DRN* 6.838f.). Lucretius here addresses the common etymological *topos* regarding *Auernus*, namely that no winged creatures can fly over it: *Auernus* derived from Ἄ-ορνος and cognate with *auis*. [71] He offers two scientific explanations in place of the myth that Avernus is the gateway to hell: either the noxious exhalations from the lake poison the birds, or the movement of the vapours displaces the air and creates a vacuum, through which the birds fall as their *anima* escapes through their pores (*DRN* 6.738-839). Either way, though, the lake is just a lake. There is no heaven and no hell, for Lucretius, and neither is lying under Avernus.

Virgil nods to Lucretius' account in his narration of Aeneas' approach to the underworld, substituting the Lucretian etymology for the suppressed name *Auernus*: *quam super haud ullae poterant impune uolantes | tendere iter pinnis* ('over which no flying creatures can wing their way in safety', *Aen.* 6.239f.).[72] As at the exit, so at the entrance: Virgil's framing of Aeneas' *katabasis* destabilises it, leaving the reader unsure of the truth of the episode. Did Aeneas visit the underworld? – or did he merely dream that he did? – or is it purely allegorical? The *Culex*'s phrasing, in turn, recontextualises the Lucretian-Virgilian trope and redoubles its self-contradictions. Lucretius says there is no underworld, and no flying creatures can fly over Avernus; Virgil says that Aeneas visits the underworld, but no flying creatures (*haud ullae… uolantes*) can fly over Avernus; the gnat, however, a flying creature *par excellence*, says that it passed through the Lucretian vacuum (*per inania*) and visited the Virgilian underworld itself. As in the *Aeneid*, the *Culex*'s narrative is in direct conflict with its allusive gestures; the reader is left in doubt as to the degree of reality or reliability in this episode.

Fluid geographies and watery underworlds

Let us put aside the question of the ghostly gnat's ontological status and turn to the *katabasis* narrative itself. It rapidly emerges that, as a narrator, the gnat leaves much to be desired. Despite its didactic assertions of autopsy in pre-emptive defence of its report's reliability (*uidi* 216, 227, *cerno* 259),[73] certain aspects of its narrative seem even deliberately confusing. The underworld's topography is especially hard to envisage, even in comparison with Virgil's renownedly unmappable underworld: though at times it seems vastly simplified,[74] consisting solely of Tartarus and Elysium with none of Virgil's subdivisions, as the speech progresses the underworld begins to seem ever more recursive and tangled. The gnat – who somehow gains entrance to the entire underworld though unburied and not yet judged (374-7) – passes from Tartarus (216-58) to Elysium (258-371) and then (back?) to Dis (372-7), a route unparalleled in ancient daytrips to Hades.[75]

Admittedly, ancient underworlds not only vary from text to text but are necessarily murky, confusing, and characterised by spatial fluidity:[76] within texts such as *Odyssey* Book 11, Plato's *Myth of Er* and *Aeneid* 6, their topographies are an eschatological secret revealed only partially and to a select few. Even considering this generic lack of fixity, though, the *Culex*-author hijacks the ontological and epistemological uncertainty of the underworld – most importantly, of course, the Virgilian underworld – and marks it in specifically narratorial ways, deploying it as comment on the issue of reliable authorship and authenticity. For example, there is a sense of both geographical and temporal disorientation in the *Culex*'s underworld, especially in the narration of the Trojan War (304-57) prompted by the sight of the heroes in Elysium (*sede piorum*, 295).[77] It is unclear whether the tale is simply a discursive aside on the gnat's part or if, in a

psychological turn, the heroes are themselves remembering their deeds (and, if the latter, how the gnat discerns this): the gnat regularly shifts tense, sometimes employing the historic present and sometimes the past, and also oscillates between narrating the literary past and describing the heroes as it sees them in the underworld. A particularly ambiguous moment occurs when the gnat is describing Odysseus at lines 327-33:

> huic gerit auersos proles Laertia uultus,
> et iam Strymonii Rhesi uictorque Dolonis
> Pallade iam laetatur ouans rursusque tremescit:
> iam Ciconas iamque horret atrox †lestrigone [...];
> illum Scylla rapax canibus succincta Molossis,
> Aetnaeusque Cyclops, illum metuenda Charybdis
> pallentesque lacus et squalida Tartara terrent.

<div align="right">(Culex 327-33)</div>

> The son of Laertes keeps his face turned away from him [Ajax]. And now, as victor over Strymonian Rhesus and Dolon, congratulating himself over the Palladium, he rejoices, and then again trembles. He, formidable though he is, shudders now at the Cicones, now at the Laestryginians. Ravenous Scylla, surrounded by Molossian hounds – the Cyclops of Etna – fearsome Charybdis – the gloomy lakes and dismal Tartarus – all terrify him.

The last line is misleading. In the context of the wider *katabasis*, it is natural to read it as a description of Odysseus' current state (as at 327), as if the gnat sees him frightened by his underworld surroundings.[78] But Odysseus is in the Elysian fields, not *pallentesque lacus et squalida Tartara*, as we are reminded soon after: *hic alii resident pariles uirtutes honore | heroes* ('here abide others of equal reputation for valour, all heroes', 358f., cf. *sede piorum*, 295). Line 333 is therefore a reference to Odysseus' earlier experience of the underworld, a continuation of Odysseus' adventures in the *Odyssey* as narrated here by the gnat (330-3). The present-tense *terrent* muddies the waters: is it a historic present, referring to Odysseus' emotional state in his *nekyia*? Or is there a transference of emotion, so that traumatised Odysseus, lost in the memory of his earlier unpleasant underworld experience, believes himself there again?[79] If Odysseus confuses his

imagined and actual surroundings, though, so does the gnat, so that we are uncertain (at least momentarily) precisely where its narration has taken us. Indeed, the *Culex* here reverses the roles taken by Ajax and Odysseus in the Homeric underworld, where it is Ajax who silently turns away from Odysseus (*Od.* 11.563-7).[80] Is this truly a reversal? – or has the gnat betrayed, once again, its imperfect recall of what it saw in the underworld?[81]

One further aspect of the *katabasis'* topography again flags up the dubious reliability of the gnat's narration, this time resting on another kind of fluidity. As in previous underworlds, the principal divisions of the underworld are marked by bodies of water: *Lethaeas... per undas* ('through Lethaean waves', 215), *ad Stygias... aquas* ('to the Stygian waters', 240), *Elysiam… ad undam* ('to the Elysian water', 260), *Ditis opacos | ... lacus* ('murky lakes of Dis', 372f.), *uastum Phlegethonta* ('huge Phlegethon', 374).[82] The gnat's narration, though, seems preoccupied with water above and beyond the traditional wateriness of the underworld:[83] as well as the underworld rivers and marshes it passes, it also tells of Tantalus in the waters (240-2), Orpheus' rivers (278), Simois and Xanthus (307), the *Sigea* or *Rhoetea litora* ('Sigean or Rhoetean shores', 307f., 313) a vivid river simile (318-20), Odysseus' previous visit to these *pallentes... lacus* (333), the Hellespont's waves (338), and a shipwreck (344-357). Virgil's Sibyl speaks of 'swimming across' underworld rivers (*transnauimus amnes*, *Aen.* 6.671) – but the gnat does it twice (*transnare*, 215; *tranandus*, 260). The gnat's parting wish for the goatherd's continued life and happiness prioritises water (*fontes*, 'springs', 381) over other conventional elements of a pastoral idyll (*uiridis nemorum siluas et pascua*, 'leafy forest groves and pastures', 382), and contrasts this imagined scene of the goatherd settled among sacred springs (*tu cole fontes*, 'you dwell among [or 'worship'] the springs', 381)

with that of the gnat in murky subterranean waters (*ego Ditis opacos | cogor adire lacus*, 'I am forced to go to the dark lakes of Dis', 372f.).

The *Culex*'s first description of the gnat is *umoris... alumnus* (183), sentimentally rendered 'little Noursling of the humid Air' by Spenser[84] but in ancient zoology a strictly literal description of the origin of gnats, born from *acescente umore* ('brackish water').[85] Like Aeneas' visit to Anchises in the Virgilian underworld, the gnat stages a return to the generative waters from which it originated.[86] What's more, its watery interests and haphazardly zig-zagging motion across the underworld's terrain[87] remind us that, despite the seemingly-human underworld it traverses, it is something other than human. The *Culex*-poet's self-comparison to a spider in the second line of the poem (*ut araneoli*) has primed us for insect-like singers; the *carmen culicis* brings us a narrator who *is* an insect, on more than the level of simile alone.[88] Its narration betrays its different, limited and biased perspective, calling into question the seeming omniscience of our *katabasis*-narrator.[89] The gnat's narrative is unreliable, not just through a grandiose poetic and philosophical tradition of unreliable narration, but because it is a gnat. The poem holds so fast to its fantastical premise as to highlight its surreal nature in the first place.[90]

Indeed, perhaps we, along with the goatherd, ought to shake ourselves out of sleepy acquiescence to this fiction of a talking, thinking, underworld-traversing gnat. The most frequent complaint regarding gnats, both in antiquity and today, does not concern their necrological abilities but rather the fact that they 'produce a high-pitched whine or buzz or hum which can keep a restless individual awake for hours':[91] as insomniac Horace complains, 'the damned gnats drive sleep away' (*mali culices… auertunt somnos*, *Sat.* 1.5.14f.).[92] The goatherd's interrupted sleep may have an altogether more prosaic cause.

Conclusion

I hesitate to claim outright that the gnat's *effigies* is necessarily a *falsum insomnium*, or that it is lying about its *katabasis*. Much of the humour of the poem derives from the contrast between the self-evident surrealism of the situation (gnats do not, as a general rule, perform heroic deeds, let alone posthumously inform the beneficiaries of their actions about poetic eschatologies) and the seriousness with which it is developed. The bathetic pathos of the goatherd's response would be lost, were the *katabasis* obviously deceitful or imagined. Yet the poem highlights and develops certain established literary tropes of specifically narratorial uncertainty and dishonesty: its allusive tactics betray a certain dissimulating relationship with the master-text of Virgil's canonical works; doubt is raised regarding the identity of its embedded narrator and how that identity affects the tale told; and the heart of the poem is a *katabasis*-narrative, a prime conduit for discussions of truth, fiction and inauthenticity in the ancient world. As the *Culex* both professes Virgilian authorship and self-consciously undermines that veneer of authenticity with regularly-placed inconsistencies and metapoetic admissions of impersonation, so too the *culicis carmen* simultaneously asserts and undermines the reliability of its narrative and authorship.

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Notes

1. Cf. Most (1987); Peirano (2012), 56-67; Zogg (2015). The text of the *Culex* used here is Seelentag's (2012), and all translations are my own.

2. Although Scaliger questioned the scholarly and biographical tradition regarding the *Culex*, he still supported Virgilian authorship. Its authenticity was first explicity called into question by Ruaeus (1675), xv: *[puto] insulsum illum Culicem… ab ineptoaliquo posteriorum aetatum scriptore fictum esse* ('I suppose that absurd *Culex* was made up by some inept scribbler of a later age'); cf. Burrow (2008), 5, and Most (1987), 199f.

3. Peirano (2012), 1-3, identifies these two types as primary/organic *pseudepigrapha* ('texts which self-consciously purport either to be the work of the author to whom they are attributed or to be written at a different time', overlapping with the term 'forgery') and secondary/inorganic ('an allographic phenomenon resulting from [later] intervention', 3). See further Peirano (2017), 255.

4. Berg (1974); Barrett (1970a-e, 1972, 1976). I have not been able to see Schmidt (1983), but Horsfall (1985), 186, reports that Virgilian authorship is asserted here too.

5. Zwierlein (1999) (and cf. Most [forthcoming]); Maleuvre (1998). Güntzschel (1972) appends a comprehensive list of previous scholars' attitudes to authenticity; see later Seelentag (2012), 9-17.

6. Peirano (2012), 1-73, building on reevaluations of ancient *pseudepigrapha* by (e.g.) Tarrant (1987 and 1989), Grafton (1990), Holzberg et al. (2005). Some more recent scholarship on Virgilian *pseudepigrapha* has moved away from questions of *Echtheitskritik* to evaluating the poems on their own terms: e.g. Kruschwitz (2015), Kayachev (2016).

7. The strength of Peirano's approach is that it redeems not only the anonymous author but the ancient readers of the poem as well. Their comments on the *Culex* seem to demonstrate a tendentious willingness to consider the *Culex* both excluded from the Virgilian canon *and* genuinely Virgilian: they are in on the game too, active participants willingly deceived. There is little room here for elaboration, so I shall be brief. There are traces of allusion in Statius (*Silu.* 1 *praef.*) to active scholarly debate regarding the *Culex*'s authenticity (Peirano [2012], 65f.); the frequent comparison of 'Virgil's' *Culex* to 'Homer's' *Batrachomyomachia* (Martial *Epig.* 14.183-6, Statius *Silu.* 1 *praef.*) similarly reflects the latter work's contested status and further establishes Virgil as a Roman parallel to Homer (Peirano [2012], 64, 66; Zogg [2015], 209-13); and Martial's

openly fantastical biographising of Virgil (*Epig.* 8.55 [56]) puts Virgilian authorship of the *Culex* on the same level of plausibility as a scrupulously biographical reading of the *Eclogues* (cf. Peirano [2012], 60-3).

8. Peirano (2012), 56; similar interpretations in Janka (2005) and Seelentag (2012). See Peirano (2017) for an extension of this principle to poems in Meleager's *Garland*: 'the implied reader of these Hellenistic fakes is not necessarily Page's naïve, unhistorically minded victim but a willing participant in the fictional restaging of the past with poets and editor both reacting to and self-consciously commenting on the assumption of a fictional authorial persona in the context of the epigrammatic genre' (269-70).

9. The *Vita Suetonii-Donati* tells us Virgil wrote the *Culex cum esset annorum XVI* ('when he was sixteen', *VSD* 17); numbers being especially prone to alteration in transmission, manuscript variants also give *XV* and *XVII*, and scholars emend to *XXI* and *XXVI*. Cf. Barrett (1972), 280f., Burrow (2008), 4-6.

10. Güntzschel (1972), 119, finds two unavoidable allusions *to* Ovid rather than vice versa (*Culex* 329 and 179-82, corresponding to *Met.* 5.329 and 2.360).

11. On the dedication to Octavian, cf. Fraenkel (1952), 7; Seelentag (2012), 13. Peirano (2012), 117-72, discusses retrospective panegyric. Suggestions of Octavius Musa are not persuasive (Giancotti [1951], Mras [1961], Barrett [1970a], 361, [1972], 284-7). On Augustus' mausoleum: Seelentag (2012), 22-5.

12. Most (1987), 206-9; cf. Burrow (2008), 5. The *Culex*'s tripartite structure correlates morning-afternoon-night with pastoral-didactic-epic style and specific *Eclogues-Georgics-Aeneid* allusions too, clearly relying on a post-Virgilian conception of Virgil's poetic career (cf. Hardie and Moore [2010], 4-9).

13. Most (1987), 200.

14. 'Overdetermination': Janka (2005).

15. Ross (1975), 252.

16. Catull. 68.49f. (Poliakoff [1985]), following Callimachus *Hecale* 42.6. Lowe (2014) explores Catullan influence on the *Culex*. Here compare Lucretius, too: *aranei tenuia fila* ('a spider's thin threads', 3.383).

17. Cf. Seelentag (2012) *ad loc.* and Holzberg (2012) for discussion. *poliantur* (10) is interesting: though the term is associated with Catullan finesse (*lepidum novum | libellum arido modo pumice expolitum*, 'an elegant new little book, just now polished down with dry pumice' 1.1f.; cf. Ov. *Pont.* 1.5.61), the *Culex*-poet defers such polished refinement to more ambitious literary endeavours (*grauiore*, 8) at a later date. Presumably the compliment is to Virgil's canonical works.

18. Peirano (2012), 56-9, 182; Seelentag (2012) *ad Culex* 1.1.

19. *ludere* as not just impersonation but outright deception: *Lede, quam plumis abditus albis | callidus in falsa lusit adulter ave* ('Leda, whom the cunning adulterer – clothed with white feathers in the guise of a falsified bird – deceived', Ovid *Am.* 1.10.3f.).

20. At line 85 *ludebat* is strictly of Varro *et al.*, but *quoque* stretches the term back to apply to Virgil's first compositions too (67-80). Contrast Propertius' term for Virgil's composition of the momentous epic *Aeneid*: *Aeneae Troiani suscitat arma*, 'he rouses the arms of Trojan Aeneas' (2.34.63). On the date of Propertius' second book, see Lyne (1998), 522-4.

21. Propertius' Virgil, too, is a decidedly slippery authorial presence: he sports with Hamadryads (2.34.75f.), sings under shaded woods (67f.), and seems to blur into one with his characters Tityrus and Corydon (72-4). Like the *Culex*-poet, Propertius echoes and exploits Virgil's impersonatory dynamics.

22. Lines 3-5 are difficult. I take *haec propter* together, referring backwards to *lusimus* rather than forwards (thus Seelentag [2012] *ad loc.*). It is curious that no commentators mention that *lusimus* directly precedes *haec propter*, a more obvious referent than *araneoli* (2): the poet expresses hope that the *ludus* itself, the fact that it is a light-hearted poem in a light genre, will bring about *doctrina*. Watt's *pariter* is not without merit ([2001], 281), but Courtney's *at pro re* is too staid ([1967], 44). Ross' conjecture of *ducta* (i.e. *deducta*) for *docta* over-eggs the neoteric pudding ([1975], 252f. n. 49), but his difficulty in construing *culicis* is significant: see below.

23. On παιδιά / παίζω / παίγνιον, cf. Peirano (2012), 57, 88, 171f.

24. Although *doctus* is often a genre-marker of didactic poetry, there is little of the didactic in the *Culex*, beyond its expansion of the brief warning in the *Georgics* (3.435-9) into a fully-fledged morality fable. Most (1987), 208 n. 43, sees the incorporation of the *Georgics* into bucolic in Virgilian reception; *contra*, Magnelli (2006).

25. An ambiguous phrase: I discuss below.

26. Phillimore's *doctrina uaces licet: inuidus absit* 5) is far from the paradosis and difficult to interpret, since *doctrina* is indicated as a feature of the poem in the previous line ([1910], 420f.; Phillimore translates, 'A truce to serious Art, and Avaunt Envy!').

27. Cf. Leo (1891) *ad loc. notitiae ducum* is ambiguous: it could also denote 'the fame of [epic] heroes'. Fuller discussion in Seelentag (2012), *ad loc.*, and Peirano (2012), 57 n. 61. Macrob. *Sat.* 5.14.11 associates 'historical style' (*historicum stilum*) with linear narration (*per ordinem digerendo quae gesta sunt*), with the purpose of making known 'knowledge of the past' (*praeteritorum… notitiam*): an interesting parallel to the *Culex*'s literary-critical terminology.

28 . The clichéd plot – peaceful idyll; sudden danger; dramatic action; partial resolution; satisfyingly spooky revelation (anagnorisis, even); full resolution – has led to idle speculation that the *Culex* adapts an existing Greek poem: cf. Fraenkel (1952), 4.

29. *TLL* VIII.1.A. *doctus* and *callidus* are synonymous at (e.g.) Plautus *Epidicus* 428 (*minus hominem doctum minusque ad hanc rem callidum*, 'someone less smart and less clever in this matter').

30. *doctus* in Plautus: *docti doli* at *Bacch.* 1095, *Mil.* 147, 248, *Per.* 480, *Pseud.* 485, 587, 941, 1205; *doctus* collocated with *callidus* (*vel sim.*) at *Epid.* 428, *Mostell.* 1069, *Poen.* 111, 131, *Pseud.* 385, 725, 729, 907, 1243, *Rud.* 928, 1240, *Stich.* 561; otherwise indicating deception at *Asin.* 525, *Bacch.* 694, *Epid.* 373, 378, *Pseud.* 765. A majority of uses are associated with deception (27 of 46); 12 of the 46 are in the *Pseudolus* alone, that most deceitful of plays, and there only two do not directly indicate that trickery is afoot.

31. Deceitful strategies *passim*. Some indicative quotations: *ludendo saepe paratur amor* ('love is often won through playing', *Ars am.* 3.368), *ego me fallo nimioque cupidine ludor* ('I am self-deceived and mocked by excessive longing', *Pont.* 2.8.71). Note Ovid's later retraction of the *Ars Amatoria* as a 'mere joke' (*tamen esse iocos*, *Tr.* 1.9.62), clearly relevant here.

32. Cf. Seelentag (2012) *ad loc.* Plural *carmina* is a standard metrical dodge for singular *carmen*.

33. The verbal aspect of *carmina* (~ *cano*) enables this double reading: compare the standard textbook example *metus hostium* (~ *metuo*), used by Livy as objective at 21.56.5.3 ('fear regarding the enemy') and subjective at 30.18.3.3 ('the enemy's fear').

34. The gnat's narration represents *notitiae ducum* more accurately than the rest of the *Culex*, if we take that phrase to mean 'the fame of epic heroes or military generals': the

gnat encounters both literary heroes (248-357) and Roman leaders (358-71) in the underworld. (This gives the lie somewhat to the narrator's *recusatio* of 26-34.)

35. The invocation of the *inuidus* is an interesting strategic move on the poet's part, opening up the possibility of criticism but immediately shutting it down again. We're told at the very beginning that our opinion will not matter in the slightest: the flyweight critic is entirely dismissed. The joke is, ultimately, on us.

36. The sense is clear but the grammar obscure: Leo's suggestion that *timor aspiciens = timor aspiciendo factus* ('fear produced by seeing', [1981] *ad loc.*) is, as Seelentag rightly comments, doubtful ([2012] *ad loc.*). More plausibly, it could be a transferred participle, from the sense *timor senis aspicientis* ('the terror of the old man spotting the snake'). *obcaeco* with *artus* (rather than, e.g. *mentem, oculos*) is also unparalleled and somewhat peculiar, but again the sense is clear. The poet prizes vivid verbal effect and continuity of metaphor over strict logic, with an effect sometimes more rococo than neoteric.

37. Note too the snake's *torua… lumina* ('savage eyes', 189f.), *aspiciens timor* (199; see previous note) and *uidit* ('he saw') at 201: sight is repeatedly emphasised in this passage (and see below on 'blazing eyes' in the gnat's underworld). Perhaps compare Aeneas' approach to the Golden Bough, also a highly visual search allegorising the search for knowledge: *aspectans* ('seeing', *Aen.* 6.186), *ostendat* ('it would reveal', 188), *opacat* ('it shades', 195), *opaca* ('murky', 208), *obseruans* ('observing', 198), *possunt oculi seruare* ('[as far as] his eyes could see', 200), *species* ('the sight', 208), and perhaps a spurious etymology in *au̲i̲dus* ('eager', 210; reflecting *uidere*, 'to see'). The goatherd's *ualidum… truncum* ('sturdy branch', *Culex* 192) clearly parodies Aeneas' *aureus… ramus* ('golden bough', 6.187). I have not been able to see E. Cesareo (1940), *Il* Culex *e il libro VI dell'*Eneide (Palermo).

38. The *Aeneid* frequently thematises the act of interpreting a text, especially in embedded narrative or ecphrasis (cf., e.g., Fowler [1991]; Barchiesi [1997]; Bartsch [1998]; Harrison [2001]): Aeneas, for example, experiences the pictures in Juno's temple *ex ordine* (*Aen.* 1.456), though they do not correspond to Iliadic chronology. (Cf. Lowenstam [1993], 43: they are ordered according to Virgil's corresponding Latian war scenes.) The Iliadic scenes assimilate to the *Aeneid*; Aeneas becomes an internal parallel for the external reader. Cf. Kirichenko (2013).

39. Both deaths, too, are matters of *pietas*: *praemia sunt pietatis ubi, pietatis honores*? ('Where are the rewards for piety, the glory for piety?', *Culex* 225). (Does the *Culex* take a 'pessimistic' stance on Aeneas' killing of Turnus? – or should we read this line solely against its Virgilian counterpart on the unjustness of the fall of Troy, at *Aen.* 1.461?)

40. Ghostly requests for burial were frequent in antiquity: from Patroclus (θάπτε με ὅττι τάχιστα, 'bury me with all haste', *Il.* 23.71) and Elpenor (*Od.* 11.51-83), and discussed by Cicero at *De div.* 57. Cf. Johnston (1999), 14; Felton (1999), 10f.

41. I know of no similar conflations (barring the ghostly Patroclus' description of his underworldly surroundings at *Il.* 23.72-16, not strictly a *katabasis*). See below on *Gilgamesh*.

42. Awake: e.g. Hom. *Il.* 5.445-53, Verg. *Aen.*10.633f. (Aeneas), 2.771-95 (Creusa). Asleep (Harrisson [2013], 246-73): Virgil: *Aen.* 1.353-6 (Sychaeus), 2.274-95 (Hector), 4.353 (Anchises). Liminal: dream-apparitions often wake the sleeper (e.g. Ov. *Met.* 11.640-709).

43. Living: e.g. Hom. *Il.* 5.445-53, Verg. *Aen.* 10.633f. (Aeneas), Stesichorus (cf. Pl. *Resp.* 586c with Allan [2008], 20), Eur. *Hel.* (Helen). Dead: e.g. Cic. *De div.* 1.57. Ambiguous: Verg. *Aen.* 2.771-95 (Creusa). Cf. Harris (2003); Harrisson (2013).

44. Cicero *De div.* 1.39-60 (esp. 1.60: *at multa falso. immo obscura fortasse nobis,* '[Some say,] 'but many dreams are false.' Rather, perhaps, they are difficult for us to understand'). Cf., e.g., Plaut. *Cist.* 291: *utrum deliras, quaeso, an astans somnias?* ('Are you mad, please, or dreaming standing up?')

45. Cf. Greek εἴδωλον: fabrication/deceit. ψεῦδος γλυκύ ('sweet lie') Aesch. fr.89R; cf. *Il.* 5.449, *Od.* 4.796, Eur. *Bacch.* 629-31, *Hel.* 31-6.

46. Cf. Lundström (1977), 115n.16; Negri (1989), 379 (s.v. *umbra*); Horsfall (2008), 498-546; Casali (2010), 123-32.

47. Prototypically: Agamemnon's false dream (*Il.* 2.77-83). At Ov. *Met.* 11.583-709, Morpheus' message to Alycone in the guise of the dead Ceyx is true (658-70) but wrapped in deceit (*fallaciter,* 643); cf. Hardie (2002), 272-8, on Morpheus' metapoetic significance. On false dreams: Harris (2003); Casali (2010); Harrisson (2013), 132.

48. Often extended to metapoetic concerns, notably in the case of Helen's phantom and anti-Homeric revision. Stesichorus' *Palinode* foregrounds concepts of rewriting (πάλιν-ῷδή), of both the text and the entire biographical anecdote: Stesichorus successfully 'rewrites' Homer's failed iteration of the same authorial transgression and punishment (Pl. *Phdr.* 243a: ὃν Ὅμηρος μὲν οὐκ ᾔσθετο, Στησίχορος δέ… οὐκ ἠγνόησεν ὥσπερ Ὅμηρος, ἀλλ᾽… 'unknown to Homer, but known to Stesichorus… not, like Homer, ignorant of the reason, but rather…').

49. Others, briefly: the *katabasis* in Aristophanes' *Frogs* (an undervalued intertext: note the noisy Aristophanic chorus at *Culex* 151f., discussed below) engages directly with concepts of poetry and literary criticism; Plato's *Myth of Er* (*Republic* 614b-21d) is Socrates' narration of Er's own report, and already criticised by Aristotle for its geographical/ physical impossibility (*Mete.* II 335b33-336a33, cf. Annas [1982]). On the metapoetics of the literary underworld, see Most (1992).

50. Overtly fallacious Odysseus: Trahman (1952); Goldhill (1991), 1-68; Pratt (1993), 55-114.

51. Cf. Fowler (1997), 269f.; Gowers (2005).

52. Gowers (2005), 174-6.

53. Half-revelation: Brooks (1953), Feeney (1986).

54. Heubeck and Hoekstra (1989), 75f.. Cf. ὡς εἰς Ἀίδεω δόμον ἤλυθεν εὐρώεντα | ψυχῇ χρησόμενος... (to Penelope, *Od.* 23.322f.: '[he spoke of] how in his well-benched ship he had gone into the murky house of Hades to speak with the ghost').

55. Palinurus' death told by the narrator (*Aen.* 5.852-71) and Palinurus (6.357-71); the fall of Troy told by Aeneas (Book 2) and Deiphobus (6.509-34). Cf. Feldherr (1999), 116.

56. Most persuasively Michels (1981); cf. Everett (1900), 154; Otis (1959), 174-6; Norden (1981) *ad loc.*; Reed (1973); Harrisson (2013), 141; Horsfall (2013) *ad loc.* Other critics have sought to neutralise the troubling implications of this passage by altering the text: cf. Horsfall (1995), 146f.; Thomas (2001),193-8.

57. Casali (2010), 135. Cf. 136: the *Aeneid* 'è falsa perché danneggia, svia, inganna i lettori: in un senso immediatamente autoriflessiva, li inganna e li svia proprio con queste stesse parole – che esattamente come i sogni falsi sono irremediabilmente oscure'.

58. The ghostly Patroclus describes his underworldly surroundings at *Il.* 23.72-16, but this is not strictly a katabasis. Er returns to life before narrating his experiences. Enkidu, in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, gives an account of a prescient dream in which he descends to the underworld, but this is expressly *before* his death (7.165-208). The Sibyl's difficulties in narrating the underworld (cf. Gowers [2005], 174f.) perhaps reflect her unhuman near-immortality (*longaeua*, 321 and 628, cf. Ov. *Met.* 14.101-53, Petron. *Sat.* 48.8): she remains neither dead nor alive.

59. *Aen.* 3.497 *effigiem Xanthi Troiamque videtis* ('you see the image of the Xanthus, and Troy'; cf. 3.202 *falsi Simoentis ad undam*, 'at the stream of a fake Simoeis'). Ovid's Circe 'fashioned the image of a false boar with no body', *effigiem nullo cum corpore falsi | fingit apri* (*Met.* 14.358f.). Both examples have obvious metapoetic import: Andromache's replica Troy echoes Aeneas', Augustus' and especially Virgil's Troy-like constructions; Circe, as weaver, singer and creator, often seems to stand as authorial double, especially (in Ovid) given her role in creating transformations/metamorphoses.

60. Servius *ad Aen.* 10.652, citing also 9.310, 11.794. Cf. Lucretius: *quae uento spes raptast saepe misella* ('even this meagre hope is often snatched away by the wind', 4.1096).

61. The gnat sounds like Catullus' Ariadne, deserted by Theseus: compare Cat. 64.59, *irrita uentosae linquens promissa procellae* ('leaving his worthless promises to the turbulent gales'). Ovid's Ariadne-like Scylla accuses Minos of the same: *an inania uenti | uerba ferunt idemque tuas, ingrate, carinas*? 'Or do the same winds carry away my useless words that drive your ships, you villain?'; the *Culex*'s *immemor* ('unmindful', 379) flags up the (now rather comic) Thesean overtones (cf. Cat. 64.58, 123, 125, 248). Interestingly, Statius's Ariadne-on-the-shore, Deidamia, modifies Catullus' line with the *Culex*'s *rapere*: *inrita uentosae rapiebant uerba procellae* ('the turbulent gales tore away his worthless words', *Achilleid* 1.960), modifying Catullus' *irrita uentosae linquens promissa procellae* ('leaving his worthless promises to the turbulent gales', 64.59). Heslin (2005), 143f., sees in Statius' *uariatio* a more sympathetic view of Achilles – whose promises go unfulfilled due to external factors, not through his own volition (*rapiebant uerba procellae*) – than of Catullus' Theseus (*linquens promissa*). Could Statius' use of *rapere* be influenced by the *Culex* and its self-pitying, self-justifying protagonist?

62. Cf. *Il*. 23.100, *Od.* 10.495, 11.222.

63. Note especially *tenuis fugit ceu fumus in auras* ('he fled like smoke into thin air', *Aen.* 5.740), a particularly Lucretian example.

64. There is a vast body of scholarship on this Virgilian motif. Recent major commentaries on the passages (e.g. Thomas [1998]; Horsfall [2008] and [2013]; Fratantuono and Smith [2015]) provide good summaries.

65. Casali (2007), 106, and 103: 'Lucretian intertextuality is a scandal for the *Aeneid*… a relationship compounded of repression, correction, censure and contrast.'

66. Coextensivity of author and work is characteristic of Virgil (and, following him, Ovid): cf., e.g., *G.* 3.9 (*uictorque uirum uolitare per ora*, 'to fly victorious on the mouths of men'); the warriors in the *Aeneid* whose 'life and voice' ebb away together (7.533f., 9.442f., 10.322f., 346-8, 521-36, 907f.).

67. Lucretian echoes in the gnat's death (*cui dissitus omnis | spiritus et cessit sensus*, 'the gnat's breath and life, entirely dispersed, stopped', 188f.): Leo (1891) *ad loc.*

68. Epic formulations such as Homer's ψυχὴ δ' Ἄιδόσδε κατῆλθε (*Od.* 10.560, 11.65, 11.475; cf. *Il.* 6.284, 18.656, 22.362, 23.100, *Od.* 3.410, 6.11, 1.150, *Batrachomyomachia* 23) and its famous imitation at the climax of the *Aeneid* (*uitaque cum gemitu fugit indignata sub umbras*, 'with a groan, his life fled indignant down to the shades' 12.952) give only a vague sense of downward motion and incorporeal translation (imitated by *Culex* 189, *cessit*?). One exception in *Odyssey* Book 24: the psychopomp Hermes guides the suitors (though scholiasts suspected this book and passage to be spurious). Cf., perhaps, *Aen.* 4.242-4.

69. Ovid describes the catasterism of Callisto and Arcas with *raptos per inania uento* ('snatched through the void by the wind', *Met.* 2.506), a fitting parallel for the *Culex* insofar as it describes recently deceased animals commencing a posthumous but still

conscious existence, but not strictly death or descent. Irene Peirano Garrison drew my attention to the fragment of Ovid on Eurydice, *bis rapitur uixitque semel* ('she was snatched twice and lived once', Courtney *FLP* fr. 7), an intriguing but only tantalisingly brief parallel.

70. *inane* is a key element in Lucretius' atomism, ocurring 88 times in the *DRN*. In Virgil it is used 38 times: twice Lucretian (*Ecl.* 6.31, *Aen.* 12.906) and frequently with *animus* or *uentus* (*G.* 3.134, 4.105, 4.196, 4.241, *Aen.* 6.269, 6.740, 10.82, 12.906).

71. Ap. Rhod. 4.601-3, Ps-Scymn. 263-70, Plin. *HN* 31.21 (citing Varro), Strabo 5.4.5, Serv. *ad Aen.* 3.442, Nonius Marcellus p.14 4M, Isid. 13.19.8. Cf. O'Hara (1996), 29, 70, 82, 168f..

72. The interpolated line *unde locum Grai dixerunt nomine Aornum* (6.242) glosses this suppressed etymology; see Horsfall (2013) *ad loc*.

73. Cf. Virgil's didactic *uidi(mus)* (*G.* 1.193, 197, 209, 318, 4.127) or Aeneas' (*Aen.* 2.5, 347, 499, 501, 507, 561, 643, 746).

74. Leo (1891), 89; Barrett (1970e).

75. Gowers (2005), 176: 'no traveller crosses back over the river Styx (425 *inremeabilis undae*)'. On chthonic geography: Feeney (1986); Feldherr (1999); Clark (2001); Horsfall (2013) *passim*.

76. Hardie (1993), 58; cf. 57-87.

77. The confusion here is not primarily due to textual corruption (Seelentag [2012], 196).

78. Güntzschel (1972). Cf. Verg. *Aen.* 6.275 *pallentes*, 480 *pallentis*.

79. Seelentag (2012) *ad loc*.

80. The reversal is only in the *Culex*: Dido takes Ajax's role at *Aen.* 6.469-76: *illa solo fixos oculos auersa tenebat* ('she turned away, kept her eyes fixed on the ground', cf.

Culex 327 *auersos*). Odysseus and Ajax align with Aeneas and Dido: the living protagonists of the katabasis encounter disdainful or recalcitrant victims of suicide.

81. This is one moment when the *ordo* and *uoces* of the gnat's narration do not accord with *historiae… notitiaeque ducum* (4f., discussed above).

82. Cf., perhaps, the shield of Aeneas in *Aen.* 8, divided spatially and temporally by rivers (Feldherr [1999], 86f.).

83. Cf. esp. Aristophanes *Frogs*. It is interesting that frogs and gnats are frequently collocated in Latin literature (e.g. Hor. *Sat.* 1.5.14f., Gell. *NA* 14.1.31), and share the same origin story: as gnats are literally *umoris alumni* (see below), so too, Ovid tells us, *semina limus habet uirides generantia ranas* ('mud holds the seeds which generate green frogs', *Met.* 15.375; cf. *Culex* 151f.: *hac querulae referunt uoces, quis nantia limo* | *corpora lympha fouet*, 'there they answer with querulous voices, those whose bodies the waters nurture as they swim in the mud'). Plato's underworld, too, is muddy: τοὺς δὲ ἀνοσίους αὖ καὶ ἀδίκους εἰς πηλόν τινα κατορύττουσιν ἐν Ἅιδου ('but they bury the impious and unjust in the mud, in the house of Hades', *Rep.* 2.363d).

84. 'Vergils Gnat', line 282, *Complaints* (1591).

85. Plin. *HN* 9.160 (also Arist. *Hist. an.* 551b27); cf. Davies and Kathirithamby (1986), 164-7. Pliny also comments that gnats like to frequent damp places (*infestant et culices riguos hortos*, *HN* 19.180); note that the pastoral world of the *Culex* is, like the gnat's underworld, regularly punctuated by rivers (57, 78, 94f., 105f., 148f., 151f., 157, 178, 390).

86. My thanks to Regina Höschele for this parallel.

87. The rivers are differently ordered to Virgil's: Aeneas crosses the Acheron, the Cocytus and Styx, passes the Phlegethon, and finally comes to the Elysian pools and the rivers Eridanus and Lethe. Despite the nine circles of the Styx around Virgil's

underworld (*nouiens Styx*, 6.439), Aeneas proceeds in a straight line, never recrossing it or retracing his path.

88. Spiders, of course, catch small flying creatures in their webs (*orsum*, 2): the *Culex*-poet similarly captures the *culex* in his poem. Philip Hardie reminds me that Spenser not only translated the *Culex* ('Vergils Gnat), but produced his own insect epyllion, 'Muiopotmos, or the Fate of the Butterflie', in which the butterfly-protagonist comes to a sad end in a spider's web. Does Spenser read this poetic antagonism between spider and prey back into the *Culex*?

89. The spectre of the monstrous snake seems to haunt the gnat's underworld: Tisiphone (*serpentibus undique compta,* 'wreathed on all sides by serpents', 218)*,* Cerberus (*anguibus… reflexis*, 'with twisting snakes', 221) Otos (*uinctus… immanis serpentis,* 'chained by huge serpents', 234). The 'blazing eyes' of Charon (216f.), Cerberus (222), Eteocles and Polynices (255), too, perhaps recall the snake's (*aspectuque micant flammarum lumina toruo*, 'his blazing eyes gleam with a fierce look', 173; *lumina diffundens… toruus,* 'savage, rolling his eyes', 176; *torua… lumina*, 'fierce eyes', 189f.). Again the gnat's perspective governs its narrative.

90. Similarly dogged realism within the fantasy at 5-7: the *leuitas* threatened against the hostile critic is a characteristic not only of this proudly ludic poem but of the gnat itself. For the proverbial slightness of gnats, cf. Lucretius 3.381-90, where dust, chalk, mist, spiderwebs, feathers, down and finally *culices* are too light for human senses to perceive. The physical properties of the gnat become the aesthetic qualities of the poem.

91. Davies and Kathirithamby (1986), 166. On ancient literary attempts to represent animal communications in human language, cf. Payne (2010) and (2013); somewhat differently, Gowers (2016).

92. That Horace finds the gnats' bark worse than their bite here is shown by his equal blame of the noisy *ranae palustres* ('marsh frogs', 1.5.14; cf. Martial's sarcastic comment that 'a gnat might sing more sweetly' than his addressee Vetustilla, *Epigr.* 3.93.9: *dulcius culex cantet*). Horace's frogs suggest he is mired in an Aristophanic underworld (Gowers [2012] *ad loc.*), a hint perhaps taken up by the author of the *Culex*.