

The Poetics and Afterlife of Virgil's Descent to the Underworld: Servius, Dante, Fulgentius and the *Culex*

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I

The punishments in the underworld of the *Aeneid* notoriously foreshadow the Christian hell. Philippe Ariès, in a history of Western attitudes to death, has observed that 'the distance between the underworlds of Homer and Virgil is greater than the distance between Virgil's underworld and the earliest figurations of the Christian afterlife.'¹ This is hardly surprising: there was a very strong, almost invincible, tradition for the works of Virgil. Throughout the early centuries of our era they were firmly stapled into educational curricula, whilst Homer virtually disappeared from western Europe, along with other pagan Greek works which contained *katabases* – the standard term for accounts of the world beyond the grave.²

The best single study of the reception of Virgil in late antiquity and the medieval period is probably still provided by Domenico Comparetti's *Vergil in the Middle Ages*, first published in English in 1895.³ Surprisingly though, that work makes no attempt to explore or explain the special impact of Virgil's *katabasis* in the sixth book of the *Aeneid* on later ages. Comparetti concentrates on the afterlife of the Virgilian corpus as a whole, and does not treat the influence of specific portions of it, apart from the Fourth *Eclogue*. This is a common failing among historians of literary tradition and sociologists of literature, who often assume that researching into the fortunes of an ancient text in later times does not require close engagement with its contents.⁴ However, if one is dealing with something

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as widely disseminated as the *Aeneid*, certain *bits* of it tend to have as much cultural importance as the whole. Earlier audiences may never have read (or heard) the entire poem themselves. Whilst Dante can plausibly claim to have read the *Aeneid* ‘*tutta quanta*,’ other authors of medieval vision literature may not have been so concerned with the poetic context of the *katabasis* that inspired their accounts of life after death.

Nonetheless studies like Comparetti’s are still extremely helpful. They show that the reception of Virgil in later times is complex and very difficult to plot. They paint a picture of Christian fathers who were tormented by the awkward fact that they disapproved of pagan literature as much as they depended on it for guidance of their Latin expression. A striking example of this tension is to be found in a letter written in the ninth century from Ermenrich of Ellwangen to Grimaldus the Abbot of St. Gall.⁵ Ermenrich is worried that he may have quoted from Virgil rather too much. He claims to have had bad dreams about the poet:

Nolo tamen ipsum videre, quem credo in pessimo loco manere, et quia terret me visus eius. Sepe vero quando legebam illum, et post lectionem capiti subponebam, in primo sopore, qui post laborem solet esse dulcissimus, statim affuit monstrum quoddam fuscum, et per omnia horribile, interdum gestabat codicem, interdum calamum ad aures, veluti scripturus aliquid, ridebat ad me, vel, quia dicta eius legebam, irridebat me. Ast ego evigilans, signabam me signaculo crucis, librum eius longeque proiciens iterum membra dedi quieti. Sed nec cessavit fantasma ipsius terrens me, ferens tridentem, nescio utrum Plutonis domestici eius, an alicuius alterius pre manibus, facie furva solos dentes candidos ostendit: quamque comminationem illius similiter in nomine Domini signatus contempsi, veluti ludum eius ante risibilem pro nihilo habui.

Epistula Ermenrici ad Grimaldum
ed. Dümmler (1898), 561–2

Anyway I have no wish to see Virgil, whom I believe to be in a very bad place, and besides the sight of him terrifies me. Often indeed, when I was reading him, and after reading put him under my head, in that first sleep which should be sweetest after toil, there immediately appeared before me a dark

monster, dreadful in every aspect. Sometimes it was brandishing a codex, other times with a pen behind its ear as one about to write, it was either laughing in my presence, or, because I was reading his words, it was mocking me. But waking up, I signed myself with a sign of the cross and hurling his book far away, again gave my limbs to sleep. But his phantasma did not stop terrifying me. He carried a trident – I know not if it belonged to Pluto his domestic companion, or to some other – in his hands and with his gloomy appearance only his white teeth were showing. Again I disregarded this menacing of his in a similar way, by signing myself in the name of the Lord, and reckoned it of no account, like his earlier trick of laughing.

The alarming event is related in a letter which is largely a pedantic, donnish discussion of good linguistic usage in Latin. The irony is that much of this good usage has to be derived from Virgil – whose person Ermenrich so deplures. Yet even as it deprecates Virgil, this passage uses Virgilian phrases and diction.⁶ This embarrassing clash of interests rears its head again a few pages later:

Linquamus, pater, iam linquamus Maronem cum Sinonte suo mendacissimum, et in Stige pessima palude cum Apolline et Musis suis sepultum. Ibi amplexetur Proserpinam suam et audiat Orpheum pro Euridice sua diis infernalibus citharizantem ...

Celestis Rex maledicat talia figmenta. Et quid hec eadem nominare valeo? Nisi supra compositorum equorum, qui redam tuam trahunt, stercora decidentia. Unde non immerito Ennius poeta a quodam interrogatus, quid quereret in Marone, respondit: 'Aurum,' inquit 'in stercore quero.' Et quia prout nosti, sicut stercus parat agrum ad proferendum satius frumentum, ita dicta paganorum poetarum, licet feda sint, quia non vera, multa tamen adiuvant ad percipiendum divinum eloquium.

Epistula Ermenrici ad Grimaldum
ed. Dümmler (1898), 563

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Let us leave him, my father, let us leave Maro, who is as mendacious as his very own Sinon, buried in the foulest swamp of the Styx with Apollo and his Muses. There let him embrace Proserpina and listen to Orpheus strumming for his Eurydice from the infernal gods ...

May the King of Heaven curse such fictions. What then am I capable of calling them? Mere dung falling from horses reined together as they draw your cart along. Wherefore, Ennius the poet, when asked by someone what he was looking for in Virgil, replied not unreasonably 'I am looking for gold in dung.' Since even as dung spread upon the field enriches it to a better harvest, so the writings of the pagan poets, though they are foul – and indeed untrue – are very helpful for the understanding of divine eloquence.

Of course the very images of the Hell to which Ermenrich would consign the mendacious poet come from that poet himself. Ermenrich depends as much on the content of Virgil as he depends on the 'dung' of his literary form. The anecdote about Ennius is quoted almost *verbatim* from a story told by Suetonius. But in Suetonius, it was of course *Virgil* who was supposed to have made this discourteous remark about his predecessor.⁷ Ermenrich's perverse manipulation of this literary anecdote and his utter disregard for chronology is extraordinary to modern eyes – but it could well have been deliberate. For medieval scholars, Virgil was the chief representative of the Classical pagan tradition. But it is important to bear in mind that the major form of commentary on the poet was grammatical and rhetorical. This was the case from late antiquity right up to the time of Dante. Allegorical interpretations (like those of Bernard Silvestris and John of Salisbury) which sought to resolve the tension between studying pagan letters and holding to Christian doctrine, did emerge in the twelfth century. However, such interpretations do not seem to have been taught in the classroom.⁸ Exposition of Virgil remained on the whole confined to the teaching of grammar.

All this indicates that if we want to explain the influence of the sixth book of the *Aeneid* on the poetic imagination of Dante, or on the superstitious imagination of Christian vision literature, we cannot merely go along standard routes. The purpose of this paper is to explore, and to try out some explanations for, the impact of Virgil's account of the under-

world on some of his Christian readers up to and including Dante. The exploring will come in the next section (II). I shall consider some passages, early in the tradition of response to Virgil – and not that typical of it – in which commentators are concerned with constructing meaning and content in Virgil, rather than with the expression and form of the poetry. I will try to show how these passages might be partly responsible for the cultural afterlife of a book that deals with life after death. The final part (III) will offer some tentative explanations for the cultural impact of Virgil's *katabasis* in terms of *Aeneid* 6 'itself' – that is Virgil's form, diction and rhetoric. The topography and narrative strategies of *Aeneid* 6 may have bypassed Virgil's more immediate successors, to work more directly on later readers like Dante. There is a moral to the whole story which might be drawn by implication from this paper as a whole: some Christian interpretations of *Aeneid* 6, for all their apparent extravagance, raise wider questions about ways Virgil is read now. I am not so confident that we are any better at reading Virgil than those whose readings we disparagingly call 'allegories'.⁹

II

The fourth century corpus of commentary on Virgil known as 'Servius' is a useful place to begin exploring the early impact of Virgil's *katabasis*. The sixth book of the *Aeneid* is introduced in this way:

Totus quidem Vergilius scientia plenus est, in qua hic liber possidet principatum, cuius ex Homero pars maior est. et dicuntur aliqua simpliciter, multa de historia, multa per altam scientiam philosophorum, theologorum, Aegyptiorum, adeo ut plerique de his singulis huius libri integras scripserint pragmatias.

Servius (introduction to *Aeneid* 6)

Though all of Virgil is full of knowledge it is predominant in this book, of which the greater part is from Homer. Some things are simply said, many from history, many from the deep wisdom of philosophers, theologians, Egyptians, to the extent that a good many have written whole treatises about these individual aspects of this book.

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Although the observations in Servius are principally those of a grammarian, we are told that the *Aeneid* is full of *scientia*, in which the sixth book excels.

Macrobius, whose *Saturnalia* was also written in the fourth to fifth century AD, certainly seems to regard Virgil as the fount of all learning. In the preface to this work of Virgilian criticism, Macrobius says that it is meant to be a ‘tool for knowledge’ (*scientiae supellex*), and he sees rhetoric as the main form of wisdom belonging to Virgil. Macrobius had an extensive influence on the medieval conception of what Virgil was about, and that preoccupation with rhetoric is obviously in line with the chief focus of Virgilian studies in the middle ages. But the *Saturnalia* takes the form of a symposium in which different speakers eulogize the poet’s various strengths: there is a character called Eustathius who deals with Virgil’s knowledge of astrology and philosophy, though none of this discussion has survived. But at 1.24.18 we are told:

De astrologia totaque philosophia, quam parcus et sobrius operi suo nusquam reprehendendus aspersit.

Macrobius *Saturnalia* 1.24.18

[The *Aeneid*] concerns astrology and all philosophy, which the poet should not be reproached for sprinkling soberly and sparingly into his work.

Macrobius acknowledges, along with Servius, the role of *scientia* and philosophy in Virgil.¹⁰ Presumably his discussion would have said something about the sixth book of the *Aeneid*.

But important as any contemporary conceptions are which Servius might have reflected, it is worth speculating about later notions this introduction to 6 might have inspired. The Servian commentary, though much tampered with at certain stages, is the fullest we have from antiquity. It was also, like Macrobius, read in various forms from the time of its production right through the middle ages. Servius’s introduction to the sixth book of the *Aeneid* (quoted earlier) tells us that if wisdom is what we are after, this is the place to look. Such a remark might well have ramified the importance of that particular book for medieval Christian readers. On the other hand, the information that a ‘great part is taken from Homer’ would have meant relatively little to such readers – who had no Greek, and who

thought that the canonised *Ilias Latina* in 1070 hexameters was Homer's output. Servius's use of the word *simpliciter* here is important. It means more than just 'simply.' Elsewhere in the Servian corpus it is set against *per allegoriam*: *simpliciter* means 'literally.' A comment on verse 20 of the third *Eclogue* provides one example:

sed melius simpliciter accipimus: refutandae enim sunt allegoriae in bucolico carmine, nisi cum, ut supra diximus, ex aliqua agrorum perditorum necessitate descendunt.

Servius on *Ecl.* 3.20

But I think it is better we take it on one level (*simpliciter*): allegories in bucolic poetry should be done away with, except when, as I said above, they derive from the crucial theme of lost estates.

So if we take *simpliciter* in this way, our first quotation from Servius holds that much of *Aeneid* 6 is to be understood literally.¹¹ We can only wonder what that would have implied to certain readers of Virgil's *katabasis* at certain times. Something literal could be something credible: the antiquity of a story might prove a sufficient defence of its truth in ages when there was no clear notion corresponding to our idea of fiction and when a canonised *auctor* really had authority.¹²

What about 'philosophers, theologians, Egyptians'? *Philosophorum* and especially *theologorum* would have had certain connotations for Christians. Even *Aegyptiorum* could well represent something special to them: consider for example this excerpt from Gratian, *Concordantia discordantium canonum* (circa 1140):

We read that Moses and Daniel were learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and Chaldeans. We read that our Lord ordered the children of Israel to spoil the Egyptians of their gold and silver: the moral interpretation of this teaches that we should find in the poets either the gold of wisdom or the silver of eloquence, we should turn it to the profit of salutary learning. In Leviticus we also are ordered to offer up to the Lord the first fruits of honey, that is, the sweetness of human eloquence.¹³

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But to show that these comments in Servius might have induced people to attach special importance to the descent to the underworld in the *Aeneid*, one should do more than posit a sufficiently ignorant Christian living in a sufficiently dark age as a token reader of Servius. It would be better to consider the response of a particular individual to Servius's comments, an individual who himself offers a portrayal of the afterlife. In my view, there are indications that the Servian corpus might have been available to Dante himself in some form.¹⁴ This is because traces of Servius can be discerned in Dante's famous tenth letter to Can Grande della Scala, in which the poet offers an introduction to his *Commedia*. The beginning of his 'self-exegesis' is as follows:

Sex igitur sunt quae in principio cuiusque doctrinalis operis inquirenda sunt, videlicet subiectum, agens, forma, finis, libri titulus, et genus philosophiae.

Dante *Epistolae* 10.6

There are six points then, as to which enquiry must be made at the beginning of every didactic work, namely the subject, the author, the form, the aim, the title of the book and the branch of philosophy to which it belongs.

Servius's introduction to the first book of the *Aeneid* begins thus:

In exponendis auctoribus haec consideranda sunt: poetae vita, titulus operis, qualitas carminis, scribentis intentio, numerus librorum, ordo librorum, explanatio.

Servius, introduction to *Aeneid* 1

In providing an exposition of an author, these things should be considered: the life of the poet, the title of the work, the nature of the poem, the intention of the writer, the number of books, the order of the books, the interpretation.

However this resemblance does not prove much by itself: the schema is fairly conventional, and similar things can be found in Donatus and Boethius as well as Servius. But a little later, once Servius's *explanatio* is

underway, a remark on the third word of the *Aeneid* provides something more to go on:

CANO polysemus sermo est. tria enim significat aliquando 'laudo,' ut regemque canebat, aliquando 'divino,' ut ipsa canas oro, aliquando 'canto,' ut hoc loco.

Servius, on *Aen.* 1.1

CANO is an instance of polysemous discourse; it signifies three things. It can mean 'I praise' as in *regemque canebat*, it can mean 'I prophesy' as in *ipsa canas oro* (*Aen.* 6.75), or it can mean 'I sing' as in *canto*, as it does here.

Dante, a few lines below the excerpt from the letter quoted above, also uses and explains the word *polysemus* in this way:

Sciendum est quod istius operis non est simplex sensus, immo dici potest polysemos, hoc est plurium sensuum; nam primus sensus est qui habetur per litteram, alius est qui habetur per significata per litteram. Et primus dicitur literalis, secundus vero allegoricus, sive moralis, sive anagogicus.

Dante *Epistolae* 10.7

It must be understood that the meaning of this work is not of one kind only; rather the work may be described as 'polysemous,' that is, having several meanings; for the first meaning is that which is conveyed by the letter, and the next is that which is conveyed by what the letter signifies; the former of which is called 'literal,' while the latter is called allegorical or mystical.

The word *polysemus* is an unusual one, and the parallel way in which it is introduced and employed suggests to me a community between these passages of Dante and Servius. This is allowing for the fact that Dante uses the word attributively of his whole *opus* whilst in Servius it is used to characterise *sermo* or language. The change rung by Dante on the notion of *polysemus* as a critical term rather reflects what many now regard as a major artistic difference between the *Aeneid* and the *Commedia*. The

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Aeneid of course has been seen to use allegory and symbols and Book 6 no less than any other. However, by and large nowadays, Virgil's poem is read, at least primarily, *simpliciter* – it sings of a *particular* man: Aeneas. In contrast, the *Commedia*, from its very opening, is seen to deal with 'everyman.'¹⁵ The work is customarily seen to display itself as allegory, even in a primary reading. Dante's own verdict of the *Commedia* endorses this:

Est ergo subiectum totius operis, literaliter tantum accepti, status animarum post mortem simpliciter sumptus. Nam de illo et circa illum totius operis versatur processus. Si vero accipiatur opus allegorice, subiectum est homo, prout merendo et demerendo per arbitrii libertatem iustitiae praemiandi et puniendi obnoxius est.

Dante *Epistolae* 10.8¹⁶

The subject then of my whole work, taken in the literal sense only, is the state of souls after death, pure and simple. For on and about that, the whole work turns. If however the work be regarded from the allegorical point of view, the subject is man according as by his merits or demerits, in the exercise of his free will, he is deserving of reward or punishment by justice.

So going back to the estimate of Virgil's *katabasis* in the Servian corpus, what might Dante's response to it be? We could look in the *Commedia*. The abundant reference throughout to the sixth book of the *Aeneid* suggests assent to Servius's claim that it is there that the *scientia* of the poem is predominant. As for the assertion that the greater part of the book is from Homer, Dante certainly has a sufficient conception of who Homer is. In the fourth Canto of the *Inferno*, Dante asks Virgil:

'O tu ch'onori scienza ed arte,
questi chi son c' hanno cotanta onranza,
che dal modo delli altri li diparte?'

Inferno 4.73–5

'O thou who honourest both science and art, who are these who have such honour that it sets them apart from the condition of the rest?'

The answer from Virgil soon comes:

‘Mira colui con quella spada in mano,
 che vien dinanzi ai tre sì come sire.
 Quelli è Omero poeta sovrano;
 l’altro è Orazio satiro che vène;
 Ovidio è il terzo, e l’ultimo Lucano. 90
 Però che ciascun meco si convene
 nel nome che sonò la voce sola,
 fannomi onore, e di ciò fanno bene.’
 Così vidi adunar la bella scola
 di quel signor dell’altissimo canto
 che sovra li altri com’aquila vola.
 Da ch’ebber ragionato insieme alquanto,
 volsersi a me con salutevol cenno;
 e ’l mio maestro sorrise del tanto:
 e più d’onore ancora assai mi fenno, 100
 ch’e’ sì mi fecer della loro schiera,
 sì ch’ io fui sesto tra cotanto senno.

Inferno 4.86–102

‘Mark him there with sword in hand who comes before the
 three as their lord; he is Homer, the sovereign poet. He that
 comes next is Horace the satirist, Ovid is the third, and the last
 Lucan. Since each shares with me in the name the one voice
 uttered they give me honourable welcome and in this do well.’
 Thus I saw assemble the noble school of that lord of loftiest
 song who flies like an eagle above the rest. After they had
 talked together for a time they turned to me with a sign of
 greeting, and my master smiled at this; and then they showed
 me still greater honour, for they made me one of their number
 so that I was the sixth among those high intelligences.

It must be significant that Dante depends on Virgil for the *sovrano poeta* to be pointed out to him. There is also something attractive about the conceit in verses 91–2: all the poets share in the name of *altissimo poeta* uttered by the one voice. Homer’s glory is shared by Virgil, and now by Dante too, since he is here admitted to their company. There is a hierarchy, but it is a flexible one. This is a useful device on Dante’s part since

he would not be sure, even after reading Servius, how much credit to assign to Homer, how much to Virgil, for the *scienza* he discovers.

From the remarks in his epistle to Can Grande della Scala, it seems clear that Dante would understand Servius's *simpliciter* to mean 'literally.' Whether he would have read the sixth book of the *Aeneid* allegorically or literally is another matter. But the claim that this book in particular draws from the *alta scientia* of philosophers and theologians would have a particular appeal and meaning for Dante.¹⁷ The point here has not been so much to demonstrate inviolably Servius's influence on Dante as to illustrate the resonances Servius's observations and his privileging of book 6 of the *Aeneid* might have had for him as a medieval reader.

Servius is not the only important commentator from late antiquity to attach special importance to the *katabasis* in Virgil's epic. Fulgentius' *Expositio Continentiae Vergilianae* – an 'exposition of the content of Virgil according to moral philosophy' – does so too. This was a text which had a fundamental and dynamic role in shaping the reception of Virgil until well into the eighteenth century. Fulgentius was probably writing in the sixth century, some two hundred years after the commentaries of Servius, Tiberius Claudius Donatus, and Macrobius. His treatise stands in strong contrast to those commentators because it does not deal with grammar or rhetoric. Instead it provides our earliest example of a reading of the *Aeneid* which is first and foremost allegorical.

Fulgentius's *Expositio* also diverges from its predecessors in the manner of its presentation. It begins by taking the form of a letter from the author to a grammarian called Calcidius. The author wants to avoid treating the *Eclogues* and *Georgics* because they might be dangerous: 'in them are woven *rationes* so mystical [i.e. 'allegorical'] that in those books Virgil has included the secrets of almost every art.' Such arts include prophecy in the fourth *Eclogue*, priestly matters in the fifth, omens in the eighth and ninth, and astrology in the first *Georgic*, augury in the third *Georgic*, as well as in *Aeneid* 6.245–6. However, Fulgentius's work soon shifts from being an epistolary treatise to a dialogue with Virgil himself:

*Cui ego: Seponas quaeso caperatos obtutus, Ausonum vatum
clarissime, rancidamque altioris salsuram ingenii iocundioris
quolibet mellis sapore dulcescas: nam non illa in tuis operibus
quaerimus ... sed tantum illa quaerimus levia, quae
mensualibus stipendiis grammatici distrahunt puerilibus*

auscultatibus. Tum ille contracto rugis multiplicibus supercilio: 'Putabam, inquit, vel te homuncule, creperum aliquid desipere, in cuius corde vecturam meas onerosiores exposuissem sarcinulas; at tu telluris glabro solidior, adipatum quidpiam ructuas. (ruptuas Helm). Cui ego: 'Serva ista quaeso tuis Romanis, quibus haec nosse laudabile competit et inpune succedit; nobis vero erit maximum si vel extremas tuas praestringere contigerit fimbrias. Ad haec ille: 'Quatenus, inquit, in his tibi discendis non adipata grassedo ingenii, quam temporis formido periculosa reluctat, de nostro torrentis ingenii impetu brevior urnulam praelibabo, quae tibi crapulae plenitudine nausiam movere non possit ... In omnibus nostris opusculis fisici ordinis argumenta induximus, quo per duodena librorum volumina plenior humanae vitae monstrassem statum. Denique ideo tale dicendi exordium sumpsimus: 'arma virumque cano,' in armis virtutem, in viro sapientiam demonstrantes ...

Expositio (ed. Helm), 85–6

I said: 'If you please, put aside your frowning expressions, o most famous of Italian poets and sweeten the bitter sauce of your difficult ideas with the condiment of sweet honey, for I do not seek these [philosophical] things in your writings ... I seek only the easy things grammarians expound to their boyish ears for monthly fees.' Then, wrinkling his brow Virgil said: 'I thought, little man, that you were too foolish for me to load my heavier burdens on your heart. You are more dense than a dirt clod and will sleep through anything weighty.' I said: 'Save that sort of knowledge, I pray, for your Romans for whom it is honourable and harmless. It will be enough for me to touch the lowest hem of your robe.' 'He said: 'As far as your coarse intelligence and the timidity of your age permit you to learn, I will dip out just a few drops from the fountain of my swelling genius and explain these matters to you. This small measure will prevent you from becoming so drunk that you get sick ... In all my works I treated subjects relating to natural philosophy. And in the twelve books of the *Aeneid*, I revealed fully the condition of man's life. And I began the exordium with

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‘Arms and the man I sing’ referring to virtue by ‘arms’ and
‘wisdom’ by ‘man’ ...

There follows an elaborate exegesis of the poem’s opening before a very close and chronologically thorough summary and interpretation of the *Aeneid*. There is no explicit statement in the text by either ‘Fulgentius’, the narrator, or by ‘Virgil’, the character, to claim special importance for the sixth book. The priority is rather suggested by more space and attention being paid to that book by Fulgentius’s Virgil than to all the other books put together. The commentary he supplies on 7–12 constitutes less than half the amount supplied for Book 6.

The last part of the exposition of the sixth book by the character of Virgil gives a fairly representative impression of how that commentary reads:

‘... *Nam et vide quid filium docet:*
Principio caelum et terram camposque liquentes
Lucentemque globum lunae Titaniaque astra.
Vides ergo quia sicut Deum creatorem oportuit et de secretis
naturae mysteriis docet et reduces iterum animas iterum de vitis
demonstrans et futura ostendit.’

Expositio (ed. Helm), 102

‘... Note what [Anchises] teaches his son:
In the beginning [an indwelling spirit infused] the heavens
and the earth and the watery plains and the shining orb of
the moon and the stars of Titan.

[6.724–5]

You can see that the creator must be God and that Anchises teaches about the hidden mysteries of nature, and describes the souls returning again and again from life, and reveals the future.’

At this point Fulgentius responds, not to express agreement, as he has done so far, but to heckle for the first time:

Ad haec ego: O vatium Latialis autentica, itane tuum clarissimum ingenium tam stultae defensionis fuscare debuisti caligine? Tunc ille qui dudum in bucolicis mystice persecutus dixerat:

‘Iam redit et virgo, redeunt Saturnia regna;

Iam nova progenies caelo promittitur alto,’

nunc vero dormitanti ingenio Academicum quippiam stertens ais: ‘Sublimes animas iterumque ad tarda reverti corpora.’ Numquidem oportuerat te inter tanta dulcia poma mora etiam ponere tuaeque luculentae sapientiae funalia caligare? Ad haec ille subridens: ‘Si, inquit, inter tantas Stoicas veritates aliquid etiam Epicuream non desipissem, paganus non essem; nullo enim omnia vera nosse contingit nisi vobis, quibus sol veritatis inluxit. Neque enim hoc pacto in tuis libris conductus narrator accessi, ut id quod sentire me oportuerat, disputarem et non ea potius quae senseram lucidarem. Audi ergo quae restant ...

Expositio (ed. Helm), 102–3

I said: ‘O truest of Italian bards, how could you have obscured your brilliant genius in the darkness of such a stupid line of defence? Wasn’t it you, who writing allegorically in the *Eclogues*, once said:

*‘Now a virgin returns and the reign of Saturn returns
Now a new race is promised by high heaven.’*

[Eclogue 4.6–7]

But now, snoring out some sort of Academic tripe while your wit is asleep, you say: ‘Heavenly souls go up to heaven and are returned again to slow bodies.’ [*Aen.* 6.720]. Why did you put blackberries among so many sweet apples and darken the torches of your brilliant wisdom?’ Smiling he said: ‘If I had not muddled something Epicurean in with so great Stoic truths, I would not have been a pagan. No people except you Christians on whom the sun of truth has shone can know all of the truth. But I was not brought to come in as a narrator in your book with the stipulation that I should argue about what I should

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have known, but to explain those things that I did know. Now listen to what remains ...¹⁸

Any merit in Fulgentius, including such evident humour, was lost on Comparetti, who says of Fulgentius that he was ‘violent and incoherent ... disregard[ing] every law of common sense in such a patent and well-nigh brutal manner, that it is hard to conceive how any sane man can seriously have undertaken such a work, and harder still to believe that other sane men should have accepted it as an object for serious consideration.’¹⁹ Exactly a century later the article on Fulgentius in the *OCD* in 1996 is just as disdainful: ‘[the *Expositio*] is characterised by extreme foolishness of thought.’ However, it is not so much the nature of the allegorising as the emphasis Fulgentius’ Virgil places on the sixth book of the *Aeneid* which is of interest here. The excerpts from the *Expositio* quoted here should suffice to highlight its status as an amusing literary creation, which is as much a parodic variant of Virgil’s *katabasis*, as a commentary on it. In this respect alone, the importance of Fulgentius for manipulating Dante’s reception of *Aeneid* 6 in the *Inferno* should now be very evident.²⁰

I mentioned that in his introduction to the *Expositio*, Fulgentius professed to eschew arts like augury treated in *Georgic* 3, and also in *Aeneid* 6.245–6, which he actually quotes. Those verses describe the Sibyl cutting the bristles from between the horns of the heifers and laying them on the fire, as she invokes Hecate. Twenty lines later in Virgil’s narrative, we hear another *vates* making an invocation which is just as sinister. This time, the *vates* is Virgil the narrator himself:

*Di, quibus imperium est animarum, umbraeque silentes
et Chaos et Phlegethon, loca nocte tacentia late,
sit mihi fas audita loqui, sit numine vestro
pandere res alta terra et caligine mersas.*

Aeneid 6.264–7

You gods who hold power over the spirits, you silent shades,
and Chaos and Phlegethon, you places silent far in the night,
let it be lawful to speak what I have heard, let it be granted by
your power to reveal things hidden deep in the darkness of the
earth.

Fulgentius, having just quoted Virgil's lines describing the Sibyl's ritual activity, says he does not want to get involved with this sort of thing: he fears that anyone who does might end up with a broken head (*ne dum quis laudem quaerit nominis fragmen reperiatur capitis ...*) But the very next thing he does is to perform a pagan invocation, addressed to the Muses:

*Vos Heliconiades, neque enim mihi sola vocanda est
Calliope, conferte gradum, date praemia menti.
Maius opus moveo; nec enim mihi sufficit una.
Currite, Pierides, vos enim mea <maxima cura>,
Parrasias niveo conpellite pectine cordas.
Haec tam parva precatio credo quod Virgilianis satisfecerit
Muisis.*

Expositio (ed. Helm), 85

O Maids of Helicon – and I do not call on Calliope alone –
Assist me and give your blessing to my mind.
I undertake a more difficult task: a single Muse will not
suffice:
Run, Pierian Maidens, you are my greatest care.
Strike the Arcadian lyre with an ivory plectrum.
I think even this little invocation will satisfy the Virgilian
Muses.

The Muses were seen to be as threatening as any other kind of pagan deity to early Christian readers: Ermenrich, as we saw, consigned them to the 'foulest swamp of the Styx'.²¹ Fulgentius's emphatic invocation is more than controversial. *Maius opus moveo* of course is taken from *Aeneid* 7.45. But then Fulgentius goes even further by demanding in no uncertain terms the *personam Mantuani vatis*. This may be humorously expressed, but it is nonetheless a necromantic exercise. The diction that opens this 'bardophany' marks definitively the transition from discursive epistolary style in which the *Expositio* began, to that of the dramatic narrative in which it is to continue:

*Cede mihi nunc personam Mantuani vatis, quo fugitivos eius
in lucem deducamus amfractus. Nam ecce ad me etiam ipse
Ascrei fontis bractamento saturior advenit, quales vatium*

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*imagines solent, dum assumptis ad opus conficiendum tabulis
stupida fronte arcanum quiddam latranti intrinsecus tractu
submurmurant (submurmurat Helm).*

Expositio (ed. Helm), 85

Send me now the Mantuan Bard in person, so that I can lead his fugitive meanings into the light. And behold, he himself comes towards me well filled with a draught of the Ascrean spring, just as *imagines* of bards are supposed to, with his tablets raised in order to treat his topic, and with a fixed frown murmurs some mysterious truth that wells up from within him.

Ecce ('behold') is the word that heralds the appearance of Palinurus whose shade is the first shade Aeneas encounters in his *katabasis*. *Ecce* also introduces the apparition of the dead Hector in Aeneas's own narrative of his dream in *Aeneid* 2.270. The word *imago* is still more obviously evocative of *Aeneid* 6: it is used more there than in any other book of Virgil's entire epic. The two most important occurrences there are the places where Aeneas discovers the incorporeal form and content of the shades he sees. The first is at 293: Aeneas tries to attack the array of Scyllas, Harpies and Gorgons:

*corripit hic subita trepidus formidine ferrum
Aeneas strictamque aciem venientibus offert,
et ni docta comes tenuis sine corpore vitas
admoneat volitare cava sub imagine formae,
inruat et frustra ferro diverberet umbras.*

Aeneid 6.290–4

At this point Aeneas trembling with sudden fear snatches his sword and brandishes his drawn blade at their approach, and if his learned guide had not forewarned him that they were vague spirits without substance, flitting about with the image of a form, he would have rushed on and slashed in vain at shadows with his sword.

The fact that Aeneas does not try this out for himself here adds extra sense and pathos to his later attempt to embrace Anchises (6.700). He tries this

three times, even though the first reference in Aeneas's preceding speech to his father was to his *tristis imago*. This is why Fulgentius is quite at home with what *imagines* of poets are supposed to look like. Possibly the apostrophe to Virgil *Ausonidum vatium clarissime* is supposed to recall the Sibyl's address to Musaeus in 6.669: *optime vates*. Fulgentius then does not quite offer another *katabasis* narrative, but the context in which his *expositio* is put forward, expressed by Virgil himself, suggests an implicit link between this account and that of the epic *katabasis*. This functions in addition to the explicit treatment of the book which takes up such a large part of Fulgentius's text.

A reading of this then would corroborate the opinion gleaned from Servius that the sixth book of the *Aeneid* is the most useful. This would not have escaped the attention of anyone who read either both commentators or Fulgentius alone. Another point about the reception of Virgil's underworld via Fulgentius recalls the opening of this discussion. There are resemblances between this account of an apparition of Virgil in Fulgentius's letter to Calcidius and the one quoted earlier from Ermenrich's letter to Grimaldus. In Fulgentius, that apparition is deliberately conjured up by the author. For Ermenrich on the other hand, the apparition was quite unwanted. But both visions echo the diction used by Virgil himself for Hector's appearance in Aeneas's dream, and both are mainly preoccupied in different ways with Virgil as the poet of the sixth book. Ermenrich is writing two centuries after the allegorist; it would be interesting to consider the extent to which Fulgentius inspired a tradition of vision literature featuring Virgil which would have been less humorously conceived than his own.²²

There is one more text which is concerned with the content of Virgil and which gives centre place to the descent to the underworld in *Aeneid* 6. This text comes far earlier in the tradition than the others I have discussed: it was known to Lucan, Statius, Martial, and Suetonius as well as to Aelius Donatus and Servius. It also had a key place later in the tradition – we have manuscripts of it dating from the tenth century. It is written in 415 hexameters and most of those Romans named probably believed it was written by Virgil himself. The *Culex* is obviously not a commentary in the sense that the works of Macrobius and Servius are commentaries. But we might usefully read it as a kind of commentary, just as it was conversely useful to treat Fulgentius as a literary successor of Virgil in considering the fictional background of his interpretation.

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The *Culex*, as the work's title indicates, is about a gnat. The poem opens with a dedication to Octavian which takes up 41 verses in which the poet seeks to justify his more trivial theme. The actual story begins with a shepherd driving his goats at dawn out to their mountain pasture. The idyllic life of the shepherd is celebrated for some fifty verses. At midday this particular shepherd ensures his herd is sheltered and soon falls asleep. A malicious serpent then approaches, but the shepherd is warned of this by a sting in the eye from a gnat. He wakes immediately, crushes and kills the gnat, and then sees the serpent which he beats to death. At nightfall the weary shepherd leads his flock back to their fold and falls asleep. The spectre of the gnat then appears to him and sings reproachfully of his death. The lament takes up nearly half the poem and provides the link with the *katabasis* in the *Aeneid*. The gnat complains that the shepherd's life has been saved while the *Manes* have driven him over the waves of Lethe. The contrast between the life he saved and the death he endures is brought out several times.

There are in fact several parallels between this account of the underworld and the one in *Aeneid*: the gnat's version often serves to elaborate on certain features of it. For instance, Charon, Tisiphone and Cerberus are mentioned and described; Otus and Ephialtes are mentioned by name (in *Aeneid* 6.583 they are merely referred to collectively as *Aloidas geminos*); Sisyphus is unnamed but his fate is referred to, as in *Aeneid* 6.616. The same basic structure is followed in both texts: we have the threshold of the underworld described, an enumeration of those who died tragically and of the wicked who are now reaping their just deserts, ending with an account of the more fortunate lot of the great Roman heroes: the Fabii, the Decii, Horatius, Camillus and the Scipios. Observing the seats of the great and pious offers little consolation to a humble gnat, and he ends by drawing an explicitly negative comparison between their fortune and his:

*illi laude sua vigeant: ego Ditis opacos
cogor adire lacus, viduos, a, lumine Phoebi.*

Culex 372–3

Let them flourish in their renown: I am compelled to approach
the gloomy lakes of Dis that are, alas, deprived of the light of
Phoebus ...

Such a contrast might well have occurred to those among the audiences or readers of Virgil's story of death in various times who did not consider themselves to be among the likes of Anchises or Marcellus. Additional elements are drawn from beyond the *Aeneid*: the episode of Orpheus and Eurydice perhaps provides the interest the encounter with Dido would have had, and there is a lengthy treatment of Greek heroes on the theme of how the mighty fall. But basically the apparatus of the underworld which Aeneas saw in the *Aeneid* provides a topography which is the authoritative one for this account too, vague though that topography may be.

However, a disturbing contrast is brought out in the *Culex* between Aeneas's view of the underworld and that of the gnat. Aeneas, like Odysseus, does not see it as one who has died, but goes as a visitor. The route he takes, though it may seem to have a rather random dreamlike quality, has a purpose – and that purpose is Aeneas's own. The gnat describes the same place but from the perspective of an observer who has actually died. His account emphasises disconcertingly that he has become a passive object, blown and driven along, subject to the *Manes*. This is made clear from the very beginning of the gnat's speech, by expressions which are here emphasised:

*'quis' inquit 'meritis ad quae delatus acerbas
cogor adire vices? tua dum mihi carior ipsa
vita fuit vita, rapior per inania ventis.
tu lentus refoves iucunda membra quiete
ereptus taetris e cladibus; at mea Manes
viscera Lethaeas cogunt transnare per undas;
praeda Charonis agor ...*

Culex 210–16

'What deserts are mine' he says, 'and to what ills am I wafted who am compelled to face a bitter requital? While your life was dearer to me than life itself, I am swept by the winds through empty space. You at your ease in sweet repose refresh your limbs, you who were snatched from a hideous death, but my remains the Shades compel to pass over Lethe's waters; as Charon's spoil I am driven ...

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The unfortunate insect is not someone who travels of his own accord and he has had no idea of where he is going at each stage:

*feror avia carpens,
avia Cimmerios inter distantia lucos
quam circa tristes densentur in omnia poenae!*

Culex 231–3

I take my way over pathless regions – pathless regions far away amid Cimmerian groves and around me through the woeful penalties for all misdeeds.

*eheu, mutandus numquam labor! auferor ultra
in diversa magis, distantia nomina cerno,
Elysiam transnandus agor delatus ad undam.*

Culex 258–60

Alas for the hardship never to change! I am hurried off on to far different sights and see famous names. Across Elysium's water I must swim and to that tide am I borne.

Finally the gnat has to submit to judgment:

*maxime Minos,
conscelerata pia discernis vincula sede.
ergo iam causam mortis, iam dicere vitae
verberibus saevae cogunt sub iudice Poenae.*

Culex 374–7

Greatest Minos you keep apart the chains of the wicked from the seat of the righteous. So before the judge cruel figures of Penance now compel me with blows to plead the case for death, the case for continued life.

This passivity, the idea of being carried or driven along, conveyed by these verbs in the first person passive voice, prefigures the style of medieval visions of death. So also does the very individual nature of the trial the gnat has to undergo at 374–7. For the middle ages, Gurevich, Ariès and

Chaunu all discuss the prevalence of the notion of a separate trial over that of a simultaneous Last Judgment at the end of time.²³ The imagery and language of court procedure are used in the source passage in *Aeneid* 6.430f., but the defendants are dealt with in groups, according to the circumstances of their deaths:

*infantumque animae flentes, in limine primo
quos dulcis vitae exsortis et ab ubere raptos
abstulit atra dies et funere mersit acerbo;
hos iuxta falso damnati crimine mortis.
nec vero sine sorte datae, sine iudice, sedes:
quaesitor Minos urnam movet; ille silentium
consiliumque vocat vitasque et crimina discit.*

Aeneid 6.427–33

The weeping souls of infants, whom a dark day snatched from the breast, deprived of the sweetness of life on its very first threshold, and then plunged into the bitterness of death; near them are those condemned to death on false charges. Their places here do not lack the casting of lots and do not lack a judge. Minos, as president of the court shakes the urn, and he summons a council of silent jurors and enquires into their lives and crimes.

Another notable feature of the ‘gnatabasis’, is the insect’s relentless use of the narrative present. All the things he sees and undergoes are described as they are happening – yet at the same he is talking to the shepherd. This device is also to be found in later *katabases*.

As a general reflection on Virgil, the *Culex* is interesting. The poet clearly wants his audience to think he is Virgil. As well as obvious echoes of the *Aeneid*, there is the aforementioned address to Octavian in which he prophesies greater work to come. In his seeking to imitate Virgil convincingly, we might imagine the *Vergilius personatus* elaborating on themes and subjects which would strike him as appropriately typical, and for which Virgil was known. We find, then, the idealisation of the country life, descriptions of nature, brief battle narratives, compassion for small animals as well as the preoccupation with death and the afterlife. That preoccupation is conspicuous even before the gnat’s misfortune: the end of

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the dedication looks to the place established for Octavian in the *pia sede* (39); we are told of Agave who will have to do penance for the death of her son (111), and of the mourning of Phaëthon's sisters (128–9).

III

At this point I want to go on to the final stage of our enquiry. What features of *Aeneid* 6 itself prompted it to be remembered and celebrated? For Christian times the mere nature of the book's content might be sufficient. An account of Hades serves a better purpose than a description of a boxing match or chariot race. The Bible does not really provide sufficiently graphic accounts of the afterlife to inspire imaginations, artistic, poetic or even visionary. Works which did supply such accounts were composed, not of course to stimulate the arts, but to incline people to behave. An early and influential example is the *Apocalypse of St. Paul*. This originally Greek text, supposed to have been written by an *Egyptian*, was translated into Latin and into several European languages from the fourth century.²⁴ It had a great deal of currency in the seventh and eighth centuries. It was not canonical – church fathers including Augustine inveigh against it. This text, at any rate, does not lack graphic detail, and enumerates torment after torment piled up for sinners in Hell. After relaying all this, the author says:

*Tunc Paulus scripsit multas penas; et sunt numero quasi
centum xliiii. Si fuissent centum viri ab inicio mundi, et
unusquisque habuisset ferream linguam, numquam possent
unam penam enarrare inferni.*

Visio Pauli Redact. I.11

Then Paul wrote down the many punishments, and their number is 144. Even if there had existed from the beginning of the world, one hundred men, each of whom possessed an iron tongue, they would not be able to recount a single one of hell's punishments.

That is clearly familiar, recalling the way the Sibyl ends her long account to Aeneas of the sinners in Tartarus in *Aeneid* 6.562–627:

*non, mihi si linguae centum sint oraque centum,
ferrea vox, omnis scelerum comprehendere formas,
omnia poenarum percurrere nomina possim.*

Aeneid 6.625–7

I could not, even if I had a hundred tongues, a hundred mouths
and a voice of iron recount all the forms of their crimes or run
through the mere names of all their punishments.

The Sibyl's words of course would cut ice with Christians: the view that the Cumaean Sibyl had prophesied the birth of Christ in Virgil's 'Messianic *Eclogue*' was already well current by the fourth century after it occurred.²⁵ So, even in a Christian account of the afterlife as early as the Latin *Apocalypse of St. Paul*, Virgil's *katabasis* is providing some kind of model.

But the reason for the influence of Virgil's particular story of death in later times, when there was an abundance of other Christian ones, still needs explanation. Dante's debt to Virgil is a general one, it may be true, but the sixth book of the *Aeneid* is picked up more than any other in the *Inferno*.²⁶ And we also have to account for the prominence given to the book in pagan antiquity when other, older *katabasis* narratives would have been known and available. A superficial response would be that Virgil's treatment of the world of death is an especially good one. In the end such a favourable evaluation is rooted in appreciation of Virgil's poetic form. It remains to turn to that form, and to the rhetoric, in a broad sense, of the narrative in *Aeneid 6*, for a selective examination of their potential impact on the book's various readers and audiences.

Much of the power of the story in *Aeneid 6* derives from its immediate location in the narrative surrounding it. Immediately before, Aeneas's epitaphic pronouncement, after his discovery of the death of Palinurus, is what closes Book 5:

*'o nimium caelo et pelago confise sereno
nudus in ignota, Palinure, iacebis harena.'*

Aeneid 5.871–2

'O Palinurus, you trusted too much in the calm sea and sky.
You will lie uncovered on an unknown shore.'

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And immediately after our *katabasis*, Book 7 opens with another epitaphic apostrophe, this time from the poet:

*Tu quoque litoribus nostris, Aeneia nutrix,
aeternam moriens famam, Caieta dedisti*

Aeneid 7.1–2

You too, Caieta, the nurse of Aeneas, in your death have given eternal fame to our shores ...

Servius explains the *quoque* ('too') thus: *sicut Misenus, Palinurus etiam* ('as with Misenus, so too with Palinurus'). All three have localities named after them. But there might be another purpose to the relation of this death at this point – so directly after Aeneas's exit through the ivory gate. We saw the condition of Palinurus in Hades when we would not have expected to hear of him again, but we now know something of what is in store for Caieta. Her death here, the first event recounted after Aeneas's return to his comrades, serves to load *every* death that follows in the poem with a depth of meaning it could not have had before. The full implications of these passages are examined in an important article by Alessandro Barchiesi.²⁷

This is relevant to a more panoramic consideration of the placing of the *katabasis* book in the poem. The importance of the ordering and numbering of the books in Servius is indicated in his introduction to the first book of the *Aeneid*, quoted above. This is the beginning of the Servian commentary on Book 7:

in duas partes hoc opus divisum est: nam primi sex ad imaginem Odysssiae dicti sunt, quos personarum et adlocutionum varietate constat esse graviores, hi autem sex qui sequuntur ad imaginem Iliados dicti sunt, qui in negotiis validiores sunt: nam et ipse hoc dicit maius opus moveo. et re vera tragicum opus est, ubi tantum bella tractantur.

Servius on *Aeneid* 7.1

This whole work is divided into two parts. The first six books are supposed to be made in the image of the *Odyssey*. It is the convention that the variation of characters and of the speeches makes these books weightier; the six books which come next

are supposed to be in the likeness of the *Iliad* – these are stronger because of the serious matters in them, as the poet himself says: ‘I begin a grander enterprise’ [*maius opus moveo*]. The work really is a tragedy where it treats of war so much.

And 12.952, the final line of Turnus’ tragedy, can only remind us of where those dying in war will go: *vitaque cum gemitu fugit indignata sub umbras*. Book 6 then is crucially placed, before the mortal combat and at the climax of Aeneas’s journey of discovery. This endows it with a gravity which no allegorist could miss.

The spatial nature of the underworld in the story, as opposed to its temporal location in the narrative, is a much more complicated question. Much has been written on Virgil’s topography in Book 6 and its bearing on actual localities. But space in a general sense, like time, character, and event is a basic product of narrative. If we attempt to produce any definite elevation of the actual underworld from the point at which Aeneas and the Sibyl enter it at 268, we run into some difficulties. There are few coordinates supplied in Virgil’s narrative which is, in Conington’s words, ‘demonstrably inconsistent or confused.’ In these *inania regna* (a disturbing indication if we want to find our way), we are told there is a path in the woods (271). But the sky is concealed by *umbra* and there are no colours. This is the *vestibulum* and the jaws of Orcus are inhabited by Grief, Cares, Old Age, Diseases, Fear and the like. Then more visually identifiable bogeys appear: the Centaurs, Scyllas, Gorgons and Harpies.

From here is the the *via* leading to the waters of Acheron (295), and there is a whirlpool (296, 310). There is the description of Charon: this place is a riverbank. The Sibyl explains to Aeneas this is the realm of the unburied. They finally cross the river (416) where Cerberus is waiting. Aeneas walks away from the riverbank (424) to the region of the prematurely dead bound by the Styx (439). The nearby (*nec procul*) *Lugentes Campi* are inhabited by the lovelorn. Aeneas continues the journey (477: *Inde datum molitur iter*) to the *ultima arva* occupied by the glorious in war. The Sibyl hurries Aeneas on (540), telling him of the path which forks to Elysium on the right, or to Tartarus on the left. They reach the gateway of Elysium marked by the Cyclopes’ forge (629). After they have entered the meadows, Musaeus shows the travellers the valley inhabited by Anchises (679), from which, much further on, Aeneas can see Lethe (711).

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The strange thing is that after Anchises has shown Aeneas the whole region, the narrator announces the famous way out at 893 – the twin gates of Sleep – through which Aeneas passes with the Sibyl to join instantly his ships and companions. Why hadn't he gone in through the out door? There might be one thing that redeems this abrupt syncopation of the narrative. Through this whole *katabasis* Aeneas and the Sibyl have been moving in time as well as in space. It was afternoon when Aeneas was talking to Deiphobus and he could well have used up the appointed time, hence the Sibyl's warning that night was impending. It was twilight when they reached Elysium as they went through the *opaca viarum*. The apparition of the Gates of Sleep at the end of the excursion, whatever else they represent, offer a neat closural device.

Nonetheless this topography is generally elusive. Summarised thus, it seems a good deal clearer than it does to most readers of the original. No dimensions are given, except one set which are relative: the Sibyl tells us that Tartarus is twice as deep as Olympus is high (577–9). The fact that we are brought back to the place where we started might cause us to wonder whether the whole region occupies any physical space at all – especially if the Shades are incorporeal. This topographical vagueness may have contributed a great deal to the widespread influence of Virgil's particular story of death. If no strict geography is asserted, this dream-like description can be reconstructed time after time, and made compatible with other models, even if they are informed by a different theology. Colin Hardie remarks 'The structures of *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* offered by [the character] Virgil [in the *Commedia*] contrast with his unsystematic *Aeneid* 6, which is not reducible to maps and diagrams.'²⁸ This might have been to Dante's advantage: maps, diagrams and cartographic paintings of the cosmos of the *Commedia* alone began to abound soon after its creation.²⁹

Finally, another formal feature of Virgil's narrative in the sixth book of the *Aeneid* is important in accounting for the exceptional influence of this particular *katabasis* on commentators, theologians and poets, both in pagan antiquity and in later Christian cultures. Ancient *katabases* generally involve someone who has gone to the underworld, relating what he has witnessed. This is the case with Odysseus's account of Hades in the eleventh book of Homer's *Odyssey* as well as with the gnat in the *Culex*. The narrator of the biblical book of Revelation also keeps saying *vidi, et*

vidi haec, as do his major sources – Daniel, Ezekiel and Zechariah. A character can also recount a *katabasis* to someone else who in turn tells it to his readers or audience. This happens with the Myth of Er in Plato. Occasionally some *katabases* can consist of directions being issued by an authority to an initiate who must follow them.³⁰ Dante obviously uses the first device, following the forms of biblical or vision literature, and directly relates his experiences *in propria persona* to his reader or audience.

However, the manner of narration in the *Aeneid* is different again. This presentation of the underworld is apparently more objective. It is given in the third person, at times in the firm manner of a topographical description. This is the only major literary *katabasis* which seems to come directly from a disembodied poet-narrator. Perhaps it is unsurprising then that Virgil eventually acquired the status of *vates* in the sense of ‘seer’ as well as ‘poet.’ Virgil’s employment of the third person turned out to be a successful rhetorical device – a device not used by Homer in this context – which basically accounts for the authority and precedence this story of death came to acquire. There is a catch though, and Virgil’s innovation – which I have discussed elsewhere – is a cunning and rather subtle one.³¹ In *Aeneid* 6 there is a higher proportion of direct speech from characters in relation to the narrator’s discourse than in any other part of the poem. In this book of 901 verses, the Sibyl and Anchises speak about 160 each – more than any of the other characters, including Aeneas. It is really these two characters who supply the most information to Aeneas, and thus to the audience, about the underworld. The prominent voice granted to the Cumaean Sibyl in particular would command the attention of Christian readers, especially given her rôle as a pagan prophet of the Nativity. Overall, the poet has passed the real burden of responsibility on to his characters. Leaving aside the issue of Virgil’s actual sources, we have an inventive variation on the traditional form of the *katabasis*, a dialogical presentation by a group of speakers. Virgil’s vatic authority has endured, but it is to some extent an *imago*.

Byron is one of many writers to send up the form of *katabasis*. His mock apocalyptic poem, *The Vision of Judgment* (1822) does for King George III roughly what Seneca did for the Emperor Claudius. The English monarch, who haplessly championed the divine right of kings, arrives expectantly at the Gates of Heaven to find himself in a very embarrassing position: none of the lethargic angels who are cranking up the sun and moon have the faintest idea who he is. The following aside from

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Byron's poem will temper the claims to *scientia* in this paper, which have verged too far on the grave:

And this is not a theologic tract,
 To prove with Hebrew and with Arabic,
If Job be allegory or a fact,
 But a true narrative; and thus I pick
From out the whole but such and such an act
 As sets aside the slightest thought of trick.
'Tis every tittle true, beyond suspicion,
 And accurate as any other vision.

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Notes

1. This is from the opening of P. Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death* (New York, 1981).
2. Literature on *katabasis* is obviously extensive. See generally A. Dieterich *Nekuia* (Berlin, 1913). On *katabasis* and Virgil see the commentaries on *Aeneid* 6 by R.G. Austin (Oxford, 1977) and E. Norden (5th edn. Stuttgart, 1970), and Raymond Clark, *Catabasis: Vergil and the Wisdom-Tradition* (Amsterdam, 1979). The Virgil commentary of the seventeenth century Spanish Jesuit, Juan Luis De La Cerda has some interesting insights on the conceptions of life after death in *Aeneid* 6, which I discuss in R. Gibson and C. Kraus, *The Classical Commentary* (Leiden, 2002).
3. The 1895 English translation by E.F.M. Benecke has been reprinted (London, 1966).
4. This is also true for much of the current study of 'second sophistic' Greek literature and also of renaissance 'neo' Latin literature. Accounts of production, circulation, readership etc. generally exclude a more intimate interpretative engagement with the texts themselves.
5. Part of this excerpt from Ermenrich's letter is translated by Helen Waddell, *The Wandering Scholars* (6th edn; Harmondsworth, 1932), 18–19. The Latin text (which was not easy to locate from Waddell's brief reference) can be found in E. Dümmler (ed.) *Ermenrici Elwangensis Epistola ad Grimaldum Abbatum* in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica: Epistolarum Tomi* (5.1) (Berlin, 1898), 534–79.
6. Ermenrich's mention of the first sleep which is sweetest after toil recalls *Aen.* 2.268; for his conceit of 'giving limbs to sleep,' compare *Aen.* 5.836 and 8.30.
7. *Suetoni Reliquiae* (ed. Reifferscheid), 67: *cum is [Maro] aliquando in manu haberet rogareturque quidnam faceret, respondit se aurum colligere de stercore Ennii*. Compare Cassiodorus *De institut. div. liter.* c.1, opp. ed. Garet II, 540.
8. See G. Padoan, 'Tradizione e fortuna del commento all' <Eneide> di Bernardo Silvestre,' *Italia Medioevale e umanistica* 3, (1960), 227–40 and P. Hardie, *Humanist*

exegesis of Virgil in fifteenth-century Italy and the medieval tradition of commentary (London: Warburg Institute M. Phil thesis, 1976).

9. On the potentially misleading opposition between modern ‘interpretation’ and ancient and medieval allegory, see A. Laird, ‘Figures of Allegory from Homer to Latin Epic’ in G. Boys-Stones (ed.), *Metaphor and Allegory in Ancient Thought* (Oxford, forthcoming).

10. However, in the Servian corpus there are only 183 comments of a strictly allegorical nature; this is a very small proportion of the whole. See J.W.J. Jones, ‘Allegorical interpretation in Servius,’ *Classical Journal* 56, (1960–1), 217–26.

11. Debates on the extent to which features of *Aeneid* 6 were to be read allegorically have a longstanding tradition; see J. Conington in the second volume of his commentary on Virgil (4th edn; London, 1884), 424–5 for an account of the debate between Warburton and Gibbon on this question.

12. However the discussion in Boccaccio, *Genealogia Deorum* 14.9 shows a remarkably advanced discussion of both allegory and fiction, rooted in a number of earlier texts.

13. For the Latin text see E. Friedberg and A.L. Richter (eds), *Corpus iuris canonici* (Leipzig, 1878–81) Compare Cassiodorus, *Div. lett.* cap. 28, where Cassiodorus, impressing on his monks the necessity of the seven arts, recommends the example of Moses, who was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians.

14. There is no mention by name of Servius anywhere in Dante’s Latin or vernacular works – and unfortunately no article on the Servian tradition in the *Enciclopedia Dantesca* (Rome, 1970–8). See also T. Barolini *Dante’s Poets: Textuality and Truth in the Comedy* (Princeton, 1984) and P. Giannantonio, *Dante e l’Allegorismo* (Florence, 1969).

15. See e.g. J. Sinclair (ed.) *Dante: The Divine Comedy – 1 Inferno*, (Oxford, 1939), 30 quoting Pellegrini (*Lecturae Dantis* on *Inferno* 1.1: ‘It was characteristic of Dante’s thought – rather of medieval thought in general – to proceed from the reality to the symbolical meaning, and not to sing in his lines of simple abstractions.’ The debate between Warburton and Gibbon (note 11 above) largely hung on the former’s claim that the figure of Aeneas in Book 6 represents allegorically the training into the mysteries of an ancient legislator.

16. For a Latin text, see E. Moore and P. Toynbee (1924), *Le Opere di Dante Alighieri* (4th edn. Oxford 1924).

17. See the full article on ‘*scienza* (SCIENZA; ISCIENZA)’ in the *Enciclopedia Dantesca* v, 74–7 (cf. n. 14 above), which defines the term for Dante in the first instance as ‘*possesso di conoscenza vera*.’ The chapter entitled ‘Poetry and Theology’ in E.R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, tr. W. Trask (London, 1979), 214–28 deals with these two categories in medieval thought, the relationship between them, and Dante’s reconciliation of them.

18. Here I take issue with the translation in O.B. Hardison (ed.), *Medieval Literary Criticism* (New York, 1985), 79: ‘But I did not come here to explain your scripture.’ *In tuis libris* must surely refer to Fulgentius’s own work.

19. Comparetti (note 3 above), 112.

20. See U. Pizzani’s article on Fulgentius in the *Enciclopedia Dantesca* iii, 71, and P. Giannantonio, *Dante e l’Allegorismo* (Florence, 1969) *passim*.

21. Curtius (see note 17), 232–46 traces Christian hostility to Muses. Rosati – in D. Fowler and E. Spentzou (ed.) *Cultivating the Muses: Power, Desire and Inspiration*

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(Oxford, 2001) – has recently echoed this. Fulgentius is not the only exception. For the complexities of Petrarch's adoption of the Muses in his *Africa*, see my own discussion in Fowler and Spentzou.

22. For an excellent account of medieval vision literature and accounts of the world beyond the grave see the chapter entitled 'The *Divine Comedy* before Dante' in A. Gurevich, *Medieval Popular Culture* (Cambridge, 1988), 104–52.

23. See Ariès (note 1 above), Gurevich (in previous note) at 120–2, and P. Chaunu, *La Mort à Paris, XVIe-VIIe-XVIIIe siècles* (Paris, 1978).

24. See T. Silverstein (ed.), *Visio Sancti Pauli* (London, 1935) for the Latin text. The supposed Egyptian authorship is especially significant given the quotations from Servius and Gratian above.

25. See e.g. J. Carcopino, *Virgile et le mystère de la IV églogue* (Paris, 1930) and P. Courcelle, 'Les exégèses chrétiennes de la quatrième Eglogue,' *Revue des Études Anciennes* 5, (1957), 249–319.

26. This is easily demonstrated by the most cursory reading of the *Inferno*: see A. Ronconi's article on 'Virgilio' in the *Enciclopedia Dantesca* v, 1030–49, especially 1044f. and E. Moore *Studies in Dante* i, (Oxford, 1896), 166f.

27. 'Palinuro e Caieta: Due epigrammi virgiliani' *Maia* (1977) 29–30, 3–11.

28. See C. Hardie's Introduction to the reprint of E. Moore, *Studies in Dante* (Oxford 1969).

29. A good recent discussion of the renaissance tradition of producing these diagrammatic representations is to be found in J. Kleiner, *Mismapping the Underworld: Daring and Error in Dante's Comedy* (Stanford, 1994), 23–56.

30. Some Orphic texts provide examples of this. A literary example is provided by Apuleius, *Metamorphose* 6.17–19 in which Psyche is given directions by a talking tower on how to descend to the underworld. Her execution of these instructions is more briefly recounted in 6.20.

31. On speech in the *katabasis* of Virgil's Fourth *Georgic* as well as the *Aeneid*, see A. Laird, *Powers of Expression, Expressions of Power: Speech Presentation and Latin Literature* (Oxford, 1999), 166. There are 36 speeches in *Aeneid* 6 – more than half the text of the book. At the same time there is a smaller number of personages who speak than in any other book of the poem.