Juvenal 1.163: an Alternative Solution

I quote 1.160-64:

‘cum ueniet contra digito compesce labellum: 160
accusator erit qui uerbum dixerit “hic est.”
securus licet Aenean Rutulumque ferocem
committas, nulli grauis est percussus Achilles
aut multum quaesitus Hylas urnamque secutus:
. . . .’

In his contribution to the Festschrift for Otto Skutsch, R. G. M. Nisbet impugns *percussus* (163) as insufficiently witty for its context:

“The duel between Aeneas and Turnus is described in typically derisive terms, as if the poet were promoting a fight of gladiators, and *urnamque secutus* is an equally frivolous way of describing Hylas’s fall down the well. But when we turn to the middle illustration, there is nothing humorous about *percussus Achilles*; contrast 1.54 (of Icarus), *et mare percussum puero* (sandwiched between the equally facetious *mugitum labyrinthi* and *fabrumque volantem*).”

Nisbet suggests that we alter *percussus* to *excussus*, “frisked” and so “exposed”, alluding to “the hero’s exposure when he was disguised as a girl on Scyros”.

Although I find Nisbet’s diagnosis entirely persuasive, I think that a different prescription is possible, namely *pertusus*. Given the common confusion of *c* and *t* and of single and double consonants in our manuscripts, this is paleographically even easier than *excussus*. The fact that the participle of *pertundere* was sometimes spelled *pertussus*

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2 “Notes on the Text and Interpretation of Juvenal”, in Nicholas Horsfall (ed.), *Vir Bonus Discendi Peritus: Studies in Celebration of Otto Skutsch’s Eightieth Birthday* (BICS Supplement 51), London, 1988, 86-110. Our passage is discussed on 88-89. He also proposes altering *uerbum* (161) to *uerbo*, but that is a separate question, and will not be considered here.

3 He also sees a reference to Statius’ *Achilleid*, to match references to Vergil and Valerius Flaccus in the other two exempla. Although agreeing that a reference to Statius would be in order, since “Statius was the outstanding example of the kind of poet that Juvenal deplored”, I do not see that a specific reference to the completed portion of the *Achilleid* is necessary. If Statius had lived long enough, he would surely have treated the death of Achilles in detail in Book XI or XII, and that should suffice to make it a suitably Statian topic.
would have multiplied the opportunities for confusion. Tibullus 1.10.37-38, part of a description of the Underworld, provides a good parallel for the error, and is instructive in other ways. The early manuscripts, followed by most twentieth-century editors, including K. F. Smith, Phillimore (OCT), Lenz-Galinsky, Putnam, and Lee, read:

\[ \textit{illic percussisque genis ustoque capillo} \\
\textit{errat ad obscuros pallida turba lacus.} \]

On the other hand, Pichard, Luck, Murgatroyd, and Goold (in the new Loeb) print \textit{pertuisisque} in 37. As Murgatroyd says, “\textit{Pertuisisque} means ‘bored through’, and the ref. is to the eyes devoured by the pyre . . . or by worms after burial”. Lee defends \textit{percussisque} on the grounds that “the dead are acting like mourners”, as if the dead would be beating their cheeks to mourn their own deaths. Admittedly, there is a very close parallel, but this would only help Lee’s case if Tibullus were a poet in the same class as A. Phillimore, of whom Martinus Scriblerus writes (\textit{ΠΕΡΙ ΒΑΘΟΥΣ, or, The Art of Sinking in Poetry}, London, 1727, Chapter XI): 

\begin{quote}
“With no less Simplicity does he suppose that Shepherdesses tear their Hair and beat their Breasts, at their own Deaths:

\begin{quote}
Ye brighter Maids, faint emblems of my Fair, \\
With Looks cast down, and with dishevel’d Hair, \\
In bitter Anguish beat your Breasts, and moan \\
Her Death untimely, as it were your own.”
\end{quote}
\end{quote}

It is precisely the fact that Juvenal is a satirist and Tibullus is not which obliges us to alter the forms of \textit{percussus} in both passages: the one instance of the verb is insufficiently ludicrous for its context, the other excessively so.

Though not, strictly speaking, unpoetic, \textit{pertundere} is a suitably low word in two different ways. It has a banausic sense “drill” or “perforate”, and is used by Juvenal of a

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\*4\* L. Havet, \textit{Manuel de Critique Verbale Appliqué[e] aux Textes Latins}, Paris, 1911, 218 § 926, lists passages in which our manuscripts either preserve the double-s spellings or exhibit corruptions facilitated by them.

\*5\* In his Teubner Tibullus (Stuttgart, 1988), G. Luck attributes \textit{pertuisisque} to “Lipsius ex codicibus, ut videtur, Livineius ex coniectura”.


\*7\* Guy Lee (ed.), \textit{Tibullus: Elegies} (Liverpool Latin Texts 3), Liverpool, 1982-2, \textit{ad loc}.

\*8\* The entire chapter, on “the diminishing figures”, might almost be an instruction-book for writing passages such as Juvenal 1.160-64.
cloak full of holes (pertusa . . laena 5.131), of bloodletting (o medici, nimiam pertundite uenam 6.46), and of booklice or similar pests damaging books (positos tinea pertunde libellos 7.26).9 It may be worth noting that pertundere also means “penetrate” in the sexual sense. Although the OLD quotes only Catullus’ metaphorical use (32.11) for the sexual meaning, the existence and nature of the goddess Pertunda (Varro apud August. De Civ. D. 6.9) suffice to show that the word was used that way.10 Even a hint of this second meaning would provide a suitably unheroic reminder of post-Homeric notions of the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus.11 Nisbet’s objection to percussus essentially comes down to its tone. Alteration to pertusus, rather than excussus, allows us to alter the tone without altering the reference. It may be significant that the scholiast, who refers to Aeneid 6.57 (Dardana qui Paridis direxti tela manusque), takes the passage as referring to the death of Achilles. Nisbet’s presumed error must then be earlier than the scholia, while mine might come either before or after.

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9 For the identification of Latin tinea, cf. I. C. Beavis, Insects and Other Invertebrates in Classical Anti-

10 R. D. Brown (Lucretius on Love and Sex, Leiden, 1987) discusses the connotations and distribution of
pertundere, with further bibliography, in his note on 4.1287: he suggests that obscene connotations “may be vaguely sensed beneath the surface” of that passage.

11 If we wished to make the obscene meaning the primary one, percisus, “sodomized” + “clobbered,
battered”, might be tempting. However, this seems unlikely, as the word is rather too low in tone for our context.