

# The “Challenges of Humanism” in Roman Historical Poetry

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*Augustan poetry is perhaps the most classic of all European classics. Its literary vision of gradual advance (back) to Golden-Age peace and prosperity has taken center stage in the process of defining European humanism. Post-Augustan epic poets like Lucan, however, also seem to doubt whether humanity can be taught by letters. This has often been interpreted as anti-classicist and, hence, anti-humanistic. However, can the ideals of civilizing literature, in fact, be proven wrong? Is there no other way to deal with the challenges of humanism than to give in? A promising interpretive approach to this question is studying the specific metapoetic potential of historical poetry. Literary characters of such poems can ‘realistically’ appear as readers; often, their success or failure may be directly related to the literary education they show. This opens up a space for a particular kind of intertextuality. In acutely reflecting the impact of their reference texts, historical epic poems have made a distinctive contribution to the classification of the classics, i.e., the defense of humanity.*

Keywords: Latin poetry / historical epic / intertextuality / metapoetic realism / Cicero / Lucan / Silius Italicus

## Introduction

How did Roman poets reflect the challenges of humanism? Phrased like this, the question must appear frighteningly complex and – given the length of this article – even greatly immodest. By itself, though, it is amply justified. The great era of Roman literature was characterized by such inhumane features as a civil war, treachery, injustice, violence, and oppression.<sup>1</sup> In the first place, the topic here proposed (and limited to epic narratives) is a historical one. For the interpretation of Latin poetry, however, it can unlock a promising hermeneutic potential to describe poetic self-referentiality and intertextuality as

<sup>1</sup> A naïve definition of ‘humanity’ can be derived *ex negativo* from e.g. *Rhet ad Her.* 4.12; *Cic. Q. Rosc.* 154; *Cic. Ver.* 2.5.121; *Cic. Or.* 51.172; *Liv.* 1.48.

well as the relation between literature and an (allegedly) obligatory set of cultural standards.

Ancient literary theory widely accepted the notion that literature has an ethical and educational purpose, and the Roman ideal of *humanitas* was conceptualized mainly as a form of intellectual culture.<sup>2</sup> What does it mean, then, that precisely those texts that promulgate – at least as we tend to perceive them – the core issues of a ‘humanist’ worldview were written at a time when humanity was under severe attack or hardly sufficiently developed? To what extent did Roman epic poets reflect not only on the general futility of human affairs, as determined by the *condition humaine*, but also on the very futility of literary education? Given the exemplary status of many ancient poems, this question has not only an immediate dimension but also a ‘synecdochic’ one; such question concerns the impact of literature in general. This may be an explanation as to why the Julio-Claudian epoch has often served as the scenery for historical novels such as Hermann Broch’s *Der Tod des Vergil* (1945) or John Williams’s *Augustus* (1971).

In fact, a kind of historical fiction that evaluates the present through the more or less recent past had already been popular in Rome, especially in the imperial age.<sup>3</sup> In historical epic, different manifestations of cultural standards, philosophical discourses, and literary affairs can be directly present. They can somehow form a part of the world represented in the epic narrative – which is indeed a striking feature of a genre that is most typically concerned with the distant past of ‘myth.’ Starting from this observation, this article aims to make some interpretive remarks on the status of humanism in that specific branch of Roman poetry.

## Classicist humanism

Admittedly, ancient poets were neither humanists nor did they write for an audience that was wont to distinguish sharply between sciences and humanities.<sup>4</sup> Speaking of ‘humanism’ in Roman poetry can however be justified by a well-known commonplace: The genesis of Roman poetry as we usually describe it is characteristically expressed by the beginning of Horace’s *Epist.* 1.2: *Troiani belli scriptorem ... Praeneste relegi*. The verb *relegere* demonstrates the way in which Roman intertextuality car-

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. Klingner.

<sup>3</sup> On this matter, see e.g. Häußler and Volk.

<sup>4</sup> See e.g. Klingner.

ries out its function.<sup>5</sup> If authors base their work on their rereading of certain ‘classical’ poems, they invite readers to reread (at least in part) these poems in the light of the literary references they find in the text.

In the case of Horace’s letter, the rereading of Homer seems to enable the poet to coin several imperishable ethical judgments and pedagogical proclamations which, in fact, have made the letter a piece of ‘classical’ poetry itself, i.e., poetry which is worth being remembered and reread.<sup>6</sup> In particular, Horace’s phrase *sapere aude* (*Epist.* 1.2.40) has gained a superior position in the history of European thought since Immanuel Kant made this sentence the motto of the Enlightenment. The cultural standards embodied within these two words have shaped a substantial part of what we today refer to as the tradition of humanism.

Given the original context of Horace’s phrase, it could of course also be understood as *legere aude*, ‘dare to read.’<sup>7</sup> A poet may refer the reader to another poem with a certain tendency, but one can never be forced to read that poem in one predetermined way. On the other hand, one might be rightly criticized if their reading of a certain poem is incorrect. The hope to become – due to reading – a better and perhaps an exemplary person has been the justification of literary study from ancient times onwards. To reread the classics is, so to say, the essence of humanism, and this makes it an inevitably classicist (or if you like: sentimental) project.<sup>8</sup> Horace’s letter indicates that many aspects of this ‘classicist humanism’ may have been present, though not exactly under this name, since the time of Augustus.<sup>9</sup>

As a central point of reference, the Homeric poems are particularly relevant to epic poetry. However, given the conventions of mythical plots, it is impossible to have heroes say they have read their classics and that the audience should do the same. This is simply because these plots are set at a ‘preliterary’ time in which classical poems did not yet exist. The writer of mythological epic must use subtler means to engage with literary authority.

<sup>5</sup> The verb (*re*)*legere* has a metapoetic ring in e.g. Verg. *Aen.* 3.690 and Luc. 9.953–954, but Horace seems to have been the first to use it referring directly to reading poetry; Ov. *Pont.* 3.5.11 is a similar example.

<sup>6</sup> On the matter of terminology, see e.g. J. Ziolkowski’s articles on ‘canon and canonization’ and ‘classic and classicism’ (Ziolkowski and Thomas). On the various processes of classification in the Augustan age, see Nagy 73–186.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. vv. 34–37 on which see e.g. Skalitzky. On the poetic dimension of *Epistles* 1, see Mayer and Korenjak.

<sup>8</sup> On the impact of Schiller’s terms for describing Roman poetry, see Kersten.

<sup>9</sup> See Klingner; on ‘humanism’ in Vergil, see e.g. Haecker and Johnson.

Vergil's Aeneas cannot realistically cite Homer,<sup>10</sup> but of course, he does refer to him when he cites the words uttered by Panthus at the moment of doom: "It is come – the last day and inevitable hour" (*Aen.* 2.324).<sup>11</sup> It is difficult to miss the reference to *Iliad* 6.448: "The day shall come when sacred Ilios shall be laid low." There is a peculiar charm in this anachronism, and it is precisely this kind of literary repetition that conveys the compelling sentimental content of Vergil's epic.<sup>12</sup> It is impossible to build up a new society unless we remember the past and avoid previous mistakes.

Based on convictions like this, classicist humanism can aspire to the return of a Golden Age. This suggestive announcement is a mainly Roman narrative.<sup>13</sup> It has been immensely influential, and it has often taken center stage in the process of defining European identity. The adoption of Beethoven's *Ode an die Freude* as the anthem of the European Union in 1985 is undoubtedly one of the most significant instances of this. The orchestration of Schiller's words "Deine Zauber binden wieder, was die Mode streng geteilt" represents the whole range of idealist notions on revision, reconciliation, and regainment – Europe shall be (re)unified in universal peace and prosperity.

However, the whole idea will be severely questioned if the Golden Age or Joy or Freedom do not show up after a while. From here emerges one of the primary motivations for our present question. A Golden Age did not come, as is known, during the reign of the Julio-Claudian dynasty. Consequently, some of Vergil's epic successors emphasize the difficulties of classical ideals and even seem to disenchant humanist visions of progress and improvement. Lucan, who is often labeled the ultimate 'anti-Vergil',<sup>14</sup> is the best example in this regard.<sup>15</sup> In his poem on the Roman civil war, he displays the total collapse of cultural standards and presents a pessimistic outlook on a future crowded by greedy and slavish people. In short, his narrative appears to be directly opposed to Vergil's epic of aspiration. However, if the Neronian epic poet contradicts Vergil, what does this mean? Can

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<sup>10</sup> By realism (as opposed to narrative metalepsis) I mean the coherent literary representation at a certain diegetic level. On the issues of theory, see Genette 20–25 and Nauta.

<sup>11</sup> If not indicated otherwise, translations are taken from the Loeb Classical Library.

<sup>12</sup> On Vergil's sentiment, see Conte.

<sup>13</sup> See Marinčič 495f.

<sup>14</sup> On this matter, see Kersten.

<sup>15</sup> Another one may be Ovid; see Hardie.

humanism go sour?<sup>16</sup> Are poets like Lucan anti-humanists? Should there be any worth in being one?

It may be useful, when dealing with these issues, to scrutinize the very scenario that does appear highly realistic in Horace’s letter 1.2 but does not in the *Aeneid*, namely a character’s engagement with ‘classical’ literary culture.

### Metapoetic realism

Whereas, as noted, characters of mythological epic cannot realistically read and interpret literary classics (for they are to be imagined as living in a world before written poetry), personages of historical epic can do so – at least if the relevant works were already published at the time of which the narrator is speaking. A literary Caesar, for example, should be thought to know the Homeric poems and perhaps Lucretius, but he cannot know that he will appear in the underworld of the *Aeneid*. In historical epic, it would hardly cause any confusion if somebody said that Homer provides essential moral values. In fact, it might even seem unrealistic when a Cicero appears who has not enjoyed the literary and rhetorical education associated with him in the ‘real’ world.

Since such anachronistic intertextual phenomena as Aeneas evoking Homer or Seneca’s Medea evoking Euripides concern the soul of Roman poetry, we should pay particular attention to those cases where intertextuality might be a convenient matter even in the story world of a poem. I would like to call this concept ‘metapoetic realism’, and I propose to regard it as a means that enables an author to motivate an explicit deliberation upon the meaning of a certain canon.<sup>17</sup> Metapoetic realism, to be sure, is a familiar phenomenon in philosophical dialogues as well as in some other genres (think e.g. of Cicero’s *De natura deorum* or Tacitus’s *Dialogus de oratoribus*). However, particularly in a historical epic narrative, it may have a significant influence on the action. There, we can read, as it were, the drama of those who read in a specific manner the very texts we studied at school. This arrangement, however fictional, brings us closer together with the historical characters since it stresses an existential condition of literature. We are all readers. The following section will discuss three examples of metapoetic realism and then try to draw some conclusions.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Due 214, “un stoïcien qui a perdu la foi,” and Masters 157: “Lucan is an idealist whose idealism has gone sour.”

<sup>17</sup> On metapoetic realism (and metalepsis), see Kersten (fc).

## Declaiming the worth of education: Cicero's epic biography

A kind of metapoetic realism already seems to appear in Ennius.<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, the present survey will begin with some other fragmentary poetry: Cicero's *De consulatu suo*. Here, the phenomenon (though perhaps still in an early stage) is especially relevant to the epic plot.

Cicero seldom figures as an author of epic. However, he certainly was one. Moreover, it is evident from some ninety lines transmitted that – even if his excessive self-panegyric has not won many admirers<sup>19</sup> – he has in several regards permanently shaped the epic genre.<sup>20</sup> What matters to the context of metapoetics is his direct reflection of his classicist humanism. In the poem, he stages a personification of what he would most influentially subsume under *humanitas* in some of his later theoretical works, namely (philosophical) education.<sup>21</sup> The work's largest surviving fragment, in which Urania addresses the consul of 63, emphasizes that his philosophical studies have just prefigured Cicero's political success:

haec adeo penitus cura uidere sagaci  
otia qui studiis laeti tenuere decoris,  
inque Academia umbrifera nitidoque Lyceo  
fuderunt claras fecundi pectoris artis.  
e quibus ereptum primo iam a flore iuuentae  
te patria in media uirtutum mole locauit.  
tu tamen anxiferas curas quiete relaxans,  
quod patriae uacat, id studiis nobisque sacraſti.  
(Cic. Carm. fr. 11.71–78 = Div. 1.13.6–13)

This was what was entirely beheld with acute care by those who gladly devoted their leisure to the study of noble things, who, in the shadows of the Academy and the effulgence of the Lyceum, spread brilliant ideas of minds that were abounding in culture. In the flower of youth, you were torn from these studies, when your country recalled you and led you right into the battle for virtue. Yet, in seeking surcease from the worries and cares that oppress you, you have devoted to your studies and us the time that the state leaves free.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>18</sup> See Kersten (fc).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Quint. *Inst or.* 11.1.23f.

<sup>20</sup> See Kurczyk 76–81 and Volk.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. *De or.* 1.35; *Rep.* 1.28f.; *Tusc.* 5.66. On Cicero's *humanitas*, see e.g. Hunt 188–205 and Høgel 17–67.

<sup>22</sup> I adapted the 1923 Loeb translation of W. A. Falconer.

For ambitious Romans, who look with traditional suspicion at any advanced philosophy, there cannot be any virtue in living as a hermitic scholar – even more so when the state is in danger. Cicero’s Urania, though being probably a somewhat Greekish muse of philosophy, seems indeed to approve of such Roman ‘down-to-earth’ *topoi*. However, she also knows that the call of duty is not heard at all times – there will always be some *otium* left for philosophy and poetry. While Cicero stresses the need to abandon the pursuit of wisdom to do politics, he acknowledges that only philosophical preparation will provide the necessary preconditions for the right political decisions.

Cicero’s epic hero is a philosopher, a reader who studies Academic and Peripatetic philosophy. Educated in these *clarae fecundi pectoris artes*, this man has nothing in common with Achilles and Agamemnon, who embody military strength and social failure. *Cedant arma togae, concedat laurea laudi*<sup>23</sup> – one may feel tempted to read Cicero’s most famous verse as decidedly metapoetic: “Yield, ye arms, to the toga; yield, the epic fame of warriors to the praise of civilized culture.”<sup>24</sup> This can, of course, be seen from two different perspectives (which are to some extent present in all later Roman epic poems). Philosophy is ennobled with epic splendor, and the epic plot is made susceptible of a philosophical explanation.

Studies on Cicero’s epic intertextuality will undoubtedly remain difficult. We cannot infer from the surviving fragments whether Cicero bestowed on his epic alter ego an attitude towards poetry similar to the one he shows in his great theoretical works and his correspondence.<sup>25</sup> However, even his allusion to philosophical studies as a way of life propagate a highly sophisticated self-concept of historical epic – one of direct reference to and implicit evaluation of certain codified classics and their ethical impact. By boastingly praising his political success, Cicero also affirms his syllabus. He has no doubt that his studies will help consolidate society.

### **Epic illiteracy and moral failure: Lucan’s Caesar**

In the *Bellum ciuile*, almost everybody becomes guilty. A century after Cicero, Lucan relentlessly problematizes the moral impact of literary

<sup>23</sup> Cic. *Carm. fr.* 16 = *Pis.* 72; *Phil.* 2.20; *Off.* 1.77.

<sup>24</sup> See Volk.

<sup>25</sup> See Spahlinger and Behrendt.

education (which does, to be sure, not automatically imply a denial). The characters of this highly intertextual poem are in permanent contact with philosophy, natural sciences, and, most importantly, poetry. Some of them appear to be acute readers. Many, however, treat their classics with apparent ignorance. The emblematic person in this regard is Caesar, the man who did not bury the dead at Pharsalos – obviously surpassing the ‘classical’ tragic examples as if he was not aware of the cultural standards expressed by Sophoclean drama.<sup>26</sup>

Near the end of his narrative, Lucan presents to his readers a passage that Ralph Johnson has called “perhaps the funniest moment of Roman literature.”<sup>27</sup> Caesar interrupts his military endeavor for a while to visit Troy. Metapoetic realism immediately suggests that he – like many others before and after him – is interested in the place because of its literary significance. The passage reads as follows:<sup>28</sup>

circumit exustae nomen memorabile Troiae  
 magnaue Phoebæ quaerit uestigia muri.  
 iam siluæ steriles et putres robore trunci  
 Assaraci pressere domos et templa deorum  
 iam lassa radice tenent ac tota teguntur  
 Pergama dumetis etiam periæ ruinae.  
 aspicit Hesiones scopulos siluæque latentis  
 Anchisæ thalamus; quo iudex sederit antro,  
 unde puer raptus caelo, quo uertice Nais  
 luxerit Oenone: nullum est sine nomine saxum.  
 inscius in sicco serpentem puluere riuum  
 transierat, qui Xanthus erat. securus in alto  
 gramine ponebat gressus: Phryx incola manes  
 Hectoreos calcare uetat. discussa iacebant  
 saxa nec ullius faciem seruantia sacri:  
 ‘Herceas’ monstrator ait ‘non respicis aras?’  
 (Luc. 9.964–79)

He walks around the memorable name – burnt-out Troy – and seeks the mighty traces of the wall of Phoebus. Now barren woods and trunks with rotting timber have submerged Assaracus’s houses and, with roots now weary, occupy the temples of the gods, and all of Pergamum is veiled by thickets: even the ruins were destroyed. He sees Hesione’s rock and Anchises’s marriage-chamber hiding in the woods; the cave where the adjudicator sat; the place

<sup>26</sup> On the ‘dramatic’ impact of this behavior, see Ambühl 259–88.

<sup>27</sup> Johnson 119.

<sup>28</sup> On this passage, see Johnson 118–123; Ormand; Rossi; Tesoriero; Eigler; Bureau; Ambühl 337–68.



from which the boy was snatched to heaven; the peak where Naiad Oenone grieved; no stone is without a story. – Unwittingly, he had crossed a stream creeping in the dry dust – this was the Xanthus. Oblivious, he placed his footsteps in the thick grass: the Phrygian local tells him not to tread up the shade of Hector. Scattered stones were lying there, preserving no appearance of anything sacred: the guide says: ‘Have you no respect for the Hercean altars?’<sup>29</sup>

There may be several reasons as to why this passage seems funny. Some would say that the pathos of traditional epic is drowned in nothingness.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, the phrase *etiam periere ruinae* can make a strong case for nihilism. In particular, the story about the Roman Empire originating from Trojan ancestors and destined to rule the world by exemplary virtue seems to be reduced to absurdity by this voyeur who wants to see the bridechamber of Anchises. This interpretation can surely lead to a sort of cynical amusement.

Yet there is more; in particular, there is, as Johnson says, Caesar’s foolery. He stands in the dust, in ruined ruins, where nothing is recognizable anymore. Only legend (*memorable nomen*) seems to distinguish this place from others. What matters here is the specific literary memory that people connect with the place. Now, one could expect Lucan’s general to utter a reflection on the fragility of things or the values defined and transmitted by the Trojan narrative. However, he is only eager to identify places that have a connection to his fictitious ancestors, who – if at all – play but a minor role in Homer. Caesar does not look out for Hector’s grave when he walks through the grass – *inscius*, as the narrator explains. Caesar seems to ignore the grand finale of the *Iliad* completely: “On this wise held they funeral for horse-taming Hector” (Hom. *Il.* 24.804).

Moreover, he does not expect the remnants of the sanctuary of Zeus to be there at some place. How did this man read his Homer? Does he not know that old Priam prayed at the altar of Zeus Herceus before he visited Achilles in his tent to ask for the corpse of his son (*Il.* 24.302ff.)? In his eagerness to follow only his interests, Caesar might resemble ‘swift Achilles,’ and perhaps he thinks that epic is only about glory and extraordinary stories such as that of Ganymede. As a warrior, he may wish to surpass the greatest of all heroes, which would be perfectly in line with the somewhat old-fashioned epic claim: αἰὲν ἄπιστεύειν (*Il.* 6.208). However, Homer does not only tell a tale of military virtue; Achilles, lately though, also takes pity on his enemy

<sup>29</sup> All translations of Lucan are from Susan Braund (sometimes slightly adapted).

<sup>30</sup> See e.g. Eigler; Tesoriero; Groß.

when he receives Priam, saying: “And if you, old sir, we hear that once you were happy” (*Il.* 24.543). Particularly for a Roman reader, Caesar’s reductive indifference towards Trojan memories may appear disturbing. One wonders whether the general wanted to subject Homer and the *Iliad* to caesarianism.

At least for Lucan’s readers, then, the guide’s question ‘*Herceas non respicis aras?*’ will not sound like a plea to show respect for this very material site as much as it sounds like a reminder to reread the  $\Omega$  of the *Iliad*. When Caesar finally promises to rebuild Pergamum at Rome (Luc. 9.990–9), this must provoke a fundamental question about Roman memory: is a person like Caesar, who cares so little about Homer and the identity of Troy, a worthy candidate to define what Romans should remember and for what they should hope?

Another issue will occupy the audience. How would this Caesar read the *Aeneid*, which deals with precisely this question and which is, of course, intertextually present in Lucan’s Troy-passage? Probably, Caesar would endorse the propagandistic glorification on the surface of Vergil’s epic. Moreover, he would surely overlook all of the much-discussed dark sides of the poem: Will there be a Golden Age under the reign of his adopted son? What, for instance, about the problematic phrase *aurea saecula condere* (*Aen.* 6.792)? Will Roman law and order always prevail? Will not Aeneas’s murder of Turnus appear as the ultimate ignorance of the ‘humane’ *memento* he learned from Anchises – *parcere subiectis* (*Aen.* 6.853)?

At this point, metapoetic realism allows for an important distinction. On the one hand, it is emphasized that Caesar may have read his Homer only very selectively, but that he could perhaps enforce this reading upon his subjects. All this is symbolized by his transgression of the little Xanthus, which certainly presents no difficulty to somebody who has transgressed the Rubicon. On the other hand, it is clear that Caesar cannot know the significance of the Trojan ruins in the poetry of Vergil. He has no authority to establish his own ‘Caesarian’ reading of the *Aeneid*. The narrator seems to respond precisely to this when he addresses the general with a promise, which sounds somewhat like a rebuke:

o sacer et magnus uatum labor! omnia fato  
eripis et populis donas mortalibus aeuum.  
inuidia sacrae, Caesar, ne tangere fama;  
nam siquid Latiis fas est promittere Muis,  
quantum Zmyrnaei durabunt uatis honores,

uenturi me teque legent; Pharsalia nostra  
 uiuet, et a nullo tenebris damnabimur aeuo.  
 (Luc. 9.980–6)

O how sacred and immense the task of bards! You snatch everything from death and to mortals you give immortality. Caesar, do not be touched by envy of their sacred fame. If for Latian Muses it is right to promise anything, as long as honors of the Smyrnaean bard endure, the future ages will read you and me. Our Pharsalia shall live, and we shall be condemned to darkness by no era.

Internally, the apostrophe reminds Caesar of precisely the text that he so excessively neglects.<sup>31</sup> Regarding Lucan’s audience, however, this passage points to both the power of individual reading and the responsibility connected to it. The words *uenturi me teque legent* (985) subject Caesar to the sentence of future readers while at the same time these readers are given the example of Caesar’s envious reading, which appears to be morally failed in that it advocates rather than prevents civil war.

Regarding metapoetic realism, Caesar’s visit to Troy denotes the moment when classical poetry ceased to exert any impact on the morals of humanity. The *Aeneid*, the Roman counterpart of the Homeric narratives that sentimentalizes the ‘Trojan’ memories of loss, is not written yet. In other words, Lucan’s historical narrative denotes the momentous necessity for Vergil’s *Aeneid* to promulgate a classicist humanism based on a rereading of Homer.

### Acknowledging the power of poets: Silius’s Scipio

Whereas Lucan’s Caesar, the exponent of civil war, appears to be a reader without respect for his own culture, Silius’s Scipio holds poetry in profound reverence. In the *Punica*, metapoetic realism serves to portray a character who has learned his lesson and whose reading, albeit ‘modern,’ leads to both military success and ethical exemplarity.

In the *nekyia*, which Scipio performs to contact the souls of his ancestors, he encounters the shade of Homer. This is what Silius has Scipio say at this point:

‘Si nunc fata darent, ut Romula facta per orbem  
 hic caneret uates, quanto maiora futuros  
 facta eadem intrarent hoc’ inquit ‘teste nepotes!

<sup>31</sup> The last verse of the *Iliad* (ὡς οἱ γ’ ἀμφίεπον τάφον Ἕκτορος ἱπποδάμοιο, 24.804) suggests itself as an example for the *vatis honores*.

felix Aeacide, cui tali contigit ore  
gentibus ostendi, creuit tua carmine uirtus.’  
(Sil. 13.793–7)

‘If Fate would suffer this poet now to sing of Roman achievements, for all the world to hear, how much deeper an impression the same deeds would make upon posterity if Homer testified to them! How fortunate was Achilles, when such a poet displayed him to the world! The hero was made greater by the poet’s verse.’

Scipio acknowledges the power of poets when he states that virtue grows if sung by a bard. He comes close to asking Homer to sing the epos of the Punic War (which, of course, functions as a conspicuous self-advertisement for Silius at another diegetic level). Unlike Lucan’s Caesar, Scipio need not diminish the glory of others; he does not intend to overwrite their story with his own. As a faithful servant of Rome, he does not even care for his fame; he wishes Roman deeds to be solemnly transmitted to future generations.

Interestingly enough, he expresses this hope in a manner reminiscent of Alexander the Great, who is said to have congratulated Achilles for having found Homer as a herald of his virtue.<sup>32</sup> For Scipio as a successor of the Macedonian emperor, this may be merely a topos of reverence serving to underline both his regard for Homer’s greatest hero and his ambition to be compared to Alexander.

However, in the context of a *nekyia*, the way Scipio addresses Achilles has a further dimension. In speaking about fame, Scipio seems to repeat what the Homeric Odysseus said when he invoked the souls of the dead: ‘No man before this was more blessed than you, Achilles, nor shall ever be hereafter’ (Hom. *Od.* 11.482f.). To him, Achilles responded in a quite provoking manner:

βουλοίμην κ’ ἐπάρουρος ἐὼν θητευέμεν ἄλλω,  
ἀνδρὶ παρ’ ἀκλήρω, ᾧ μὴ βίωτος πολὺς εἶη,  
ἢ πᾶσιν νεκύεσσι καταφθιμένοισιν ἀνάσσειν.  
(Hom. *Od.* 11.489–91)

I should choose, so I might live on earth, to serve as the hireling of another, some landless man with hardly enough to live on, rather than to be lord over all the dead that have perished.

In Silius, Achilles does not answer Scipio’s praise. We do not learn whether he would (still) prefer a long life to eternal glory in literature.

<sup>32</sup> See, e.g., Cic. *Arch.* 24; Plut. *Alex.* 15.8f.

However, as a reader of the *Odyssey*, Scipio may expect Achilles’s lament. Furthermore, metapoetic realism suggests that, in addressing the shade, the Roman general is not only thinking of Alexander’s regard for poetry but, generally, of the cultural importance of poetry that praises exemplary deeds.<sup>33</sup> Fully aware of his Roman exemplarity, Scipio not only repeats Odysseus’s claim, but he also proves it right regarding ‘literary reception’ – and thereby decently criticizes the old-fashioned (and somewhat un-educated) super-hero who can hardly accept his fate.

Here, things become difficult. As in Lucan, the audience is asked to reread both the Homeric pretext, which can be thought to be known to the characters, and the Vergilian one, namely the *katabasis* of Aeneas, to which Silius alludes at the discourse level of his narrative.<sup>34</sup>

## Conclusions

In historical poetry, intertextuality can be useful in a more explicit way. Metapoetic realism can serve to display the historical impact of literature and can contribute to the characterization of the epic personages. Regarding intertextuality, the characters’s engagement with (or their ruinous ignorance of) a classic testifies and affirms the very process of literary classification of specific cultural standards.

Silius’s Scipio ‘Romanizes’ Achilles and appears as a character who seeks modern heroism that is, however, neither ignorant of the past nor of the prospect of being read by later generations. On the other hand, as in the case of Lucan’s Caesar, brutal and insufficient reading can be a part of the epic failure. There is no doubt that this Caesar must finally succumb and that a Caesarian Rome, ignorant of its cultural tradition, is not desirable at all. The behavior of Lucan’s Caesar becomes an exemplary warning, as is described in Horace’s letter. “If you do not call for a book and a light before daybreak and if you do not devote your mind to honorable studies and pursuits, envy will keep you awake in torment” (*Epist.* 1.2.34–7).

However, Caesar’s epic illiteracy symbolizes yet something else. If the poet did indeed intend Caesar and the Caesars to represent the political vision of the Augustan poets, he would simplify and truncate the *Aeneid*, just as Lucan’s Caesar simplified and truncated the *Iliad*. Here one has to go back to the introductory question. Are poets like Lucan anti-humanists and is there any worth in being one?

<sup>33</sup> On Silius’s Scipio, see e.g. Marks and Tipping.

<sup>34</sup> See Reitz.

When Lucan's metapoetical realism draws attention to the importance of reading and careful interpretation, it upholds the invitation to study the classics, the invitation so fundamentally expressed by Roman classicist humanism. So: No. Since Lucan's audience may contend with the epic characters for the right interpretation of the shared cultural heritage, every single reader is endowed with the means to resist propaganda and to defend humanity.

However, this does not deal with the other, problematic dimension of 'humanism.' If writing and reading are just reduced to a "supreme faith in human reason," as David Ehrenfeld has put it in a different context,<sup>35</sup> in the "ability to rearrange both the world of Nature and the affairs of men and women so that human life will prosper" ... Then we are in Troy again, where nothing is present but what can be seen and touched and what is subjected to the force of individual courses of action. At this point, when classical myths do not surprise us with the question *quid pulchrum, quid turpe* anymore, but only serve to legitimize empire, at this point the answer is: Yes.

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<sup>35</sup> Ehrenfeld 5. On a similarly problematic conception of 'humanism', see the paper of M. Russo in this volume.

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## »Izzivi humanizma« v rimski historični poeziji

Ključne besede: latinska poezija / historična epika / medbesedilnost / metapoetični realizem / Ciceron / Lukan / Silij Italik

Avgustejska poezija je morda najbolj klasična od vse evropske klasike. Njeno literarno videnje postopnega napredovanja (nazaj) do miru in blagostanja zlate dobe je zavzelo središnji položaj v procesu oblikovanja evropskega humanizma. Zdi se sicer, da postavgustejski epiki, npr. Lukan, izražajo dvom o tem, ali je človeštvo mogoče poučevati s književnostjo. Takšno stališče je bilo pogosto interpretirano kot antiklasično in zato antihumanistično. Toda – ali je mogoče dejansko dokazati, da so ideali civilizirajoče književnosti zgrešeni? Ni druge poti za soočenje z izzivi humanizma kot predaja? Obetaven pristop k temu vprašanju je študij specifičnih metapoetičnih potencialov historične poezije. Literarni liki takšne poezije so lahko "realistično" prikazani kot bralci; njihov uspeh ali neuspeh je lahko neposredno povezan z njihovo literarno izobrazbo. To odpira prostor posebni vrsti intertekstualnosti: v izostreni refleksiji o vplivu svojih referenčnih besedil so historične pesmi dale svoj značilen prispevek h klasifikaciji klasike, tj. k obrambi humanosti.

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