

ARTICLE

Lucan, Reception, Counter-history

Ika Willis, University of Wollongong

ABSTRACT: This paper reads Foucault's 1975-6 lecture series *Society Must Be Defended*. It argues that the notion of counter-history developed in these lectures depends on a particular construction of Rome, as that which counter-history counters. Foucault's version of Rome in turn depends on a surprisingly conventional reading of two monumental histories (Livy's *Ab Urbe Condita* and Virgil's *Aeneid*) as 'the praise of Rome'. Reading Foucault's work instead with Lucan's *Pharsalia* renders visible a counter-history within Rome itself. This reading demonstrates the ways in which reception theory can usefully illuminate and supplement Foucauldian genealogy as a critical-historical method.

Keywords: Lucan, reception, genealogy, counter-history, reactivation

Is there anything more to history than the praise of Rome?

- Petrarch, cited by Foucault¹

Introduction

In the Introduction to this special issue, Richard Alston writes that "Foucault establishes Rome as a point of critical perspective. But this perspective also enables historians of Rome to 'speak back' to Foucault and to use the history of Rome to reassess, reflect upon, develop, criticise, and advance the dialogue."²

I am not a historian of Rome, but a reception scholar. My work seeks to account for the ways in which literary texts and historical phenomena are received, read and rewritten, by readers, often across great temporal distances – and, in particular, to account for the persistence of (a

¹ Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*, translated by David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 74.

² Richard Alston, "Foucault's Rome," *Foucault Studies*, see above.

certain version of) Rome in the European imaginary. In this paper, accordingly, I am using the reception of Roman history, rather than the history of Rome as such, to reassess and advance the dialogue between Foucault and the Classics. I am interested in the ways in which Foucault models time and history, and especially in the moments where his models seem to depend upon a particular construction of Rome.

In this paper, then, I seek to open a dialogue between Foucault's Rome and the Rome of a Classical reception scholar – a dialogue, that is, between genealogy and reception. I do so by reading Foucault's 1975-6 lecture series at the Collège de France, published in English as *Society Must Be Defended*. Typically for his work in the mid-seventies, the *Society* lectures focus on the late sixteenth to the late eighteenth century. They trace the emergence, in this period, of a historical discourse of permanent war – one which Foucault repeatedly and remarkably calls an “anti-Roman” counter-history. What does it mean to say that an early modern discourse is still doing battle with the long-fallen Roman Empire? What model of temporality underlies Foucault's formulation of the seventeenth-century counter-history, and why must it be Rome that underpins this model? What historical or theoretical work is Rome doing for Foucault, and how does it do so?

I explore these questions in two ways. Firstly, by reading a Roman epic poem (Lucan's *De Bello Ciuili*; not one of the texts drawn on by Foucault) which conforms closely to the characteristics of the discourse that Foucault analyses in the lectures, thus enabling Rome to “speak back” to Foucault. Secondly, by analysing, in Foucault's terms as well as in the terms of Classical reception theory, what this phenomenon of “resemblance or repetition” means: what theory of history, reception, or genealogy can account for the relationship between Rome and the present day, and for the importance of Rome to Foucault's own position here?

Permanent war and counter-history

Foucault's aim in the lectures which comprise *Society Must Be Defended* is to analyse the emergence of a “new discourse, a strange discourse... the first historico-political discourse on society.”³ He identifies two historical moments of emergence for this discourse: the first in England in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, and the second in France a century later in the work of Boulainvilliers and a small group of noble historians who are trying to shore up the power of the aristocracy against the growing power of the bureaucracy.

The emergent discourse that Foucault analyses is strange and new because it supplies an alternative to theories of sovereignty and contract as the basis of civil society, proceeding instead from the principle that “politics is the continuation of war by other means.”⁴ According to this discourse, “war... was understood to be a permanent social relationship, the ineradicable basis of

³ Foucault, *Society*, 49.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 48.

all relations and institutions of power.”⁵ War is no longer something that can be terminated by peace. Foucault writes:

Society, the law, and the State are [not] like armistices that put an end to wars, or... the products of definitive victories. Law is not pacification, for beneath the law, war continues to rage in all the mechanisms of power, even in the most regular. War is the motor behind institutions and order.⁶

The institutions of peaceful society do not end war; rather, the permanent unstable play of domination and repression is transferred into, and occluded by, the institutions of peace, which become the means by which the strong continue their war against the weak.

Among these institutions are the institutions of knowledge, and Foucault argues that “[t]his discourse established a basic link between relations of force and relations of truth:” indeed, “it is a discourse in which truth functions exclusively as a weapon that is used to win an exclusively partisan victory.”⁷ Truth, far from being the product of a peaceful, serene, and neutral standpoint somehow outside or above the play of domination and repression, “can be deployed only from its combat position;”⁸ truth is strategically produced and directed by a subject who is irrevocably committed to one side or another in this war.

This truth, which is a weapon in an endless war, is above all *historical* truth. As we have seen, it is in the articulation of history with politics that Foucault identifies the newness and strangeness of the discourse of permanent war, as well as its significance: “it is, I think, important because it is the first discourse in postmedieval Western society that can be strictly defined as being historico-political.”⁹ He goes on to write that “[i]t is a discourse that develops *completely* within the historical dimension. It is deployed within a history that has no boundaries, no end, and no limits” (emphasis added).¹⁰ History, then, is the limitless field in which this discourse on war – which is also, itself, a war – emerges and is fought. This is where the political significance of the discourse is to be found: in its status as counter-history, which is also to say, in its transformation of history and historical knowledge into a – or even *the* – central site of political struggle, power, contestation, and resistance.

It seems clear that Foucault’s interest in this seventeenth-century discourse is motivated by its political possibilities in the present. The discourse of permanent war offers a way of rethinking the history of sovereignty and the relationship between power and knowledge – but also, and

⁵ Ibid., 49.

⁶ Ibid., 50.

⁷ Ibid., 52, 58.

⁸ Ibid., 52.

⁹ Ibid., 51-52.

¹⁰ Ibid., 55.

perhaps even more importantly, it frames Foucault's own activity as a (counter-)historian as a significant act of resistance to power.

This makes it all the more surprising that when we ask what this seventeenth-century counter-history is counter *to*, we find that the answer is: Rome. "What is specific about the new form of discourse that appeared... in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries," Foucault writes, is that "this is the first non-Roman or anti-Roman history that the West had ever known;"¹¹ this is "not exactly the invention of historical discourse, but rather the shattering of a pre-existing historical discourse whose function had until then been to sing the praises of Rome."¹²

Roman history

If this new discourse is an anti-Roman counter-history, what, then, characterizes the Roman history that it counters? Roman history, for Foucault, is a name for the history of sovereignty: "the history of power as told by power itself, or the history of power that power had made people tell."¹³ This form of history "sings the praises of Rome" by glorifying power (it is "the great and glorious genealogy in which the law and power flaunt themselves in their power and their glory"), and, importantly for Foucault, it constructs history as both unity ("the unity of the city," "the unity of the sovereign law") and continuity ("the continuity of glory," "a history of continuity").¹⁴

"Rome" thus functions here for Foucault, as it has for many other thinkers, as a dense and compact figure for the mutually defining intersection of history, power, and knowledge.¹⁵ As we will see in more detail later, Foucault does not care to date, or to analyse, the emergence of the discourse of Roman history itself: instead, for him it functions as an indistinct historical background against which new discourses differentiate themselves as they emerge. For a Classicist, however, the discourse of Roman history as a continuous narrative of Rome's unity and sovereignty itself ultimately derives from aspects of the Roman Empire's own self-presentation, and has a distinct date of emergence in the Augustan period (the late first century BCE/early first century CE). The model of Roman history that Foucault invokes here can thus be traced back, above all, to two great monumental histories from the Augustan period, Livy's *Ab Urbe Condita* (*From the Foundation of the City*) and Virgil's *Aeneid*.

¹¹ Ibid., 69; see also 71-72, "The historical discourse that appears at this point can therefore be regarded as a counter-history that challenges Roman history."

¹² Ibid., 141. Foucault is referring to a question asked by Petrarch in the fourteenth century which he has cited earlier (74): "is there nothing more to history than the praise of Rome?"

¹³ Ibid., 133.

¹⁴ Ibid., 70-72.

¹⁵ On Rome, power, and knowledge, see Ika Willis, "The Empire Never Ended," in *Classics in Post-Colonial Worlds*, edited by Lorna Hardwick and Carol Gillespie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 329-348 (<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199296101.003.0019>).

Livy, whose “enormous year-by-year annalistic history of Rome ‘from the foundation of the city’... emplots the foundation of Rome under the shadow of its present greatness,”¹⁶ is the only Roman author named in the lectures,¹⁷ but Foucault’s reference to this mode of history being “a ‘Jupiterian’ history”¹⁸ also summons up Virgil’s *Aeneid*. Although Foucault never names the *Aeneid* in the lectures, he does refer to the circulation of works in the medieval and Renaissance period which, in tracing the origin of the French people back to emigrant Trojan princes, borrowed the *Aeneid*’s mythico-historical story-world and imitated its structure in order to produce analogous legitimating myths for European states.¹⁹ To some extent, then, the historical narrative that Foucault presents in these lectures is bound up with the reception of the *Aeneid* – the mechanisms by which the *Aeneid*’s construction of history was able to filter through into medieval and post-medieval European thought.

The *Aeneid* itself was the final work of the Augustan poet Virgil, composed between 29 BCE and 19 BCE and published, unfinished, on his death (the narrative of the poem is complete but half-lines remain throughout). Both the context and the content of the poem position it as a monument to monumental history: an unambiguous history of sovereignty, explicitly singing the praises of Rome and telling the history of power from the point of view of power. In terms of the context, Virgil was one of a small circle of poets under the patronage of the emperor Augustus: as R. O. A. M. Lyne writes, “Augustus and the state were effectively synonymous. To be under his patronage, directly or indirectly, was to be in the patronage of government.”²⁰ The poem can therefore be seen as speaking for, and from the position of, sovereign power. As for the content, the first book of the epic contains a prophecy tracing the continuous descent of sovereignty from Aeneas through his heirs to Romulus and ultimately to Julius Caesar (who claimed descent from

¹⁶ Duncan F. Kennedy, *Antiquity and the Meanings of Time: A Philosophy of Ancient and Modern Literature* (London and New York: I B Tauris, 2013), 97.

¹⁷ Foucault, *Society*, 68, 71. On each occasion Foucault links Livy with the “early annalists” (68), “the annalist who records, day by day, the history and the uninterrupted glory of power,” (71) although – as even Kennedy’s brief summary (above) suggests – Livy is by no means keeping a day-by-day record of the doings of power but rather employing the annalistic form to emplot a deterministic and teleological narrative of the history of Rome from the perspective of his present.

¹⁸ Foucault, *Society*, 68.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 115-117. The key work alluded to is Grégoire de Tours, *Historia Francorum* (575-592); the story of Francus would have been familiar to Foucault’s audience from Ronsard’s canonical epic poem *La Franciade* (1572).

²⁰ R. O. A. M. Lyne, “Augustan Poetry and Society,” in *The Oxford History of the Ancient World, Volume 2: The Roman World*, edited by John Boardman, Jasper Griffin and Oswyn Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 182-205, 186. Lyne gives the view which was consensus at around the time Foucault gave the *Society* lectures; for a more nuanced view of Virgil’s relationship with Augustus, see R. J. Tarrant, “Poetry and power: Virgil’s poetry in contemporary context,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Virgil*, edited by Charles Martindale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 169-187, arguing that “the depiction of Virgil as a ‘client’ of Maecenas or Augustus himself, and therefore as saying only what accorded with their wishes and interests, employs a model of patron-client relations too simplistic for his situation” (183).

Aeneas's son Iulus) and Augustus. The prophecy also foretells a moment when all war will cease, replaced by the lawful institutions of peaceful society. It is spoken by the king of the gods, Jupiter, himself:

There will be born of this splendid lineage a Caesar, a Trojan.
He'll make Ocean the bounds of his power, and the stars of his glory,
He will be Julius – a name that derives from the mighty Iulus...
Then all wars will cease. These Ages of Harshness will soften.
Vesta and white-haired Trust, Quirinus, along with his brother
Remus, will make laws together.²¹

History doesn't come more "Jupiterian" than this.²² As this passage indicates, the *Aeneid* brings together all the characteristics that Foucault lists as being the marks of Roman/sovereign history: the praises of Rome; the concern with sovereignty and power; the representation of peace and the institutions of civil society as bringing an end to war; and the depiction of unity and continuity.²³

Foucault's version of Roman history is, then, recognizable to a reception scholar not so much as the "truth" of Roman history, but as an instance of the remarkable persistence of a discourse of Roman history which can be traced back to Virgil's *Aeneid*. Perhaps more surprisingly, however, Foucault's version of the counter-historical discourse of permanent war – the "first non-Roman or anti-Roman history that the West had ever known,"²⁴ whose "date of birth" Foucault places "after the end of the civil and religious wars of the sixteenth century"²⁵ – can also be recognized, feature by feature, in a Latin epic poem from the Julio-Claudian period: Lucan's *De Bello Ciuili* (*On the Civil War*, also known as the *Bellum Ciuile* [*The Civil War*] and the *Pharsalia*).²⁶ Foucault's analysis of this counter-historical discourse can help us to read Lucan – but perhaps more

²¹ Virgil, *Aeneid* 1.286-93, translated by Frederick Ahl (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

²² The real story of the *Aeneid* is of course more complex and manifold, and "pessimistic" readings which see it as critiquing or deconstructing the workings of sovereignty rather than simply celebrating it have been elaborated at least since the early modern period, as Craig Kallendorf has argued (*The Other Virgil: "Pessimistic" Readings of the Aeneid in Early Modern Culture* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007]). Again, here I am referring to the consensus view of the poem – one which I believe Foucault is drawing on, obliquely but significantly, to underpin his argument in these lectures. As Tarrant ("Poetry and Power," 184) points out, this reading of the *Aeneid* is in part constructed and canonized by the great anti-Virgilian writers – including Lucan, who I'll get to in a minute – as a foil to their own "counter-historical" projects.

²³ Foucault, *Society*, 70-72. For more on the construction of continuity in Virgil's *Aeneid* and its deconstruction by Lucan, see Ika Willis, *Now and Rome: Lucan and Vergil as Theorists of Politics and Space* (London: Continuum, 2011).

²⁴ Foucault, *Society*, 69.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 49.

²⁶ For a brief overview of the problem of the title of Lucan's epic see Susanna Morton Braund, *A Lucan Reader: Selections from Civil War* (Mundelein, Illinois: Bolchazy-Carducci, 2009), x.

importantly, the very existence of Lucan's poem poses some important questions for Foucault's model of Rome and history.

The cultural influence of the *Aeneid* is so massive and pervasive in Europe that Foucault was certainly aware of the model of Roman history it represented, whether or not he was at that point offering a reading of Virgil's text. By contrast, at the time when he was giving the *Society* lectures, Lucan's epic was just beginning to emerge from a lengthy period of critical neglect.²⁷ Unlike more canonical Latin authors – say, Livy or Lucretius (both read in some detail by Foucault's contemporary Michel Serres) – Lucan has not been used much as a critical resource by non-classicists: his non-canonical status, however, is in part precisely because his wild, strange, and terrifying poem is not easily assimilated to our notions of what Rome, and Roman history, are.

On the Civil War was composed between 61-65CE by the poet Lucan, a contemporary and friend of the emperor Nero. It is an epic poem in the same genre and metre as the *Aeneid*, but it gives a very different version of Roman history. It tells the story of the Roman civil wars in the period 60-47 BCE, with Pompey and Cato fighting against Julius Caesar. Caesar, the eventual victor and the man lauded in the *Aeneid* as the divinely-appointed – and divinely-descended – bringer of order, power, and glory to Rome, is the poem's chief antagonist.

The poem articulates a vision of a bleak, violent, disordered universe in a state of permanent war, where history is written by the violent criminals who have won power through victory in the civil war and whose exercise of sovereignty is therefore itself an illegal act and a continuation of civil war by other means. John Henderson's essay "Lucan/The Word at War" offers a vivid description of the poem's unmasking of the violence that underlies Roman (and Western) "civilisation," writing that for Lucan:

Civilisation is to be seen in teleogenic retrospect as an orgiastic calendar of self-mutilation built on the self-falsifying logic of war... War is laid bare in its scandal, and all the lies you have

²⁷ The revitalization of critical attention to Lucan is usually dated to the publication in 1976 – the very year in which Foucault gave the lecture series I read in this paper – of Frederick Ahl's *Lucan: An Introduction* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1976). For a brief account of the fascinating, strange, and troubled twentieth-century reception history of Lucan in English, see Robert Crowe, "Democratizing the Classics: Penguin Books' reception of classical literature," PhD diss., University of Bristol, 2012. The pre-Ahl consensus view of Lucan can be seen in the introduction to the 1928 Loeb translation by J. D. Duff: "No reasonable judgment can rank Lucan among the world's great epic poets... The truth is, that Lucan is not a poet in the sense in which Lucretius and Virgil are poets; he is read, not for any poetical quality but for his rhetorical invective and his pungent epigrams." (Lucan, *The Civil War*, translated by J. D. Duff [Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1928]) Prior to the nineteenth century, however, Lucan had often been valued very highly: Dante, for example, has him as one of the four great classical poets he encounters in Limbo, the zone of the virtuous pagans, and, as we will see later in this paper, he was enormously popular in England in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

made for yourselves fail... War is... a figuring and disfiguring of civilisation as an absurd process of unmaking.²⁸

Lucan's poem represents war as a permanent and universal state, only ever occluded by the lies of civil society. It performs a critique of sovereignty, unity, history and power which corresponds exactly to the key aspects of the discourse that Foucault analyses in the *Society* lectures. In the first section of this paper I sketched out the way Foucault's lectures set out four key aspects of the seventeenth-century discourse of permanent war: now I return to them to show how they are articulated in Lucan's epic.

Firstly, politics as the continuation of war by other means. Lucan ends the very first book of the *De Bello Ciuili* with a series of prophecies, structurally positioned as responses to the prophecy of Jupiter in the first book of the *Aeneid*, which I cited above. The longest, the prophecy of Figulus, contains the lines:

The madness of war is upon us, when the power of the sword shall violently upset all legality, and atrocious crime shall be called heroism [literally, "the name for 'unspeakable crime' will be 'virtue'"]. This frenzy will last for many years; and it is useless to pray Heaven that it may end: when peace comes, a tyrant will come with it. Let Rome prolong the unbroken series of suffering and draw out her agony for ages: only while civil war lasts, shall she henceforth be free.²⁹

Where Virgil uses Jupiter's prophecy to position Julius Caesar and Augustus as the unambiguous bringers of peace and order and the terminators of war, Lucan uses Figulus' to argue that peace is not an end to war ("it is useless to pray that it may end") but only another form of violent domination: the word translated as "tyrant" above is the Latin *dominus* or "master," meaning a slaveowner, a man who has the right to inflict corporal punishment on his slaves (exemption from corporal punishment was a key mark of free status in Rome). Earlier in the first book, Lucan has also been at pains to point out that Nero's authority derives not from any form of social contract between the ruler and the ruled, but from Caesar's victory in civil war:

Still, if Fate could find no other way for the advent of Nero; if an everlasting kingdom costs the gods dear... then we complain no more against the gods: even such crimes and such guilt are not too high a price to pay. Let Pharsalia heap her awful plains with dead; let the shade of the Carthaginian [i.e., Hannibal] be gluttoned with carnage; let the last battle be joined at fatal Munda; and though to these be added the famine of Perusia and the horrors of Mutina, the ships overwhelmed near stormy Leucas and the war against slaves hard by the flames of Etna, yet Rome owes much to civil war, because what was done was done for you, Caesar.³⁰

²⁸ John Henderson, "Lucan/The Word at War," *Ramus* 16 (1987), 122-164, 124.

²⁹ Lucan, *DBC*, 1.666-72., trans. Duff.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.33-45. I go through my reading of this passage in more detail in *Now and Rome*, 113-115.

The tone of this complex passage is hard to read and much-debated. Whether it is sincere or ironic, however, the passage links sovereignty and civil war in two ways. Firstly, it exposes the source of Imperial power as conquest and domination – here figured explicitly through a list of violent atrocities committed against Roman citizens – rather than any social contract. This conforms to the model of right which Foucault argues Boulainvilliers developed in his history of Gaul after the Roman invasion: “This right was the right of the conquest... The right that prevailed there was in no sense a consensual sovereignty; it was the result of domination.”³¹ Secondly, the passage begins by *contrasting* Nero (good) to civil war (bad) – civil war was the terrible price we had to pay for this great leader – but ends with an address to “Caesar.” The context makes clear that the referent for this name is Nero, but the choice of word is deliberately ambiguous: far from being external to the civil war, the thing that is exchanged for it, Nero is indistinguishable from one of the participants in it. Lucan’s use of the word “Caesar,” naming both the violent criminal who attacked the Roman State (in book 1 of the *De Bello Ciuili*, at the moment when he is about to cross of the Rubicon, Caesar sees a vision of Rome as a woman begging him to stop) and the glorious leader of the divinely-sanctioned Roman Empire, exposes the continuity – even the identity – between these figures: the invader and the sovereign.

Politics, then, is the continuation of war by other means, and that war is permanent – the second characteristic of the discourse that Foucault analyses in the *Society* lectures. “War,” Foucault writes, “was understood to be a permanent social relationship, the ineradicable basis of all relations and institutions of power... War is the motor behind institutions and order.”³² As we have already seen, Lucan exposes the civil war as the basis of Rome’s institutions of power; even more strikingly, however, he materializes Foucault’s image of war as the “motor” of order. He does this in an extraordinary simile near the start of Book 1, where he compares the fall of Rome to the end of the world, writing:

Even so, when the framework of the world is dissolved and the final hour, closing so many ages, reverts to primeval chaos, then... the whole distracted fabric [*discors machina*] of the shattered firmament will overthrow its laws.³³

W. R. Johnson draws attention to the “superb oxymoron” *discors machina*, which he calls “beautiful... and frightening.”³⁴ This is the phrase translated here as “distracted fabric,” which literally means something like “unharmonious apparatus” and could be translated as “civil-war-machine” or “motor of disorder.”³⁵ The word *machina*, which means “machine” or “engine,” appears only

³¹ Foucault, *Society*, 145.

³² *Ibid.*, 49.

³³ Lucan, *DBC*, 1.72-80, trans. Duff.

³⁴ W. R. Johnson, *Momentary Monsters: Lucan and his Heroes* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 16.

³⁵ The recent Penguin translation has “contraption” for *machina*, giving something of the sense of a rickety, non-self-identical apparatus, but recasts the sentence so that *discors* is no longer an adjective characterizing *machina*

four times in the *De Bello Ciuili*: in all its other three appearances (6.37, 8.377, 10.481) it is part of the phrase *machina belli*, explicitly referring to a war-engine such as a battering ram. The word *discors* is frequently used for civil war both in Lucan and in other Roman authors. The image of the *discors machina* suggests both that the entire machinery of the universe is designed to produce civil war (*discors machina*, civil-war-machine, an apparatus for making discord) and that the motor of the universe itself is in a state of *discordia*: originally divided against itself and at war. War is not a disruption of order, or something that can be ended by peace and the institution of order: rather, order is an illusion, and the (dis)ordered universe that we inhabit is powered by a war-machine.

This war, the war that powers the universe, is fought in the domain of knowledge and truth: the *De Bello Ciuili*, as much as the discourse that Foucault analyses in the *Society* lectures, can be said to “establi[sh] a basic link between relations of force and relations of truth,”³⁶ and this is the third point of similarity between the two discourses. We have already seen a glimpse of this in Figulus’ assertion that war disrupts naming; war is a war over what things should be called (“the name for ‘unspeakable crime’ will be ‘virtue,’” 1.667-68): the “true” name for an object will be determined by the victor in the war. But this link between relations of force and relations of truth structures the poem’s universe in a more fundamental way.

Foucault writes that, in the discourse of permanent war, truth is always polemically engaged. “The identification of truth with peace or neutrality... is being dissolved,” and instead truth “can be deployed only from its combat position.”³⁷ “It is a discourse in which truth functions exclusively as a weapon that is used to win an exclusively partisan victory.”³⁸ We see exactly this in the *De Bello Ciuili*, again in contexts where Lucan is strategically rewriting and inverting the *Aeneid*’s historico-political discourse. For example, where Virgil invokes the Muse as the source of the information he will convey in the *Aeneid* (“Muse, inscribe in my memory the causes”, 1.8), Lucan appeals to Nero, the sovereign, as the source of all truth, saying “You alone are sufficient to give strength [*uires*] to a Roman bard.”³⁹ Lucan’s work is, then, specifically Roman in a way that Virgil’s is not, and derives its strength and power from the Roman sovereign, not from the divine and all-knowing Muse. Lucan, in other words, speaks from a politically and polemically committed position, not from a neutral and divinely-guaranteed one. Further, the word Lucan uses for “strength” here, *uires* (perhaps best translated as “force” and with a strong connotation of violence), has already appeared in the poem in the sense of “military force” (at 1.4). Lucan’s epic, then, far from being “true” because it is dictated by a Muse, is “Roman” because it is backed by

and the oxymoron is lost: “The whole contraption of the world ripped apart/ shall riot, confounding its treaties in discord.” Lucan, *Civil War*, translated by Matthew Fox (London: Penguin, 2012), 5.

³⁶ Foucault, *Society*, 52.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 52.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 52, 58.

³⁹ Lucan, *DBC* 1.66, trans. Duff

the physical and military force of the sovereign. The truth that Lucan tells is a Roman truth, polemically deployed in order to win a victory in the field of historical knowledge.

Lucan's epic thus opens up a battlefield in which all knowledge is polemically committed; we are all required to take sides in a battle of truth; and this knowledge or truth is above all historical – the fourth key aspect of the discourse that Foucault analyses. Foucault writes:

This discourse about the general war, this discourse that tries to interpret the war beneath peace, is indeed an attempt to describe the battle as a whole and to reconstruct the general course of the war. But that does not make it a totalizing or neutral discourse; it is always a perspectival discourse. It is interested in the totality only to the extent that it can see it in one-sided terms, distort it and see it from its own point of view.⁴⁰

Lucan, meanwhile, writes:

Even in later ages and among posterity, these events... will excite hope and fear together and useless prayers, when the story of battle is read; and all men will be spell-bound as they read the tragedy, as if it were still to come and not past; and all will still take sides with Magnus [Pompey].⁴¹

His account of the war is explicitly perspectival, polemical, and one-sided: the poem, he tells us, is designed not to convey a neutral and universal truth about the past, but to stir up passionate commitment to one side in a conflict which we experience as still on-going ("as if [the outcome] were still to come and not past"). Historical knowledge, for Lucan as for Foucault, becomes the privileged site of political struggle, commitment, and resistance; indeed, Lucan's writing of historical epic and his "extra-textual" political commitment are inextricably intertwined. Lucan committed suicide at the age of twenty-five after he was found to have taken part in a conspiracy to assassinate Nero: he opened his veins in a warm bath and died reciting the words of one of the characters in his own poem.⁴²

The *De Bello Ciuili*, then, articulates a discourse of exactly the type Foucault identifies as an anti-Roman discourse of permanent war. Moreover, it explicitly articulates this discourse *as* anti-Roman (or at least, in John Henderson's terms, as "always already the war within the Imperial Muse").⁴³ The dominant reading of Lucan's epic in the twentieth century – one to which I wholeheartedly subscribe – is as an "anti-*Aeneid*."⁴⁴ As we have glimpsed above, and as has been shown

⁴⁰ Foucault, *Society*, 52.

⁴¹ Lucan, *DBC*, 7.207-213.

⁴² For a brilliant reading of the entangled discursive relationship between the *De Bello Ciuili* and its author's death, see Henderson, "Lucan," 125.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁴⁴ See, for example, Ahl, *Lucan*, 64-67, and Gian Biagio Conte, *Latin Literature: A History*, translated by Joseph Sodolow (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 443-4. Both argue, in formulations strikingly remi-

in detail by other critics, the *De Bello Ciuili* makes its historico-political points in large part through its appropriation and rewriting of Virgil's epic. Henderson, for example, writes:

His epic... implodes [Rome's] traditions and ideologies along with the documents which bear them... Lucan's text does trace a subversion of the system of values, linguistic, literary, ideological and cultural, which are fixed in place, asserted and paraded by the epic tradition, the *paideia* which is monumentalised and 'statufied' in the massive, totalising articulation through twelve *irrevocable* books of all... that can be implied in... Virgil's *arma uirumque cano*.⁴⁵

The *De Bello Ciuili* is, then, a thoroughgoing and polemically engaged deconstruction of the historical and political principles which structure Virgil's epic – notably the unity and continuity of Roman power – and a savage denunciation of the violence, permanent war, and play of domination and repression, which Lucan reveals as only ever disguised by the institutions of peaceful civil society. In other words, it is “the shattering of a pre-existing historical discourse whose function had until then been to sing the praises of Rome”⁴⁶ – and it takes place in 65 CE.

Nietzsche, genealogy, history; Lucan, reception, counter-history?

Two questions are raised here. Firstly, what does it mean to say that a discourse whose “date of birth” Foucault traces to the late sixteenth century can be detected in an epic poem from the first century? What kind of historical claim can we make about the relationship between the discourse of permanent war in Lucan's poem and the discourse of permanent war that emerges in the sixteenth century? And secondly, how can it be that Lucan and Boulainvilliers have the same enemy, counter the same history?

One approach to the first question would be to argue that the discourse of permanent war originates, simply and entirely, with Lucan; that Lucan's poem retains, in a certain way, ownership of this discourse, which can then only be fully understood by referring back to the poem's formal and conceptual machinery; and that the re-emergence of this discourse in a later historical period is brought about by the re-emergence of Lucan's poem as a historical actor. A strong case can, in fact, be made for this. Foucault is clear and emphatic about the date of the emergence of a discourse of permanent war in England: it emerged in “very specific conditions between the end of the sixteenth and beginning of the seventeenth century.”⁴⁷ Is it a coincidence that, in the words of Edward Paleit's recent book on the reception of Lucan in England, “it is only a slight exaggeration to term the period of English literature between the mid-1580s and the 1640s an ‘age of Lu-

niscent of Foucault, that Lucan uses “the facts of history” (Ahl, 66) or “fidelity to the historical truth” (Conte, 444) in “the polemic against Vergil” (ibid.).

⁴⁵ Henderson, “Lucan,” 143.

⁴⁶ Foucault, *Society*, 141.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 58.

can”?”⁴⁸ That is, at exactly the moment where Foucault places the birth of the discourse of permanent war, “there seems to have been a significant increase in the number and intensity of engagements with Lucan’s text across many different forms of discourse”?⁴⁹ For, as Paleit goes on to point out, it is not only in literature that Lucan’s influence can be seen in the England of this period: imitations of and allusions to Lucan abound across historical poetry, drama, and “works of moral and political theory;” moreover, excerpts from *De Bello Ciuili* “achieved independent circulation in contemporary culture” in this period, appearing in a range of contexts from “arguments about the morality of courtly politics” to “debates over the soteriology of Christian burial.”⁵⁰

Such an argument, however, is immediately susceptible to the critique that Foucault aims, in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, at “the notion of influence,” which provides a support – of too magical a kind to be very amenable to analysis – for the facts of transmission and communication; which refers to an apparently causal process (but with neither rigorous delimitation nor theoretical definition) the phenomena of resemblance or repetition; which links, at a distance and through time – as if through the mediation of a medium of propagation – such defined unities as individuals, *oeuvres*, notions, or theories.⁵¹

If not through the notion of “influence” – which, as Foucault points out, has to posit the existence of some sort of magical ether (a “medium of propagation”) through which Lucan’s “notions” are transmitted intact through time and space to England in the 1580s – how, then, are we to understand the “phenomena of resemblance and repetition” with which we are dealing here?

The question – what does it mean that one period or work resembles or repeats an earlier one – is clearly an important one for Foucault, and goes to the heart of his method: his genealogical project and his critique of monumental or “metaphysical” history. It is also an important question for a reception scholar, because it asks us to examine our frameworks for understanding the historicity and the transtemporal agency of literary texts.

So far in this paper I have singled out the way that Foucault emphasizes the newness and strangeness of the discourse of permanent war and its status as a break from existing historical forms and norms. However, although he is interested in isolating the disruptive force of the discourse’s emergence, on several occasions a revealing hesitation is visible in Foucault’s language over whether this discourse might, in fact, be an example of resemblance and repetition rather than a pure emergence. For instance, he writes, in a passage I have partially cited above, that the discourse of permanent war “began its career – or perhaps its new career in the West – in very specif-

⁴⁸ Edward Paleit, *War, Liberty and Caesar: Responses to Lucan’s Bellum Ciuile, ca. 1580-1650* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 10-11.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, translated by A.M. Sheridan Smith (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 23-24.

ic conditions between the end of the sixteenth and beginning of the seventeenth century” (emphasis added).⁵²

On a few scattered occasions in the lectures, a theory of history as the “reactivation” of the past becomes visible. For example, Foucault argues that “the juridico-political theory of sovereignty... dates from the Middle Ages. It dates from the reactivation of Roman law,”⁵³ and that “royal power developed throughout the Middle Ages by modelling itself on the Roman imperium and reactivating the Imperial rights that were codified in the era of Justinian.”⁵⁴ Foucault also argues that the “disruption of the praise of Rome” – or, in even stronger terms, “the shattering of a pre-existing historical discourse” – “in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries came about in two ways”: the first is “the reactivation of the fact of the invasion,” which “introduced a major break in time.”⁵⁵

Thus we have an image of a historical event, datable to a particular period (the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries), which functions to disrupt or shatter an existing discourse. And we also have the claim that this event consists (at least in part) in a “reactivation” of a historical fact, or – in the medieval examples – of an earlier system of right or law. “Reactivation” itself becomes a highly important form of historical/political action. The term suggests that facts, ideas, or theories somehow lie dormant for long periods of time until historical agents “reactivate” them in the present.

This is where Foucault’s method begins to coalesce with the methods and theories of reception studies.⁵⁶ An often-quoted axiom of classical reception is that “meaning is realized at the point of reception.”⁵⁷ That is, a text does not have a meaning which is successively configured in time; rather, readers, as active interpretative agents embedded in specific discursive and historical contexts, activate particular conceptual, affective, or political formations which exist neither purely “in” the text nor “in” the reader, but emerge out of the complex interface between text, reader, and context.⁵⁸ Interpretation thus becomes a highly politicized act, and the “reactivation” of his-

⁵² Foucault, *Society*, 58.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 116-7.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 141.

⁵⁶ Or at least with some of them. For discussions of why Foucault’s work is not compatible with the Gadamerian hermeneutics that underlie a lot of contemporary reception scholarship, see Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabino, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), eg xxi, and discussion in Gary Wickham, “Foucault and Gadamer: Like Apples and Oranges Passing in the Night,” *Chicago-Kent Law Review* 76: 2 (2000), 913-943. (Ultimately, the answer to this question is that Foucault explains discursive acts – for example, sexual confession – with reference to the relations of social domination which elicit and structure those acts, rather than by attempting to discern their “deep meaning”).

⁵⁷ Charles Martindale, *Redeeming the Text: Latin Poetry and the Hermeneutics of Reception* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 3.

⁵⁸ On text/context/reader relations in reception theory see Janet Staiger (using the term “activation”), *Interpreting Film: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema* (Princeton, NJ, and Oxford: Princeton University Press,

torical texts and discourses is a key aspect of political struggle against domination – or, indeed, *for* domination – in the present day.

In this light, Foucault's theory of genealogy can be taken as, ultimately, a theory of reception, or a theory of history-as-reception. He begins his important essay "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" with a critique of Paul Ree for "assum[ing] that words had kept their meaning... and that ideas retained their logic; ... he ignored the fact that the world of speech and desires has known invasions, struggles, plundering, disguises, ploys."⁵⁹ Throughout the essay he distinguishes metaphysics from genealogy by arguing that the metaphysician "plac[es] present needs at the origin" in order to "convince us of an obscure purpose that seeks its realization at the moment it arises,"⁶⁰ while "genealogy does not pretend to go back in time... to demonstrate that the past actively exists in the present, that it continues secretly to animate the present, having imposed a predetermined form on all its vicissitudes."⁶¹ Similarly, reception – which distinguishes itself vigorously from "source study" and from untheorized models of "influence" like those critiqued in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* – does not assume that words keep their meanings, that meaning is not the site of struggle, or that a historical text imposes a predetermined form on all the vicissitudes of interpretation. Instead, as Foucault puts it later in the "Nietzsche" essay:

The isolation of different points of emergence does not conform to the successive configurations of an identical meaning; rather, they result from substitutions, displacements, disguised conquests, and systematic reversals. If interpretation were the slow exposure of the meaning hidden in an origin, then only metaphysics could interpret the development of humanity. But if interpretation is the violent or surreptitious appropriation of a system of rules, which in itself has no essential meaning, in order to impose a direction, to bend it to a new will, to force its participation in a different game, and to subject it to secondary rules, then the development of humanity is a series of interpretations. The role of genealogy is to record its history: the history of morals, ideals, and metaphysical concepts, the history of the concept of liberty or of the ascetic life; as they stand for the emergence of different interpretations, they must be made to appear as events on the stage of historical process.⁶²

Reception knows this well: there is no single, original meaning in a text which is slowly exposed, or successively configured. There is a war of interpretations, and history and counter-history cannot stand outside that war.

1992), 35-36, and William Batstone, "The Point of Reception: A Provocation," in Charles Martindale and Richard Thomas (eds.), *Classics and the Uses of Reception* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006).

⁵⁹ Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," *The Foucault Reader*, edited by Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 76-100, 76. Notice how close the language here is to the discussion of war in Hobbes in *Society*, 92-99.

⁶⁰ Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" 83.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 86.

What's striking here is how similar Foucault's image of history as a war of interpretation is to the discourse he finds in the seventeenth century (and I find in Lucan): a discourse in which history is the field of political struggle and truth can only be deployed from a combat position; in which interpretation, as the violent struggle over the rules for the production of "truth," is the political act par excellence. What is happening in the 1975-6 lectures, then, is not so much the discovery of the "truth" of a historical moment of emergence; rather, it is the polemical reactivation of a past discourse in and against the present. This is history as counter-history; Foucault is reactivating a past discourse just as, in his account, Boulainvilliers "reactivates the fact of the invasion."

In Foucault's account, however, "Rome" itself seems to function as an oddly ahistorical entity. In deploying Rome as a figure for the unbroken continuity of power, Foucault seems to suggest that the discourse of Roman history does not, itself, need to be reactivated. As I argued above, Rome, for Foucault, functions not as a historical entity, but the background against which history happens. "Rome" is somehow *there* to counter for the English writers of the late sixteenth centuries and the French writers of the early eighteenth, just as it was for Lucan. But in what way can a historical discourse developed in the early seventeenth century be a counter-history to Roman history? How and why has Rome retained power over history and truth continuously, in an unbroken genealogy, from the birth of its Empire to a millennium and more after its fall, into the seventeenth century and even into the late twentieth? In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, as Alston points out in the introductory chapter "Foucault's Rome" in this volume, Foucault writes that "discourse must not be referred to the distant presence of the origin, but treated as and when it occurs."⁶³ Why does this not apply to Rome?

Foucault deploys "Rome" here to name the kind of history that is countered by the discourse of permanent war, with the consequence that, in his own writing, "Rome" escapes its political and historical boundaries in time and space to become the adversary in a permanent, unending – and unendable – war, fought in the limitless historico-political (battle)field. Thus, when Foucault uses the name "Roman history" for the history that is being countered by the seventeenth-century discourse of permanent war, he is not only taking a side in the historico-political war, but also invoking a discourse which makes Roman Imperial power coterminous with the production of historical knowledge. In so doing, as suggested, he departs radically from his usual historical practice, summarized by Alston as "establish[ing] historical divergences in which epistemological links break down or arise" and "uncover[ing] a multiplicity of loosely linked systems and power dynamics that undermine any grand philosophical histories."⁶⁴ Rome, for Foucault at this period, is not a "multiplicity of loosely linked systems and power dynamics," but a totality. Rather than attending to the "obscurity of contingencies and all the minor incidents that bring

⁶³ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, translated by Alan Sheridan (London: Allen Lane, 1977), 30-1. Cited in Alston, "Foucault's Rome," see above.

⁶⁴ Alston, "Foucault's Rome," see above.

about defeats and ensure victories,”⁶⁵ Foucault constructs a Rome whose power is all but absolute, and whose control over the historical field is total and unquestioned until the moment of “shattering” in the late sixteenth century. Rome itself escapes the play of history and becomes the eternal enemy in the permanent war.

There is something exceptional about Rome – Rome and history, Rome in history, Roman history⁶⁶ – not just for Foucault but in post-Roman European thought more generally. As I have argued elsewhere, this discursive construction of Rome as the eternal adversary, the place where power, knowledge, and history merge, is deeply embedded in post-Roman European thought.⁶⁷ It surfaces in texts which might otherwise not appear to be connected, from Philip K Dick’s 1974 novel *Valis* (which tells the story of a permanent war against “the Empire, the Black Iron Prison, as the super or trans-temporal constant”⁶⁸) to Hardt and Negri’s *Empire* (2000), where they write that “the concept of Empire presents itself not as a historical regime originating in conquest, but rather as an order that effectively suspends history and thereby fixes the existing state of affairs for eternity.”⁶⁹

The “counter-history” that Foucault traces in the *Society* lectures thus ultimately depends on an extant and pervasive construction of Rome as a transtemporal constant; a regime which somehow escapes the historical play of conquest and domination, repression and reactivation. To justify his genealogical method and to give it the polemical force he wants it to have in the present, Foucault needs there to be a backdrop of historical continuity against which discourses emerge in the discontinuous, contingent way which his methodology centres and valorizes. Calling this backdrop “Rome” implicates him in a particularly persistent European historical fantasy dating back to the Augustan period – and makes him, to a certain extent, complicit with the enemy he has constructed because he succumbs to the fantasy that Rome has indeed succeeded in creating and sustaining a continuous, unified, transhistorical field of power which escapes the violent contingencies and vicissitudes of history. In “studiously avoid[ing] the Classical”⁷⁰ – in refusing to turn his critical/ genealogical attention to Rome – Foucault has, paradoxically, ceded power to Rome. Or at least, he has left it to us to continue his project: as this paper has shown, Foucault in fact provides a powerful framework for a reading of Lucan which enables us to open up “Roman history” to a genealogical gaze and see that, far from being *only* “a ritual that rein-

⁶⁵ Foucault, *Society*, 54.

⁶⁶ Elsewhere I call this discursive construction “Rome’n’ history:” see Ika Willis, “*iam tum* (nowthenalready): Latin Epic and the Post-Historical,” *Cultural Critique* 74 (Winter 2010), 51-64 (<https://doi.org/10.1353/cul.0.0062>).

⁶⁷ Willis, “Empire.” On the *topos* of the endlessness of Rome see also Duncan F. Kennedy, “A Sense of Place: Rome, History and Empire Revisited,” in *Roman Presences*, edited by Catharine Edwards (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 19-34.

⁶⁸ Philip K. Dick, *Valis* (London: Gollancz, 2001 [1974]), 54.

⁶⁹ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), xiv.

⁷⁰ Alston, “Foucault’s Rome,” see above.

forced sovereignty,”⁷¹ Rome is like all other discursive formations: fissured and messy, riven by local and partial resistances, uneven and dispersed throughout history, susceptible to periods of latency and periods of reactivation. Rome, then, speaks back to Foucault – and Foucault, despite himself, can show us how to speak back to Rome.

Ika Willis
University of Wollongong
Northfields Ave
Wollongong NSW 2522
Australia
ikaw@uow.edu.au

⁷¹ Foucault, *Society*, 69.