

Nero's Final Hours

DAVID SANSONE

Suetonius' account of Nero's last hours (*Nero* 47–49) has been admired for its vividness of description and for its readability. Gavin Townend has characterized this passage as “perhaps the most successful piece of continuous narrative in the *Caesars*,” and others have agreed.¹ But Townend also notes that the success of the account as narrative is secured at the cost of historical accuracy, and he points out (95) a number of unanswered questions that the narrative poses for historians who seek to uncover the truth that lies behind Suetonius' description. Townend explains this state of affairs in terms of what he calls (84) the “law of biographical relevance,” whereby the details of the narrative are presented as though from Nero's perspective. The problems and inconsistencies in the narrative can thus be accounted for by the fact that Nero was not himself aware of the totality of the situation.² Implicit in an explanation of this sort is the assumption that there existed a truthful and accurate account of Nero's final hours, and that Suetonius, in accordance with the dictates of his chosen genre, has omitted those elements that, while they are of great importance for the modern historian, do not interest the biographer. But the difficulty with this explanation is that many of the features that characterize Suetonius' account are also to be found in Cassius Dio, who was not a biographer at all, but a historian.³ I should like to suggest another

¹ G. B. Townend, “Suetonius and his Influence,” in T. A. Dorey (ed.), *Latin Biography* (London 1967) 93; cf. K. R. Bradley, *Suetonius' Life of Nero: An Historical Commentary*, Collection Latomus 157 (Brussels 1978) 243, 273, F. R. D. Goodyear in E. J. Kenney and W. V. Clausen (edd.), *The Cambridge History of Classical Literature* II (Cambridge 1982) 661 (“perhaps the best thing he ever wrote”), B. Baldwin, *Suetonius* (Amsterdam 1983) 78, 174–75, 510–11, R. C. Lounsbury, *The Arts of Suetonius* (New York 1987) 63. G. D'Anna, *Le idee letterarie di Suetonio* (Florence 1954) 182 ff. had earlier subjected this passage to an extensive and detailed stylistic analysis, coming to the conclusion that the striking differences in style between this passage and most of the remainder of the *Life of Nero* resulted from Suetonius' use of a different source for this passage.

² Townend (previous note) 95 says, “the whole course of events smells of treachery.” Bradley (previous note) 274 quotes these words of Townend, apparently with approval; cf. also B. H. Warmington, *Suetonius. Nero* (Bristol 1977) 115, Lounsbury (previous note) 71.

³ Dio 63. 26–29. This would mean that there existed a truthful and accurate account that was used by the author who was the common source of Suetonius and Dio, and who was

explanation for these awkward details in Suetonius' (and Dio's) account, namely that the source that lies behind both Suetonius and Dio contained a substantial admixture of fiction.

We should be alerted to the possibility of the presence of fiction by the very circumstantiality of Suetonius' narrative. For example, if the detail that Nero tore his cloak on some brambles (48. 4) as he entered Phaon's villa is historically accurate, we will have to assume that an eye-witness⁴ thought this particular worthy of recounting, and that it was faithfully transmitted to Suetonius' source. And we will have to make the same assumptions also about the other details that enliven Suetonius' account. But these are just the sort of details that we expect to encounter, not in a work of history or even of biography, but of fiction. One of the valuable features of Rhys Carpenter's very curious book, *Folk Tale, Fiction, and Saga in the Homeric Epics*,⁵ is the reminder that the more detailed and verisimilar a narrative is the more likely it is to be fictional. Of Homer Carpenter says (31-32), "since it is fiction which imparts verisimilitude to his scenes, we may say without fear of paradox that the more real they seem the more fictional they are." But this is true not only of the songs of the oral poet but, I think, of the works of the historian and the biographer as well. If we are to acknowledge the presence of fabrication anywhere in the *Caesars* of Suetonius, we should acknowledge it here.⁶

While the circumstantial character of Suetonius' account may raise our suspicions, it cannot of itself prove that the account, or any part of the account, is fictional. As it happens, not only are certain of the details individually suspicious but, as we shall see, they form a pattern suggesting that the entire narrative of Nero's last hours was created by a moralizing writer whose model was the myth of Er, which concludes Plato's *Republic*. There are, it is true, only a few such details, but they call attention to themselves by their specificity and their apparent irrelevancy and, indeed, they are an embarrassment to anyone who tries to deal with this narrative as

himself subject to the "law of biographical relevance." In addition to unduly multiplying the number of sources, this hypothesis posits a *biographical* source for both Suetonius and Dio, a source for which there appears to be no evidence.

⁴ According to Suetonius (48. 1; cf. Joseph. *BJ* 4. 493) only four men accompanied Nero. These will have been (Aur. Vict. *Epit.* 5. 7) the freedmen Phaon, Epaphroditus, Neophytus and Sporus; see W. Jakob-Sonnabend, *Untersuchungen zum Nero-Bild der Spätantike* (Hildesheim 1990) 36-37.

⁵ Berkeley 1946.

⁶ Another possible indication of the presence of fiction is the fact that there are a number of similarities of detail and even of verbal expression in Suetonius' accounts of the deaths of Nero and Otho; see B. Mouchová, *Studie zu Kaiserbiographien Suetons*, Acta Universitatis Carolinae, Philosophica et Historica Monographia 22 (Prague 1968) 55-57. It is difficult to believe that these similarities are the result of historical coincidence, so the likelihood is that they are fabrications either here or in the *Life of Otho* (in the case of Otho, these details are found also in Tacitus' account; see Mouchová), if not both.

an historical document. Keith Bradley, for example, in commenting on sections 47. 3–49. 4, says:

the piece . . . has details which contribute little or nothing to elucidating the last hours of Nero's life. It is impossible to comment on such items as s. 47. 3, *direptis etiam stragulis*, s. 48. 3, *inter fruticeta ac uepres*, s. 48. 2 *tremore terrae et fulgure aduerso*. These items have a telling effect in a novelettish sense, but this is all.⁷

But I do not think this is all. In fact, of the three details on which, it is alleged, comment is impossible, two can be shown to be of considerable interest.⁸

Let us consider first the thicket and the brambles. At 48. 3 Suetonius recounts of Nero and his party, “ut ad deverticulum ventum est, dimissis equis inter fruticeta ac uepres per harundineti semitam . . . ad aversum villae parietem evasis.” Dio does not include the brambles, but he does mention the reeds and the fact that Nero turned off the main road (63. 28. 1): ἔκ τε τῆς ὁδοῦ ἀπετράπη καὶ ἐς καλαμώδη τόπον τινὰ κατεκρύφθη. Clearly the common source described Nero as leaving the road and walking toward Phaon's villa along a path that led through a reedy area. Did the source also include the brambles? It seems likely that it did, and that they were simply ignored by Dio (or his excerptor). But in any case, the brambles are surely a fabrication, whether on the part of Suetonius himself or his source. The reason for their invention is immediately clear from what follows; they exist for the purpose of tearing the imperial cloak (48. 4 “divolsa sentibus paenula traiectos surculos rasi”). It is, of course, possible that Nero's cloak did in fact catch on brambles as he made his way into Phaon's villa and that this detail was accurately reported and transmitted. But it is also possible that this is all a fiction intended to remind the reader of the fate of the fictitious Ardiaeus, who is, according to Plato's account in the myth of Er, punished for his sins by being carded on brambles. Ardiaeus, it will be remembered, was, like Nero, a tyrant and a parricide, having murdered his father and his brother (*Rep.* 615c–d), just as Nero had murdered his own mother and his brother by adoption, Britannicus. The condign punishment meted out to Ardiaeus (*Rep.* 616a) consists of being dragged over brambles that lie alongside the road outside the entrance to the upper world: παρὰ τὴν

⁷ Bradley (above, note 1) 273.

⁸ In the light of what is suggested below, it may be that some comment is possible even concerning *direptis etiam stragulis* as well. At 47. 3 Nero, having left his bedroom at midnight to look for his friends and finding no one, returns to his room only to find that even his guards have run off and that his bed-clothes (*stragula*) and container of poison have been taken. Nero then looks for Spiculus the gladiator or anyone else who can put him out of his misery, but he cannot even find someone to serve as his executioner. In other words, Nero is portrayed as being in an awkward in-between stage, as neither dead nor alive. In view of this, one wonders if the other meaning of *stragula*, “burial garments,” is not hinted at here; for this meaning, cf. *Nero* 50, *Petr. Sat.* 42. 6 and (fem. sing.) 78. 1. Nero is cut off from the living, but he cannot attain the peace of death and burial.

ὄδον ἐκτὸς ἐπ' ἀσπαλάθων κνάπτοντες.⁹ We may assume, therefore, that Nero's detour,¹⁰ the delay outside the villa and the annoyance of the brambles were all fictions designed to give an impression of Nero not merely on the way to his death but, in a sense, as already in the underworld.

There are other indications that this is the case. As we have just seen, the source on which Suetonius and Dio rely described the area through which Nero's path lay as "reedy," and reeds are a conventional element of ancient descriptions of the underworld.¹¹ In this way Nero is represented as neither dead nor alive, as existing, while still alive, in the world of the dead. And this liminal status of Nero is hinted at in Suetonius' text and may have been explicit in Suetonius' source as well: While Nero was waiting, in a sort of limbo, until a secret entry-way into the villa could be prepared, Phaon encouraged him to hide in a pit that had been excavated in the sand (48. 3 in *specum egestae harenae*) and Nero joked that he was not about to go underground while he was still alive. This pit seems also to be referred to in Dio's account, although there is some inconsistency involved. In Suetonius Nero refuses to enter, whereas in Dio he goes into what is called "the cave" (63. 28. 5 μετῆλθεν εἰς τὸ ἄντρον). Unfortunately, no cave has previously been mentioned in what survives of Dio's account, but there seems to be no question that Suetonius' *specus* and Dio's ἄντρον are identical. For there follows immediately in both narratives the same anecdote concerning Nero's drink of water:¹² Taking some water (with his hand, according to Suetonius) from a nearby ditch, the emperor exclaimed, "This is Nero's special drink."¹³ The special drink was in reality, as we learn from Pliny,¹⁴ an invention of Nero's: The emperor would boil water, which was then placed in a glass container and chilled in snow. The water was first boiled because this removed impurities and enabled the water to

⁹ Compare Croesus' torture of one of his enemies (Hdt. 1. 92. 4): ἐπὶ κναφηίου ἔλκων διέφθειρε.

¹⁰ Compare παρὰ τὴν ὁδὸν in Plato with ἔκ τε τῆς ὁδοῦ in Dio and *deverticulum* in Suetonius.

¹¹ E.g. Hermesianax 7. 6, Virg. *Geor.* 4. 478, Prop. 2. 27. 13, Paus. 10. 28. 1.

¹² In Dio Nero also eats some bread at this point, whereas, according to Suetonius (48. 4), it was only later that he was offered some bread (which he refused). It is curious that twice Dio represents Nero as doing something (eating bread, entering the cave) that, according to Suetonius, he refused to do. It is difficult to believe that the common source was unclear on these matters, particularly in the case of the cave, if, as seems likely, Nero's *mot* about not going underground while he was still alive appeared in the source. We should perhaps assume that, in the source, Nero first refused the bread and then ate some, that he first refused to enter the cave and then went in. In other words, the source presented Nero as being even more indecisive than he appears in Suetonius' account. For Suetonius' portrait of Nero's indecisiveness, see W. Steidle, *Sueton und die antike Biographie*², *Zetemata* 1 (Munich 1963) 93, J. Gasco, *Suétone historien*, BEFAR 255 (Paris 1984) 796-97.

¹³ "Aquam ex subiecta lacuna poturus manu hausit et 'haec est,' inquit, 'Neronis decocta'" (Suet. *Nero* 48. 3); Ἐπεὶ διψήσας ὕδωρ ὁποῖον οὐδεπώποτε ἐπέπώκει, ἐσφ' ᾧ δυσανασχετήσας εἶπε, τοῦτ' ἐστὶν ἐκεῖνο τὸ ποτὸν τὸ ἐμόν τὸ ἄπερθον (Dio 63. 28. 5).

¹⁴ *NH* 31. 40; cf. Mart. 2. 85. 1, 14. 116, 117, *Juv.* 5. 50.

become even colder (!) and more refreshing when chilled. This special quality of Nero's decoction is reminiscent of the outstanding feature of the waters of the underworld: The water of the river Styx is said to be so cold as to be lethal, and no ordinary vessel can contain it.¹⁵ Likewise, in Plato's myth of Er, the water of the River of Forgetfulness can be contained by no vessel.¹⁶ And all of the dead—but not Er, who is to return to the land of the living—must drink of this water before they can continue their journey. And so Nero drinks (but not from any vessel) while he is waiting to enter Phaon's villa, where he is to die.

But there is something curious about the topography of this place to which Nero has come.¹⁷ Because of the wealth of detail in Suetonius' and Dio's accounts, we seem to have a vivid picture of the surroundings in which the drama of Nero's last hours was played out. But we must be careful not to equate vividness with truth; indeed, as Rhys Carpenter has reminded us, it is one of the distinguishing features of fiction. Let us take inventory of the features of this landscape: In the immediate vicinity of Phaon's villa are to be found thickets, brambles, reeds, a sand-pit and a ditch filled with water. But these are items that are not likely to exist in close proximity to one another. Reeds grow in wet, marshy places that are inhospitable to brambles. Nor does one excavate sand from wet, marshy places. According to Suetonius, the ditch (or pool) filled with water was adjacent to the sand-pit (*ex subiecta lacuna*); one wonders how the water came to fill the ditch but not the adjacent pit. It is, of course, possible that some of these details are historically accurate; I am merely suggesting that they cannot *all* be so. On the other hand, they could all be fictitious, in which case, as has been suggested, their origin is easily accounted for: The brambles and the source of water come directly from the myth of Er, while the reeds and the pit (or cave) have obvious associations with the underworld.¹⁸

We turn next to the earthquake and the lightning-flash, concerning which Bradley found comment impossible.¹⁹ If one's concern is to extract

¹⁵ Pliny, *NH* 31. 27 "hanc putant nimio frigore esse noxiam"; cf. J. G. Frazer, *Pausanias's Description of Greece* IV (London 1898) 253. For references to the belief that the water of the Styx "could only be carried in the hoof of a mule, or an ass, or a horse," see J. R. Hamilton, *Plutarch. Alexander: A Commentary* (Oxford 1969) 215, F. Bölte, "Styx," in *RE* IV.1 (1931) 462–63.

¹⁶ *Rep.* 621a τὸν Ἀμέλητα ποταμόν, οὗ τὸ ὕδωρ ἀγγεῖον οὐδὲν στέγειν.

¹⁷ For the likely location of Phaon's estate, see T. Ashby, *The Roman Campaign in Classical Times* (London 1927) 84–85.

¹⁸ *H. Od.* 11. 25, *A.R.* 2. 735, *V. Aen.* 6. 237, 262. Plato's χάσματα (*Rep.* 614c) are likened by Plutarch (*De sera num. vind.* 565c) to ἄντρα βακχικά; cf. G. Soury, "La vie de l'au-delà. Prairies et gouffres," *REA* 46 (1944) 169–78.

¹⁹ If nothing else, it might at least have been appropriate to note the connection between these and the other portents associated with Nero's downfall. For the frequency of reports of such portents, see J. H. W. G. Liebeschuetz, *Continuity and Change in Roman Religion* (Oxford 1979) 155–66.

from Suetonius' narrative fragments of historical truth, it is difficult indeed to know what to say about the biographer's statement that Nero was "tremore terrae et fulgure adverso pavefactus" (48. 2). But the obvious comment to make is that the combination of earthquake and lightning-flash²⁰ is a conventional element of narratives, particularly Greek narratives, in which the underworld is, or is about to be, revealed, either literally, as in *Iliad* 20. 56–65 and in various apocalyptic accounts, or metaphorically, by foretelling, threatening or describing the punishment of sinners. In Herodotus, for instance, the Athenians who impiously attempted to remove from Aegina the statues of Damia and Auxesia were greeted with thunder and an earthquake, and immediately came to a violent end (5. 85. 2, 86. 4). Josephus explicitly attributes to the agency of God the earthquake, thunder and lightning that occurred before the Philistines were put to flight.²¹ According to Pausanias (9. 36. 3), the god destroyed the Phlegyans κεραινοῖς συνεχέσι καὶ ἰσχυροῖς σεισμοῖς, because they had attacked the sanctuary in Delphi with the intention of plundering it. In the Septuagint we find thunder and an earthquake in the vision of Mordecai (Est. 1. 1d) and in Isaiah's prediction of the "visitation" that will come upon those who warred against Jerusalem (Is. 29. 6). And thunder, lightning and earthquakes figure prominently in the New Testament book of Revelation: after the seventh seal has been broken (8. 5), after the seventh angel has blown his trumpet (11. 19) and after the seventh angel has poured out his bowl (16. 18).²² But of greatest interest for our purposes is the fact that thunder and earthquake

²⁰ Or thunder. In the surviving portion of his history Dio mentions (63. 28. 1) the earthquake but not the lightning. A thunderbolt, however, seems originally to have appeared in Dio's account; so K. Heinz, *Das Bild Kaiser Neros bei Seneca, Tacitus, Sueton und Cassius Dio* (diss. Bern 1946) 64 n. 2, who refers to John of Antioch, fr. 91 Müller: φωνεῖν δὲ ἐπεχείρησε, πρότερον κεραινωθείσης αὐτοῦ τῆς τραπέζης. This last looks like a confusion of two separate incidents, one, recorded by Suetonius at *Nero* 47. 1 (and by Plutarch at *Galba* 5. 3, but not in the surviving portion of Dio), according to which Nero, receiving the news while he was dining that his remaining troops had defected, overturned the table, and the other, found at Tac. *Ann.* 14. 22. 2, Dio 61. 16. 5 and Philostr. *VA* 4. 43, according to which Nero's table was struck by lightning (*fulgur*, σκηπτός) while he was dining. The former is connected with Nero's last day; the latter, however, belongs to the time shortly after the murder of Agrippina. The confusion may already have been present in the source of these various accounts, for Philostratus claims that the lightning also struck Nero's cup, which may be connected with the cups that broke when Nero overturned the table (Suet. *Nero* 47. 1). At any rate, it seems likely that the source of Suetonius and Dio contained, in addition to the earthquake, reference either to thunder or to lightning.

²¹ *AJ* 6. 27. The earthquake is Josephus' own addition to his Biblical model (1 Sam. 7. 10).

²² An interesting feature of the two passages from the LXX and the three from the NT is that all mention, in addition, φωναί (φωνῆς μεγάλης at Is. 29. 6). With this we may compare the φθέγμα in the myth of Er (*Rep.* 615e), which bellows to signal the punishment of Ardiaeus and the other sinners. Nothing, according to Plato, surpasses the fear of hearing this voice (φόβων . . . γεγονότων τούτων ὑπερβάλλειν, μὴ γένοιτο ἐκάστω τὸ φθέγμα 616a). Just so Nero, in Dio's account (but not in Suetonius'), waits in the reedy spot "trembling at every voice" (πάσαν δὲ φωνὴν . . . ὑποτρέμων 63. 28. 2).

occur also in the myth of Er.²³ In fact, immediately before Plato mentions these phenomena he tells us that Er and the waiting souls went to sleep and were awakened at midnight (ἐπειδὴ δὲ κοιμηθῆναι καὶ μέσας νύκτας γενέσθαι). And so Nero, on the last night of his life, went to sleep and was awakened around midnight ("ad mediam fere noctem excitatus," Suet. *Nero* 47. 3).

We see, then, that there appears to have existed a moralizing account of Nero's death that included a number of fictional elements, that presented Nero as in a sort of transitional state between the world of the living and the world of the dead and that originated between the time of Nero's death in 68 and the time at which Suetonius composed his *Life* of the emperor, probably under Hadrian. There is yet another reason we should feel encouraged to believe in the existence of such an account. During this same period Plutarch published his essay, *De sera numinis vindicta*,²⁴ which concludes (563b ff.) with an eschatological myth that is patently modeled upon Plato's myth of Er. Just as Plato's Er (*Rep.* 614b) dies and comes back to life, recounting his vision of the afterlife, so Plutarch's Aridaeus²⁵ reports what he saw after dying and coming back to life (*De sera num. vind.* 563d). Among Plutarch's startling innovations is that his visitor to the underworld sees the shade of Nero. Indeed, Nero is the only named person whose soul Aridaeus sees. Now, one might be tempted to expect that Nero's fate is about to be singled out as an example of the punishment of the tyrannical man.²⁶ And this expectation appears to be on the point of being fulfilled when Plutarch tells us that preparations were being made to have Nero's soul implanted in a viper, so that in his new incarnation he might re-enact his matricide. But all of a sudden, Plutarch tells us, a great light shone forth and from the light came a voice which commanded that, in view of his beneficence toward the Greeks, Nero be reborn as a gentler creature, as a melodious animal that haunts marshes and lakes.²⁷ It is, of course, possible that Plutarch was the first to portray Nero in the underworld. But, given

²³ *Rep.* 621b βροντῆν τε καὶ σεισμόν γενέσθαι. The combination of thunder (and/or lightning) and earthquake is found also in the *Sibylline Oracles*: 2. 6–7, 4. 113, 12. 157–58, 13. 10, 14. 234.

²⁴ For the date (between 81 and 107), see C. P. Jones, *JRS* 56 (1966) 71.

²⁵ Clearly Plato's Ἀρδιαῖος was the model for Plutarch's Ἀριδαῖος (564c), regardless of whether we follow Wyttenbach in emending Plutarch's spelling to conform to Plato's. See F. E. Brenk, *In Mist Apparelled: Religious Themes in Plutarch's Moralia and Lives*, Mnemosyne Suppl. 48 (Leiden 1977) 136–37.

²⁶ For Plutarch's view of Nero as tyrant, see C. P. Jones, *Plutarch and Rome* (Oxford 1971) 19.

²⁷ 567f ῥοδικόν τι . . . περὶ ἔλη καὶ λίμνας ζῶον. K. Ziegler, *RE* XXI.1 (1951) 849 suggests that the animal is a swan, but good reasons have been given for believing that it is rather a frog: R. M. Frazer, "Nero the Singing Animal," *Arethusa* 4 (1971) 215–18. Frog had already been suggested by M. P. Nilsson, *Geschichte der griechischen Religion* II (Munich 1950) 529, and Nero had already been connected with frogs (or toads) without reference to this passage by A. Lesky, "Neroniana I," *Annuaire de l'Inst. de Philol. et d'Hist. Orient. et Slav.* 9 (1949) 385–96 (= *Gesammelte Schriften* [Bern 1966] 335–43).

what we have seen in Suetonius, it seems far more likely that there already existed some account that represented, or suggested, Nero's punishment in the afterlife, against which Plutarch was reacting. Nor is there anything implausible about the existence of such an account. The *Apocolocyntosis*, written at the very beginning of Nero's reign, provides a parallel for the depiction, by an ill-disposed author, of an emperor in the afterlife. And, at a later time, Nero himself puts in a (very brief) appearance at Romulus' banquet in Julian's *Caesares* (310c) before he is unceremoniously whisked away by Cocytus. This is not enough to enable us to speak of a "tradition" of representing the emperor (or, specifically, Nero) in the underworld. But the evidence presented here, in combination with the existence of frequent rumors of "false Neros," indicates that even in the first century there was felt to be something terribly ambiguous about the report of Nero's death. Indeed, the very fact that the account (which appears to have been the only one in circulation) was so obviously lacking in historical plausibility may have encouraged the spread of rumors that the emperor was still alive.²⁸

Two questions yet remain, to which we can give only partial and unsatisfactory answers, namely why such an account arose and who was responsible for it. As to the origin of the account, the most likely possibility is that Nero himself provided, while on his tour of Greece, the inspiration for those who wished to chronicle his journey to the underworld. For, in a report of which Pausanias is our only witness, Nero is said to have attempted (unsuccessfully) to measure the depth of the Alcyonian Lake, near Lerna, which was the route by which Dionysus descended into the underworld to retrieve Semele.²⁹ This report may well be historically correct, and Michael Grant regards it as evidence of the enthusiasm for scientific exploration that was inspired in Nero by his tutor Seneca.³⁰ In any event, the image of the emperor, in the year before his death,³¹ exploring one of the entrances to the underworld is likely to have suggested the outline and some, at least, of the details of the picture of Nero's final hours. In particular, the topography of Lerna is suspiciously reminiscent of that of Phaon's estate, as we can see from Frazer's description:

The ground is swampy, abounding in springs, and overgrown with rank vegetation. Along the shore there is a strip of firm gravel, but between this and the foot of the hills the traveller is reminded by ditches full of stagnant

²⁸ Tac. *Hist.* 2. 8; cf. M. T. Griffin, *Nero: The End of a Dynasty* (London 1984) 214–15. E. K. Chambers, *Arthur of Britain* (London 1927) 231 mentions (in addition to Arthur) Harold, Frederick Barbarossa, Don Sebastian, Charlemagne and Lord Kitchener as instances in which "the death of a great leader has been hardly accepted by those who had put their trust in him." To these illustrious names we may now add those of Elvis Presley and Haile Selassie.

²⁹ Paus. 2. 37. 5.

³⁰ M. Grant, *Nero: Emperor in Revolt* (New York 1970) 135.

³¹ See K. R. Bradley, "The Chronology of Nero's Visit to Greece A.D. 66/67," *Latomus* 37 (1978) 61–72. Bradley (66) suggests October/November 67 as "perhaps the best time" for the visit to Lerna.

water . . . that he is crossing the Lernaean Marsh. At the foot of the hill . . . is a still, deep lake, or rather pool, some hundred paces in circumference, fringed by a luxuriant growth of reeds, rushes, yellow irises, and aquatic plants of many sorts. This is the Alcyonian Lake . . .³²

The only elements that are missing are the brambles, which, as we have seen, have come from the myth of Er, and the pit or cave. But, since the function of the pit is to symbolize entrance into the land of the dead, we may say that that element is present as well, in the form of the lake itself. In the account of Nero's final hours, however, the lake whose bottom Nero failed to reach was replaced, in the hopes of making the story more plausible, by a pit or cave that Nero refused to enter.

Finally, one cannot help raising the question of the likely source of Suetonius' (and Dio's) account of Nero's final hours. Needless to say, the issue of the sources of Suetonius (and Tacitus and Dio) is an extremely contentious one and, although a great deal has been written, there is little consensus among scholars.³³ What is presented here concerns only the account of Nero's death, nor can certainty be attained even concerning this one incident. Nevertheless, if what has been said above regarding the character of Suetonius' source is correct, we may be able to make a more convincing suggestion concerning the identity of that source. Perhaps the most likely candidate, on the surface at least, is the elder Pliny, whose lost *Histories* continued the work of Aufidius Bassus. Both Pliny and Suetonius were *equites*; Pliny's work was very detailed, which we have seen to be characteristic of Suetonius' source for this incident; in his surviving *Naturalis Historia* Pliny frequently criticizes Nero on moral grounds.³⁴ In addition, there may be one or two correspondences between Suetonius and passages in the *Naturalis Historia*, passages that, we may assume, were repeated in the lost *Histories*. We have seen (above, page 182) that the brief reference in 48. 3 to Nero's "special drink" is elucidated by a passage in Pliny's *Naturalis Historia*, and we may be tempted to assume that Pliny is Suetonius' source for the reference here. Pliny tells us (*NH* 2. 199 and 232) that in his account of Nero's reign he described the portents that preceded the emperor's downfall and, although we do not know whether these portents are identical with those recounted by Suetonius at *Nero* 46, it seems likely that Suetonius has drawn on Pliny's account.³⁵ And there is clearly a

³² Frazer (above, note 15) III 302.

³³ See most recently D. Wardle, "Cluvius Rufus and Suetonius," *Hermes* 120 (1992) 466-82, with bibliography.

³⁴ J. Isager, *Pliny on Art and Society: The Elder Pliny's Chapters on the History of Art* (London 1991) 224-29, M. Beagon, *Roman Nature: The Thought of Pliny the Elder* (Oxford 1992) 17-18.

³⁵ Dio's list of portents (63. 26. 5) is different from that of Suetonius, although they have in common the spontaneous opening of the doors of the Mausoleum Augusti (for this, see O. Weinreich, "Gebete und Wunder," in *Genethliakon Wilhelm Schmid*, Tübinger Beiträge zur Altertumswissenschaft 5 [Stuttgart 1929] 262-65). Presumably Dio and Suetonius made

relationship between Suetonius' "mensam subvertit, duos scyphos gratissimi usus, quos Homeros a caelatura carminum Homeri vocabat, solo inlisis" (*Nero* 47. 1) and Pliny's "Nero amissarum rerum nuntio accepto duos calices crystallinos in suprema ira fregit inlisis" (*NH* 37. 29).³⁶ But the nature of Nero's "special drink" seems to have been common knowledge,³⁷ and the breaking of the cups and the portents belong to the "public" section of the account of Nero's downfall, before he took flight with his four freedmen, and there is no need to assume that the source for the "public" section (if, indeed, that source can even be identified as Pliny) was the same as the source for the flight to Phaon's villa. In fact, as it happens, there is good reason for believing that Pliny's *Histories* cannot have been Suetonius' source for the details of Nero's death. For Pliny's *Histories* were not published until after the author's death on 24 August 79.³⁸ But it is clear that Josephus, in a work whose date of publication antedates the death of Vespasian on 23 June 79,³⁹ gives evidence of knowing the account that appeared in Suetonius' source, for he refers to Nero's abandonment by his guards and his flight to the suburbs with four freedmen.⁴⁰

We can thus eliminate Pliny as a potential candidate for Suetonius' source. The most promising candidates that remain are Fabius Rusticus and

different selections from Pliny's more extensive list. (Pliny himself mentions [*NH* 2. 232] rivers flowing backwards, which was included in neither Dio's nor Suetonius' list, although the former records rivers of blood and the sea retreating from Egypt.)

³⁶ Lest it be thought that "caelatura" and "crystallinos" cannot refer to the same vessels, note that Pliny, in discussing defects in rock-crystal, says, "hoc artifices caelatura occultant" (*NH* 37. 28). It is interesting to note that Suetonius' phrase, "solo inlisis," recurs in the younger Pliny's *Panegyric* (52. 4).

³⁷ See the passages from Martial and Juvenal cited above (note 14).

³⁸ Pliny had completed his *Histories* by the time he published his *Naturalis Historia* in 77, but he tells us (*NH* praef. 20) that he intends to allow his nephew to publish it after his death. It is usually assumed (e.g. by W. Kroll, *RE* XXI.1 [1951] 289) that this intention was indeed carried out.

³⁹ The attempt by S. J. D. Cohen, *Josephus in Galilee and Rome* (Leiden 1979) 84–86, to show that Books 1–6 of *BJ* were completed under Titus is not convincing. See the reservations expressed by L. H. Feldman, *ANRW* II.21.2 (1984) 839 and *Josephus and Modern Scholarship (1937–1980)* (Berlin 1984) 379, also T. Rajak, *Josephus: The Historian and his Society* (London 1983) 195, with n. 23. *Vit.* 361 and *Ap.* 1. 50–51 are most naturally taken to mean that Josephus presented *BJ* to Titus and Vespasian as joint-rulers, i.e. between 71 and 79 (see B. W. Jones, *The Emperor Titus* [London 1984] 80–81). The emphasis on Titus in the preface to *BJ* is no more evidence of post-Vespasianic publication than is the similar emphasis on Titus in the preface to Pliny's *NH*, published in 77.

⁴⁰ Joseph. *BJ* 4. 493. Compare κατελείφθη . . . ὑπὸ τῶν φυλάκων ἀπάντων with Suet. *Nero* 47. 3 *custodes diffugerant* and σὺν τέτρασι τῶν πιστῶν ἀπελευθέρων with 48. 1 *quattuor solis comitantibus*. These look as though they are derived from a common *written* source. We must beware of the suggestion that Josephus is dependent here upon oral testimony from Nero's freedman Epaphroditus. For this man was put to death in 94 (R. Syme, *Chiron* 13 [1983] 134 = *Roman Papers* IV [Oxford 1988] 266), and cannot therefore be identified with Josephus' patron of the same name, to whom the *Vita* and the *Contra Apionem* were dedicated.

Cluvius Rufus. It is, of course, possible that Suetonius is here relying, not on an extended historical work, but on a specialized monograph,⁴¹ but there are enough similarities between Suetonius' account of the death of Nero and Josephus' account of the death of Caligula⁴² to make it a more economical hypothesis that both accounts derive from the same source, a historical narrative of a moralizing tendency that covered (at least) the period from the accession of Claudius to the death of Nero. And that source, if what has been suggested above is correct, is most likely to have been Cluvius Rufus. For we have seen that Plutarch, in the myth in his *De sera numinis vindicta*, seems to be reacting against the account that appeared in Suetonius' source, and there is evidence that Plutarch knew the work of Cluvius Rufus,⁴³ but none that he knew the work of either Fabius Rusticus or the elder Pliny. And, finally, we have seen that the account in Suetonius' source may have been prompted by witnessing Nero's attempt to measure the depth of the Alcyonian Lake, and we know from Dio that Cluvius Rufus accompanied Nero on his trip to Greece, where he served as the emperor's herald.⁴⁴

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

⁴¹ See Bradley (above, note 1) 18, who refers to "the popular *exitus* literature of the day."

⁴² Both accounts are *very* detailed; both include Homeric quotations (*AJ* 19. 92, *Nero* 49. 3); both report conversations that can have been heard by, at most, only a handful of individuals (*AJ* 19. 91, *Nero* 48. 1-2); both emphasize the theatrical aspects of the situation (*AJ* 19. 90 and 94, *Nero* 49. 1). For the theatrical aspects, see the following two notes. As to the Homeric quotations, G. B. Townend ("The Sources of the Greek in Suetonius," *Hermes* 88 [1960] 98-120) has argued that the quotation of Greek is frequently an indication of Suetonius' use of Cluvius Rufus as a source; Townend's argument has, however, recently been criticized by Wardle (above, note 33).

⁴³ See Jones (above, note 26) 77, with n. 31. Plutarch quotes Cluvius at *Otho* 3. 2 and *Quaest. Rom.* 289c-d. It is interesting to observe (see previous note) that the latter quotation concerns the origin of the word *histrio*.

⁴⁴ Dio 63. 14. 3. We are also told by Suetonius (*Nero* 21. 2) that Cluvius Rufus performed this service for Nero (apparently) at Rome as well, where he announced a dramatic performance by the emperor. This provides further evidence (see previous note) for Cluvius' interest in the theater.