5.5 SUETONIUS ON POETS AND EMPERORS

Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus, the most widely known and influential among Roman biographers, was born around AD 69, perhaps in North Africa; but he spent most of his life in Rome, as a scholar and a civil servant in the imperial administration. He disappears from sight after AD 122 when he is reported to have lost the favour of Emperor Hadrian, as whose chief secretary, *ab epistulis*, he had then served for some years. His fame rests with his *Lives of the Caesars* (*De vita Caesarum*), twelve in all from Julius Caesar to Domitian; but he seems to have been a prolific writer in a variety

of learned subjects, and his biographical writing also includes a large work of collective biography known under the title *De viris illustribus*, 'Famous Men'. While the *Caesars* has come down to us almost in its complete form (just the preface and the beginning of the first Life are missing), only smaller parts survive of the other collection.

Like Nepos' work of the same title, Suetonius' *De viris illustribus* was divided into books according to the profession treated: teachers of grammar and rhetoric (extant except for the last part), poets (partly extant), historians, orators, and philosophers (the internal order is unknown) – but no generals or statesmen as in Nepos and his successor Hyginus. The time of composition is uncertain, but probably falls between AD 107 and 118.[83] The amount of space allotted to each entry varies considerably, from a few lines to some seven printed pages. The surviving pieces about poets (and one historian) have not been transmitted under Suetonius' name, but anonymously, or under other names, in manuscripts of the work of the respective poet. It follows that the ascription of each of them to Suetonius is a matter of debate, and that at any rate additions and omissions will have occurred along the way. With this proviso, we shall look at the longest and presumably most intact of them, the *Life of Virgil* (traditionally ascribed to Aelius Donatus),[84] before attention is turned to Suetonius' main achievement, his *Caesars*.

The large amount of material dealt with in the seven surviving pages of *Virgil* emerges from the following outline:

Name, birthplace, parents, birth (accompanied by omens) (1–5)
Youth (up to arrival at Rome) (6–7)
Physical appearance, health, lifestyle, sexual inclinations (8–11)
Property, places of residence (12–13)
Death of parents and brothers (14)
Studies and failed oratorical career (15)
Literary works (in chronological order), working methods, recitations (16–34)
Illness and death, tomb and epigram, testament, publication of the *Aeneid* (35–42)
Detractors and defenders (43–6)

[83] See Kaster 1995, xxi n. 1.

[84] On the *Life of Virgil*, see Leo 1901, 12–13; Steidle 1963, 170–2; Baldwin 1983, 384–94; Horsfall 1995; and Bayer 2002, with a full bibliography by N. Holzberg and S. Lorenz (339–61). On its authenticity, see Naumann 1939, Naumann and Brugnoli 1990, 572–4, and Horsfall 1995, 3, who summarizes: though formally the work of Aelius Donatus (fourth century), it is 'in all probability . . . Suetonius', essentially unaltered' (compare Bayer 2002, 338 'im Kerne Suetonisch'). The classic argument against this view was delivered (in 1946) by Paratore 2007, 199–302.

The main facts of Virgil's life thus seem covered, though some suspect a lacuna, perhaps after (7), on Virgil's relationship to Maecenas and Augustus.[85] While the main framework is chronological, the large central piece on his manhood (8–34) is subdivided according to topics. Telling is chosen in preference to showing and the typical is favoured before the particular, as illustrated by the following passage, placed after young Virgil's arrival at Rome (8–10):[86]

> He was tall and of full habit, with a dark complexion and a rustic appearance. His health was variable; for he very often suffered from stomach and throat troubles, as well as with headache; and he also had frequent haemorrhages. He ate and drank but little. He was especially given to passions for boys, and his special favourites were Cebes and Alexander, whom he calls Alexis in the second poem of his *Bucolics*. This boy was given to him by Asinius Pollio, and both his favourites had some education, while Cebes was even a poet. It is common report (*vulgatum est*) that he also had an intrigue with Plotia Hieria. But Asconius Pedianus declares that she herself used to say afterwards, when she was getting old, that Virgil was invited by Varius to associate with her, but obstinately refused.

Continuous narrative, even for a short spell, is rare, and so is dramatization of particular events. No concrete episode is mentioned in the account of his childhood and youth (6–7), nor is the boy described or characterized; dates and places fill the little space devoted to this period of life – only a third of the textual space that was previously occupied by dreams and omens in connection with his birth (3–5), a favourite topic of Suetonius.[87] Virgil's final illness and death, in contrast, are narrated with a certain amount of detail, especially regarding a journey eastwards he had to interrupt; yet a summary style prevails throughout.

What then characterizes *Virgil* as a specimen of 'literary biography'? The external facts of the author's life are there in outline, and the composition of his various works is enlarged upon, from a boyhood epigram to the *Aeneid*, which was left incomplete at his death. We get the titles and sometimes the basic contents of the poems, some literal quotations, and often the concrete background or instigation for the composition. On the other hand, Suetonius offers no aesthetic comments and hardly any evaluations or interpretations of his own. Instead he reports the success Virgil enjoyed among patrons and friends, as well as the envy and criticism of less fortunate

[85] Leo 1901, 12, whose disposition of the Life my outline mainly follows.

[86] The *Life of Virgil* is quoted in the translation of Rolfe 1998:II, 442–59, occasionally modified according to the text of Brugnoli and Stok 1997, 17–56.

[87] Suetonius' preoccupation with dreams, omens, and astrology is discussed by Konstan 2009.

colleagues. The description of his recitation of the *Georgics* before Octavian is memorable (27–30):

> When Augustus was returning after his victory at Actium and lingered at Atella to treat his throat, Virgil read the *Georgics* to him for four days in succession, Maecenas taking his turn at the reading whenever the poet was interrupted by the failure of his voice. His own delivery, however, was sweet and wonderfully attractive (*pronuntiabat autem cum suavitate et lenociniis miris*). In fact, Seneca [Rhetor] has said that the poet Julius Montanus used to declare that he would have purloined some of Virgil's work, if he could also have stolen his voice, expression, and dramatic power (*hypocrisin*); for the same verses sounded well when Virgil read them, which on another's lips were flat and toneless.

The embryonic scene, three men and a book, is never allowed to develop, however. Suetonius chooses to provide anecdotal illustration from elsewhere, with careful registration of his sources (Seneca, etc.), rather than using his own imagination to create a full scene in which the characterization of Virgil's art of delivery might have been integrated.

When the time comes to read portions of the *Aeneid*, Octavia (Augustus' sister) too is present, the sixth book of the epic 'producing a remarkable effect' on her: 'for it is said (*fertur*) that when he reached the verses about her son, "Thou shalt be Marcellus" (883), she fainted and was with difficulty revived'. Again a would-be scene, but deliberately kept at a distance through indirect discourse.[88] We also note that Suetonius is sparse with information about people and circumstances that he expects his audience to know, for instance who this Octavia is and that her reaction is due to the recent untimely death of her son Marcellus, a potential heir of Augustus. The missing information about the young Virgil being admitted into the circle of Maecenas may perhaps be ascribed to the same reluctance to state what is (to Suetonius) obvious. Similarly, among Virgil's studies only the more unexpected ones, medicine and astrology (*mathematica*), are specified, while those in rhetoric have to be inferred from his subsequent failure as an advocate in a law court (15).

Contemporary reception is thus well provided for, considering the small scale of the whole enterprise. Another favoured topic of literary biography, the glance into the writer's study, also receives its due in Suetonius' famous description of Virgil's meticulous work with his verses (23–4):

[88] As Horsfall 1995, 3 (cf. 19), points out, when Suetonius uses expressions like *dicitur*, 'he may not mean more than that "I do not know quite who actually said this"'. The important thing in our context is that he prefers to hide behind sources, whether specific or general, whether genuine or faked, rather than telling his story directly.

When he was writing the *Georgics*, it is said (*traditur*) to have been his custom to dictate each day a large number of verses which he had composed in the morning, and then to spend the rest of the day in reducing them to a very small number, wittily remarking that he fashioned his poem after the manner of a she-bear, and gradually licked it into shape. In the case of the *Aeneid*, after writing a first draft in prose and dividing it into twelve books, he proceeded to turn into verse one part after another, taking them up just as he fancied, in no particular order. And that he might not check the flow of his thought, he left some things unfinished, and, so to speak, bolstered others with lightweight verses, which, as he jocosely used to say, were put in like props, to support the structure until the solid columns should arrive.

This is poetic composition from the point of view of the philologist or *scholasticus*, rather than that of a literary critic. Furthermore, the tone of the whole Life is scholarly also in the sense that facts are presented simply as facts, seemingly without either a laudatory or a vituperative intention. Most of the facts reported happen to be positive; but presumably less praiseworthy sides of Virgil's personality are not excluded, such as his failure as an orator and his pederastic inclinations.[89] So this is neither *egkomion* nor *psogos*, but (in that respect) something closer to the modern ideal of biography. If, on the other hand, many of the facts do not stand up to modern scholarly scrutiny,[90] this is not due to the author's lack of ambitions; it may owe something to his deficient critical sense, but more to the fact that his own sources, some 150 years after the event, are already an inextricable mixture of fact and legend.

Suetonius' work on the *Lives of the Caesars* might be expected to show easier access to good historical sources, at least with regard to the later emperors. The reigns of the last three that Suetonius writes about, Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian, even coincided with his own childhood and youth; he was in his mid-twenties when Domitian was assassinated in AD 96. Yet it remains a curious fact that the later Lives in the series are the least detailed and seem least inspired. Some would explain this by the abrupt termination of his privileged position at the Imperial court: perhaps he no longer had access to the archives he had presumably used for the earlier Lives. Or he may simply have lost interest in his project. No doubt, as witnessed also by *Famous men*, it is the late Republic and early Imperial age that interests him most.[91] But it should also be kept in mind when reading

[89] See further Baldwin 1983, 390–1, who notes that Suetonius' 'customary vituperation of homosexual activity is [in this Life] replaced by cursory tolerance'.

[90] See, in particular, Horsfall 1995, with further refs.

[91] See Wallace-Hadrill 1995, 53–7, 61–2. For the view that Suetonius wrote the six last Lives first, see most recently Pausch 2004, 252–8.

any one of the biographies that *Caesars* is a coherent work rather than a collection of separate biographies. The *Life of Augustus* is the longest and most conscientiously elaborated one, not only because Augustus' reign was the longest and arguably the most interesting, but also because the institutions and workings of the novel empire need description and explication. Augustus becomes the model emperor. Increasingly, as the successive Lives pass by, less and less needs such special attention. Suetonius counts on his readers to remember the earlier parts of his work and can thus allow himself to be more selective, to concentrate on what is new in each reign. This may be noticed most easily with regard to persons: in *Nero*, for instance, the persons that have been active in *Caligula* and *Claudius* require no further introduction. Suetonius is thus, perhaps surprisingly, a rather demanding author: he often simply leaves out not only what he has himself said at an earlier point, but also, as we saw in *Virgil*, what seems to him too banal to mention. One can well understand, for instance, if the reign of Domitian, with its all too easily available oral and written sources, did not present enough of a challenge to his research instincts.

To represent the twelve Lives here, I have chosen *Nero*, mid-sized and mid-positioned in the series. It fills thirty-eight printed pages, in comparison with sixty-three for *Augustus* and forty-five for *Divus Iulius*.[92] Whereas perhaps not reaching the artistic level of these two, it appears typical of Suetonian biography, exhibiting both its merits and its weaknesses. It also happens to contain 'perhaps the best thing he ever wrote', namely, the account of Nero's death.[93] Paul Murray Kendall, modern biographer and historian of biography, even declares this narrative 'hardly excelled, perhaps, in the whole range of life-writing'.[94]

The start of *Nero* is typical enough. In the first two pages (1–5) we are given an overview of the branch of the Domitius family to which Nero belonged, with the expressed aim of showing 'how Nero degenerated from the virtues of his ancestors yet reproduced each one's legacy of vice' (1.2).[95] The various Domitii, from Nero's great-grandfather's grandfather down to his own father, are reviewed, with mini-anecdotes or sayings illustrating their respective characters. Of one it was said that 'it was no wonder he had a beard of bronze when his face was made of iron and his brain of

[92] Baldwin 1983, 180 lists and discusses the different sizes, counted in numbers of chapters: *Iul.* 89; *Aug.* 101; *Tib.* 76; *Calig.* 60; *Claud.* 46; *Ner.* 57; *Galb.* 23; *Otho* 12; *Vit.* 18; *Vesp.* 25; *Tit.* 11; *Dom.* 23.

[93] Quotation from Goodyear 1982, 661. Similarly Bradley 1978, 243, 273; Lounsbury 1987, 63; Wallace-Hadrill 1995, 11.

[94] Kendall 1985, 36.

[95] My translations of *Nero* are based jointly on Rolfe 1998 and Catherine Edwards 2000.

lead' (2.2).[96] Another is characterized as arrogant, profligate, and cruel (*arrogans, profusus, immitis*) and is said, both as praetor and consul, to have brought Roman knights and matrons on stage to perform farces (4). The anticipatory nature of these selected glimpses of Nero's *genus* is obvious. Likewise, though using opposite criteria of selection, Suetonius begins his *Augustus* with a review of the Octavius family with its brave and honourable men (1–3). In his *Tiberius*, the corresponding scrutiny of the Claudian family (1–2) reveals both heroes and villains, foreboding Tiberius' own double nature. An alternative introductory strategy, used in *Caligula* and *Claudius*, is to contrast an excellent father with his rascal of a son. By a third, less sophisticated method, the character of the emperor is stated directly: he is either wholly good (*Titus* 1.1) or wholly evil (*Domitian* 1.3).[97]

Next follows a brief account of Nero's early life until the age of seventeen, when he becomes emperor (6–8). The chronological structure is emphasized by putting the direct or indirect indications of age first in each section, as a kind of rubric: *Nero natus est*... ('Nero was born...'), *Trimulus patrem amisit* ('At the age of three he lost his father'), *Tener adhuc*... ('Still a young boy...'), *Undecimo aetatis anno*... ('In his eleventh year...'), *Deductus in Forum tiro*... ('At his first public appearance in the Forum...'), *Septemdecim natus annos*... ('At the age of seventeen...'). The bad omens surrounding his birth are recounted, and an anecdote is told about how he got his name. Then we get glimpses of family business and intrigues, among them the 'story' (*fabula*) of how Messalina, Claudius' wife, tried to have little Nero strangled in his sleep because she feared her stepson as a rival to her own son Britannicus (6.4). As time goes by, attention turns to the behaviour of the young boy himself. He takes part in the 'Game of Troy' (*lusus Troiae*, a traditional pageant) at the Circus with great success; he 'reveals his monstrous nature' (*prodita immanitate naturae*) by denouncing Britannicus for irreverent behaviour to Claudius, whose adopted son Nero has now become; and he testifies against his aunt Lepida (7.1). He also assumes official duties, displays fluency in Greek as well as Latin oratory, and appears as a judge. He marries Octavia – the fact is just recorded without further details (7.2). To realize the dynastic implications of the marriage and who arranged it, one has to turn to the historians of the

[96] ... *non esse mirandum quod aeneam barbam haberet, cui os ferreum, cor plumbeum esset.* For *cor* (lit. 'heart') here meaning 'brain', see Shackleton Bailey 1983, 318: 'Domitius was stupid – it seems to have run in the family', referring to Cicero's mention of a stupid contemporary Domitius in *Att.* 8.1.3.

[97] On the importance of the first chapters, see Gascou 1984, 691–5.

period (Tacitus, Cassius Dio);[98] Suetonius, as often, ignores the political aspects of the events he reports.

Nero begins his reign by honouring both his adopted father, the deceased and now deified Claudius, and the memory of his biological father Domitius. His mother Agrippina receives authority over both private and public business. Significantly, the password *optima mater*, 'Best of Mothers', is given to the head of the palace guard, and Nero often rides together with her in a litter through Rome (9). This, it will appear, is the prelude to a six-page catalogue of the more positive acts of Nero's reign (9–19). Systematic arrangement now takes precedence over chronology, as indicated by a new succession of rubrics: *Spectaculorum* . . . (spectacles, 11–13), *Consulatus* . . . (consulships, 14), *In iuris dictione* . . . (dispensation of justice, 15.1), *In curiam* . . . (senate, 15.2), *Formam aedificiorum* . . . (buildings, 16.1), and so on. This effect of rubrics is achieved simply by putting the significant noun first, which the free word order of Latin allows, but can only occasionally be achieved in modern translations. We have met the technique already in Nepos' *Atticus*, though it is with Suetonius that it becomes a manner. Rather than producing an effect of discontinuity, as is sometimes supposed, it in fact helps the reading, marking the transition to a new subject in a straightforward fashion. It is the modern translation, where the 'rubric' is often hidden somewhere within the sentence and the reader is carried totally unawares into something different, that gives the sense of abrupt transitions: the mediating element is lost.

The systematic arrangement of the material is a distinctive mark of Suetonian biography. In his *Augustus*, the author himself comments programmatically on his method and provides us with the convenient term *per species*, 'according to categories' (9): 'Having given as it were a summary of his life, I shall now take up its various phases (*partes*) one by one (*singillatim*), not in chronological order (*per tempora*), but by categories (*per species*), so that they may be more clearly perceived and assessed.' In this manner, a wealth of concrete detail can be handled without author or reader losing sight of the main lines; George Luck aptly likens it to 'a system of drawers into which facts can be stored conveniently'.[99] Usually, the transition between the various categories coincides with the beginning of a new chapter in our modern editions; but sometimes it falls within such a chapter, and modern typographical layout risks blurring the clear structure in which Suetonius himself shows such pride.[100]

[98] See Bradley 1978, 62. [99] Luck 2000b, 167 = 1964, 230.
[100] This is demonstrated by Luck 2000b, 167–8 = 1964, 231–2.

We return to *Nero* 9–19. Most of these acts of Nero's are enumerated without the author revealing his own view of them. Such an evaluation only comes in retrospect, after the whole series has been told (19.3):

> These deeds, some of them meriting no reproach, others even deserving quite some praise,[101] I have gathered together to separate them from the shameful deeds (*probra*) and crimes (*scelera*) with which I shall now be concerned.

This narrative boundary between good and evil has its counterpart in other Lives as well, most memorably expressed in *Caligula*: 'The story has so far been of Caligula the emperor, the rest must be of Caligula the monster.'[102]

The catalogue of shameful deeds and crimes is three times the length of that of commendable acts (20–39, some eighteen pages), and there is now more of continuous narrative and emotional engagement. To a certain extent, the same topics come up again, but this time with their negative aspects in focus, such as his travels in Greece, his building activities, and his 'generosity', alias 'mad extravagance' (31.4). The artificiality of the procedure is apparent. For instance, whereas earlier in the biography (8–9.1) Claudius' death was just registered as a fact and Nero's filial piety towards the deceased stressed, now the story is repeated from a totally different angle (33.1):

> The murder of family members and general slaughter began with Claudius. Even if Nero was not responsible for his death he was certainly complicit and did not pretend otherwise, for he was afterwards in the habit of praising the kinds of mushrooms with which Claudius had ingested the poison as, in the words of a Greek proverb, the food of the gods. Certainly, after Claudius' death Nero attacked him with every kind of insulting word and deed, harping sometimes on his stupidity, at others on his cruelty . . . and he disregarded many of his decrees and pronouncements as the decisions of a raving madman. Finally, he failed to provide anything but a low and insubstantial wall as the enclosure for the place where Claudius had been cremated.

It is true that the murder of Claudius had already been described in some detail at the end of that emperor's biography (*Divus Claudius* 44–5), so that readers could supplement the bare mention in *Nero* 8 with the macabre circumstances narrated earlier. But Nero's alleged complicity and his behaviour afterwards are new items here in 33.1 and place his *pietas* in 9.1 in a very different light, retrospectively. Furthermore, not only *Claudius* but also *Augustus* should ideally be in the reader's mind in order fully to appreciate the quoted passage from *Nero* (33.1): for in *Augustus* (100) we

[101] *Haec partim nulla reprehensione, partim etiam non mediocri laude digna . . . .*

[102] *Calig.* 22.1: *Hactenus quasi de principe, reliqua ut de monstro narranda sunt.* See also *Tib.* 42.1.

find a complete description of the ideal conduct following an emperor's death, in perfect contrast to Nero's irreverent behaviour. It is a frequent mark of Suetonius' art not to comment, just to describe, and leave the contextualization to the reader.

The shame-and-crime part contains many of the well-known stories about Nero's depravity: his amateurish song performances, his passion for horses and games, his nightly acts of sexual abuse and violence, his wasting of the Imperial fortune and criminal appropriation of the means of others; further, how his murderous career, referred to at the begining of 33.1, came to include his brother Britannicus, his mother Agrippina, his aunt Domitia, his first wife Octavia, second wife Poppaea, and prospective wife Antonia, his stepson Rufrius Crispinus, his tutor Seneca (forced to commit suicide), and many others, for more or less capricious reasons.

Within each thematic group the order is mainly chronological, which in some of them (but not in the murder sequence) also means a crescendo towards the most outrageous. This development, if not of his character, at least of his giving full and public expression to it, is noted explicitly in 27.1: 'Gradually (*paulatim*), however, as his vices took root (*invalescentibus vitiis*), he left off jokes and secrecy and, taking no care to conceal his actions, moved on openly to greater misdeeds.' Such direct comments are rare in Suetonius; even unique is the summary of Nero's vices that he has inserted a little earlier in the same context (26.1):

> At first the signs he showed of insolence, lust, luxury, greed, and cruelty (*petulantiam, libidinem, luxuriam, avaritiam, crudelitatem*) were gradual and covert and could be put down to the errors of youth, but even then it was clear to all that these vices were due not to his age but to his nature.

The following chapters (26–39) may in fact be seen as an illustration of these five vices, focused on one at a time, with 'cruelty' as the global term for his career as a serial killer (33–9).[103] After Nero's setting Rome on fire has been added to the list – individual murder being replaced by mass murder – we arrive at the end of the systematic account and the beginning of the concluding chronological story (40.1):

> Having endured a ruler of this sort for a little less than fourteen years, the world at last shook him off. The process was begun when the Gauls revolted under Julius Vindex who at that time governed the province as propraetor.

When Nero now becomes the victim of a process, rather than an active agent who initiates one series of deeds after another, we are made to

[103] See Mouchová 1968, 92–3; Bradley 1978, 153–5.

follow his hopes and fears, his reactions and forced counteractions, and his occasional passivity, if not actually from inside, at least through the continuous description and interpretation of his behaviour and utterances (40.4):

> He learned of the Gallic revolt at Naples on the very anniversary of his mother's murder, but took the news with such a calm and easy mind (*lente et secure*) that he gave the impression of being pleased,[104] because it gave him the opportunity, in accordance with the laws of war, to despoil these most wealthy provinces. He went at once to the gymnasium where he watched athletes in competition with the greatest enthusiasm. At dinner too when he was interrupted by a more disturbing message, he was angered (*excanduit*) but only so far as to threaten vengeance on the rebels.

Yet continuous narration of this kind is not the procedure throughout; Suetonius also resorts frequently to the typical 'cataloguing' or 'exemplary' style that dominates the earlier, systematic parts of the Life.[105] We may further note the grim irony that underlies the account: to date the beginning of Nero's downfall, Suetonius uses no ordinary temporal marker but 'the anniversary (*die ipso quo* . . .) of his mother's murder'; and the emperor's motive for apparently welcoming the Gallic revolt is interpreted as greed and malicious pleasure combined. Author and reader, knowing the outcome, can join in tacit derision of Nero's vain hopes. For all the apparent neutrality of his recording, 'Suetonius' purpose', as Keith Bradley notes, 'is to dwell on the ignominy of Nero throughout, and . . . the materials available to him are manipulated to this intent'.[106] Suetonius shows no compassion for the emperor who has caused all the human suffering and Imperial waste catalogued earlier in the Life.

Finally, informed that the remaining armies too had revolted, Nero 'tore up the dispatches brought to him as he was dining, overturned the table, and hurled to the ground two favourite goblets which he called "Homeric", because they were decorated with scenes from Homer's poems' (47.1). This is the Suetonian manner of showing rather than telling us that Nero now at last realizes the hopelessness of his situation. As Richard Lounsbury observes, 'the universal revolt of the empire is no longer a vague historical occurrence, but shattered crystal on the dining-room floor, vividness

[104] *ut gaudentis etiam suspicionem praeberet.*

[105] The term borrowed from Bradley 1978, 241, who distinguishes between his 'discursive' and 'exemplary' styles and provides an analysis of Chs. 40–50 to demonstrate the shifts.

[106] Bradley 1978, 243; see also Barton 1994, 55.

secured by the cunning concentration of detail'.[107] Nero finds some poison, puts it in a box, and leaves his quarters. Yet he still nourishes the hope of escape, perhaps to Egypt. It soon appears, however, that everyone has deserted him, his friends as well as his bodyguard of soldiers. Suicide remains the only honourable option – in fact, the only way to avoid capture, torture, and execution. Suetonius brilliantly depicts Nero's vacillation between resolve and cowardice, between what he knows everyone expects from the emperor and what his own character desires. With only four freedmen as attendants, he desperately hastens on horseback between various hiding-places, in constant fear for his life and experiencing hardships unwonted for an emperor.

At last Nero arrives at the villa of his freedman Phaon, at the fourth milestone in the northeasterly direction from the city. To avoid detection, he crawls on all fours through a narrow passage up to the house and finds a small room (*cella*) where he lies down on a simple mattress. He refuses the coarse bread he is offered, but drinks some lukewarm water. The scene is set for his *exitus* (49):

> Then, as every one of his attendants urged him to save himself as soon as possible from the abuses that were imminent, he ordered a grave to be dug in his presence, of a size which would accommodate his own body, fragments of marble to be collected at the same time, if any could be found, and water and firewood brought for the disposal of the corpse-to-be, weeping as each instruction was fulfilled and repeating, 'What an artist dies with me (*qualis artifex pereo*)!' During the delay caused by these preparations, a runner brought a message to Phaon which Nero grabbed, learning from it that he had been judged a public enemy (*hostis*) by the senate and was the object of a search, to be punished according to ancestral custom. He asked what manner of punishment this might be. When he learned that the criminal was stripped naked, his neck being placed in a fork, then his body beaten until he died, he was overcome with terror and snatched two daggers which he had brought with him, but, after trying the point of each one, he put them away again, on the grounds that the fatal hour had not yet arrived. He would at one moment beseech Sporus [the boy he had castrated and taken as his 'wife', 28.1] to commence weeping and lamenting, and at another beg that someone should help him take his life by setting an example. At times he complained in these words about his own reluctance to act: 'My life is disgraceful, shameful', [and in Greek:] 'This does not become Nero, does not become him', 'In such circumstances, one must be decisive', 'Come, rouse yourself!' At that moment some horsemen drew near who had orders to capture him alive. When he realized this, he uttered in alarm: 'The thunder of swift-footed horses echoes around my ears' (*Iliad* 10.535),

[107] Lounsbury 1987, 77.

then drove the dagger into his throat aided by Epaphroditus, his secretary (*a libellis*). He was half dead when a centurion burst in and, holding a cloak to his wound, pretended he had come to his rescue. Nero said only, 'Too late' and 'This is loyalty.' With these words he died, his eyes glazed and protruding (*exstantibus rigentibusque oculis*), to the horror and dread of those who saw him.

This whole account of Nero's last hours and death (47.3–49) is characterized by continuous narration, apparently without lacunae: every step, every utterance is reported. It is like a film which has so far offered scattered glimpses, different angles, comments, and associative digressions, but now, for the finale, follows the hero's movements in one sustained sequence, interrupted only by occasional close-ups of his expressive face. In dense Latin prose[108] the narrative moves on steadily, without breaks for comments, changes of perspective, or alternative versions. Nero the man, stripped of his imperial dignity, is the constant centre of attention,[109] and the grim sequence of events, depicted in graphic detail, needs no authorial explanation. It is probably such purely narrative qualities that have made these pages the favourite of modern critics.[110] It is the closest Suetonius gets to Tacitus and other Roman historians in the rhetorical art of *narratio* – and, somewhat worryingly, the farthest from his usual biographical technique. Here he sacrifices scholarly systematization and biographical testimonies for captivating narrative, using his imagination to recreate the desperate flight and pathetic end of a failed emperor.

Now, how far Suetonius actually relies on his own empathy and creative mind is not quite certain. Nero's flight and death are also described by Cassius Dio in his *Roman History* (63.27.3–29.2), with many of the same concrete details and some of the same utterances; so Suetonius and Dio seem to have had a common literary source (which in turn, perhaps, relied on notes left by the eyewitness Epaphroditus, Nero's secretary).[111] But since Dio's text has only survived in an abbreviated version, the comparison is not

[108] The passage quoted here consists of ca. 1,500 characters in Latin, as against ca. 2,000 in English. The style in a specially dramatic scene (47.3), immediately preceding our extract, is described by Lounsbury 1987, 72: 'short clauses, abrupt changes of construction, each image presented to the emperor's sight in a few words, then whirled away again; there are six instances of the ablative absolute in this one short section, most of them of two or three words only'.

[109] The only exception in our extract is 'who had orders to capture him alive'. See Lounsbury 1987, 72–3.

[110] For detailed literary appreciations of this description, see Townend 1967, 93–6; Baldwin 1983, 174–5; and Lounsbury 1987, 65–89, who compares it to Tacitus' account of the murder of Agrippina (*Ann.* 14.1–9).

[111] This is the plausible suggestion of Baldwin 1983, 175. The lost literary source has sometimes been identified as Cluvius Rufus, see Champlin 2003, 48–51 (with further refs.); *contra* Griffin 1984, 235–7. Di Branco 2002 discusses the literary traits of the 'legend of Nero' that starts with Suetonius and Cassius Dio, its theatricality and representation of the emperor according to a 'heroic' paradigm.

so straightforward. It seems likely, however, that the consistent focalization through Nero himself is Suetonius' own achievement. In fact, it is typical of Suetonius' *Caesars* generally that the (grammatical or logical) subject of the verbs in the main clauses is the emperor himself.[112] To judge from Dio's account, their common source in contrast exhibited changes of perspective between Nero and his persecutors as well as authorial comments of the type: 'Such was the drama that Fate now prepared for him, so that he should no longer play the roles of other matricides and beggars, but only his own at last', and so on.[113]

Even if the utterances of Nero quoted in direct speech are partly the same in both authors, they occur at different places. Dio lets Nero pronounce, 'What an artist dies with me', as his very last words, while Suetonius places this famous utterance earlier in the account.[114] Instead, he prefers to let Nero die with the tragically ironic words on his lips, *Haec est fides*, 'This is loyalty', believing that the officer who tries to stop the blood from Nero's fatal wound does so as an act of allegiance (49.4). Seeing the special weight put on 'last words' as an index of character in the Roman *exitus* genre,[115] it is significant that Suetonius in this way eliminates any trace of heroism from Nero's death.[116] The readers of *Nero* are surely expected to remember how the ideal emperor dies, peacefully and at an advanced age like Augustus, with a pious farewell to his wife of five decades as his *ultima verba* (*Aug.* 99.1).[117] Nero, by contrast, dies as early as in his thirty-second year (57). He needs the assistance of a freedman to commit suicide, with his mock-wife weeping on command, and even in his last utterance reveals his poor grasp of reality. Suetonius makes sure Nero dies in character.[118]

Nero's death does not mean the end of the Life. First, some stock elements of Suetonian biography have to be dealt with: burial, physical

[112] See Dihle 1954, 50; Townend 1982, 1058. [113] Cass. Dio 63.28.4, trans. Earnest Cary (LCL).

[114] For a different interpretation of these words, 'What an artisan I am in my dying!', referring to the 'artisanal' activities he is now supervising, see Champlin 2003, 51. See also Connors 1994, 230.

[115] On the function of the *ultima verba* in Suetonius, see Gugel 1977, 95–103, on Nero at 99–100. On the Roman genre of *exitus illustrium virorum*, see Lounsbury 1987, 65, with further refs. 152–3 (n. 11), and below, Ch. 5.6.

[116] Lounsbury 1987, 71, 79, reads *haec est fides* as sarcastic. On that interpretation, Nero is aware of the treachery and thus, in a manner, in control of the situation.

[117] On Augustus' death described by Suetonius as the paradigmatic death of a good emperor, see Wardle 2007, concluding (461): 'Augustus dies respected and accompanied by friends, family and spouse; his words reveal a consciousness of his achievement expressed with admirable modesty and an appropriate feeling for his wife; assured of his future divinity, he shows perfect *constantia* in the face of death.' Augustus in his death surpasses, as Wardle notes (460), all his main rivals: Cyrus, Socrates, and Alexander.

[118] The literary topos 'the shameful death of the bad emperor' is investigated by Arand 2002; on Nero, 73–7, 112–17, 223–5, 297. Scheid 1984 too places our description in its rhetorical 'mort-du-tyran' context.

appearance, literary (and other artistic) interests, reactions to his death. The physical portrayal begins with a sentence crammed with concrete description (51):

> He was about the average (*iusta*) height, his body spotted and malodorous, his hair light blond, his features regular (*pulcher*) rather than attractive (*venustus*), his eyes grey-blue and rather weak, his neck thick, his belly protruding, his legs very thin, his health good.[119]

It then continues in a freer form, providing scattered information about his few periods of illness (three in fourteen years) and his 'shameless' hair arrangements and dressing habits. The physical description proper is interesting for several reasons.[120] It has counterparts in all the other Imperial Lives, sometimes much more detailed (in particular, *Augustus* 79–80); but only in one more case, *Domitian* (18), is it placed after the emperor's death, as a kind of retrospect.[121] Some components are standard (bodily constitution, head, and face), but otherwise only the more remarkable features are selected for mention (such as Nero's thick neck and protruding belly).

It is doubtful that Suetonius had any kind of precedents in Hellenistic biography for this habit, at least nothing on this scale.[122] The similarity with the description of Aesop at the beginning of his Life is obvious (above, Ch. 3.2); but that description may itself belong to the post-Hellenistic elements of the composite work. Rather than looking for models, we should probably see Suetonius' descriptions as another instance of his cataloguing of biographical facts of various kinds. Technically, he has no doubt been helped, even inspired, by the physiognomical literature that flourished in the Early Empire.[123] But we have no clear indication that Suetonius meant his own descriptions to be revealing of character, in the manner of the physiognomists proper. For example, even if weak eyesight is sometimes supposed to indicate cowardice and thin legs femininity,[124]

[119] The Latin expresses it all in a series of qualitative ablatives: *Statura fuit prope iustâ, corpore maculoso et fetido, subflavo capillo, vultu pulchro magis quam venusto, oculis caesis et hebetioribus, cervice obesa, ventre proiecto, gracillimis cruribus, valitudine prospera.*

[120] See Bradley 1978, 281–4 (with further refs.); Barton 1994, 57–8.

[121] For a convenient collection of the physical descriptions, see Carrié 2006, 206–8, who follows the habit through later Roman historians and Malalas.

[122] For physical descriptions in the Hellenistic fragments, see Misener 1924, 107–9.

[123] E.g., the sophist Polemon of Laodicea (ca. AD 88–144), author of a book *On Physiognomy*, was a contemporary of Suetonius and associated with the imperial court from Trajan to Antoninus Pius; see Evans 1969, 11–15, 51–3; Gleason 1995, 29–81; Swain 2007, 125–201, 206.

[124] The examples from Bradley 1978, 283–4, with textual references to Polemon's *On Physiognomy*. See also Misener 1924, 118: 'These descriptions have no physiognomical significance, although the language recalls the technical vocabulary of the handbooks.'

it seems more likely that Suetonius just gives as accurate a description as possible of Nero, depending on the verbal or pictorial sources available to him. Yet, in his selection of what 'extra' bodily features to mention, in addition to the basic ones, his view of the emperor's character may shine through: the particularly depraved ones tend to have both thin legs and a belly, like Nero.[125]

The section on Nero's education and literary interests (52) is notable for the defence Suetonius offers of the young emperor's genuine poetic talents:

> He wrote poems gladly and without effort, and did not, as some think, publish the work of others as his own. I have had access to notebooks and papers with some well-known verses of his, written in his own hand and in such a wise that it was perfectly evident that they were not copied or taken down from another's dictation, but worked out exactly as one writes when thinking and creating (*plane quasi a cogitante atque generante exaratos*). For there were many instances of words deleted or erased or written above the line (*et deleta et inducta et superscripta*).

Such moments show Suetonius the scholar-biographer at his best (and closest to modern biographical ideals). He is an independent mind; he traces new evidence to refute rumours or common opinion; and any bias he might have against one emperor or other does not prevent him from presenting the evidence he finds, *pro et contra*.

About Nero, he has mostly found negative facts to record, and is perhaps also (as suggested above) guilty of some manipulation in his selection – he was definitely not kindly disposed to the man and his way of playing the emperor. But it is another sign of Suetonius' basic impartiality (or his wish to make that impression) that the Life still ends on a rather positive note. In spite of the 'great public joy' following Nero's death, his tomb was 'for a long time' decorated with flowers, statues of him were displayed, and his edicts circulated by his Roman supporters. He was especially popular in Parthia, where, says Suetonius (57) – for once alluding to personal recollection – 'twenty years later, when I was a young man (*adulescente me*), a person of obscure origin appeared, who boasted that he was Nero, and the name was still in such favour with the Parthians that they gave him vigorous support and could scarcely be made to surrender him'.

Suetonius' art and historicity have been very differently assessed through the ages.[126] While he was admired and imitated in the Renaissance and

[125] Stok 1995, 127–8. Stok, 113–16, discusses various proposals to situate Suetonius' descriptions: Alexandrian tradition (Leo 1901), physiognomic theory (Evans 1969, 51–6), 'realism' with some tendency towards either satirical impressionism or idealization (Gascou 1984, 598–614). Stok himself opts for non-technical physiognomic interest in medicine and philosophy.

[126] See Steidle 1963, 1–2; Lounsbury 1987, 1–26; Barton 1994, 48–50; Bowersock 2010.

Baroque epochs,[127] his reputation was poor among classical scholars from the middle of the nineteenth century and far into the second half of the twentieth. Historians found him wanting in source criticism and had little understanding for his criteria of selection: his omissions, more than his factual errors, provoked adverse judgements. It was mostly the larger historical perspectives that were found missing.[128] That Suetonius addressed himself to a contemporary audience well informed in historical matters was not taken properly into account. His style too was subjected to severe criticism. Eduard Norden, who devoted just a footnote to Suetonius in his magisterial survey of Greek and Latin artistic prose (*Kunstprosa*), found three words sufficient to characterize his style: *Sueton schreibt farblos*, 'Suetonius' style is colourless' (overlooking the graphic details that precisely lend colour to his style).[129] He was considered a scholar, not a real writer.[130] One senses who is the 'real writer': Suetonius constantly suffers from being compared, often unconsciously, to his contemporary Tacitus, as Cornelius Nepos has suffered from writing in the same age as Cicero.

Yet, by judging Suetonius on his own terms and those of his times, a more balanced appreciation has gradually emerged.[131] *A priori*, it is not very likely that the high official and chief secretary at the courts of Trajan and Hadrian, in this age of rhetoric, was himself a poor writer. His 'businesslike' style, it is now argued, is a rhetorical disguise to inspire confidence. His authentic-looking details are stock ingredients to produce *enargeia*, vividness or 'presence'. He conceals his art, and it demands careful analysis to find the hidden connections and the subtle ordering of words or events. Much that was immediately appreciated by his contemporaries will necessarily escape us. These new insights, it is true, do not place Suetonius on a par with Tacitus as a literary artist or historical thinker; but they make him a respectable author who knew perfectly well what he was doing – and whose successful afterlife is both understandable and justified.

Late Antiquity saw Suetonius' method of writing Imperial history through its emperors setting a fashion. In the early third century, Marius Maximus, a Roman senator and official, produced a series of another twelve *Vitae principum*, covering the emperors from Nerva to Elagabalus (AD 96 to 222).[132] The work is lost, but its successor, the *Historia Augusta*, 'Augustan History', has survived. This series of Lives of the emperors from

[127] See Lounsbury 1987, x, 41–61, 147–51. [128] See, e.g., Syme 1980, 118–27.
[129] Norden 1909:1, 387–8 n. 1. [130] See Lounsbury 1987, 3 and Barton 1994, 59.
[131] See, in particular, Steidle 1963, Lounsbury 1987, and Barton 1994; the following remarks are indebted to these three works.
[132] See Syme 1968, 89–93, and 1971, 113–34; Birley 1997.

Hadrian to Numerianus and Carinus (AD 117 to 285) purports to have been written by six different authors working in the reigns of Diocletian and Constantine (to whom parts of the work are dedicated). This is no doubt a fiction: most scholars now set the date of composition close to the year 400, and behind the whole may hide a philologist, antiquarian, and *grammaticus* of pagan Rome[133] – that is, a figure not unlike Suetonius, not his equal as a scholar, but endowed with an irreverent mind and considerable creative imagination. Suetonius' truthfulness is praised in the text (*Probus* 2.7); several of the Lives, in particular that of *Antoninus Pius* by 'Julius Capitolinus', are structured according to the Suetonian scheme; and there are a number of physical descriptions of emperors in the manner of Suetonius.[134] Two more fourth-century works of *Caesars* should be mentioned. The *Liber de Caesaribus* of Aurelius Victor is not another Suetonius *continuatus*, but a short historical compendium starting back with Augustus and leading up to the author's own time. Suetonius is an important source for the earlier Lives, though presumably only indirectly; there are no obvious traces of his biographical method.[135] Nor is there, reasonably enough, any such formal influence in the versified *Caesars* of the statesman and prolific poet Ausonius (ca. 310–94), covering (in the extant version) Caesar to Elagabalus; but Suetonius is suitably honoured in the prefatory lines as the inventor of the genre.

The Middle Ages, however, seems to have been a less Suetonian period in biography than has sometimes been maintained. That he was *the* model for late antique and medieval Lives of saints, such as Pontius' *St Cyprian*, Sulpicius Severus' *St Martin of Tours*, and Possidius' *St Augustine*, has been shown to be a great exaggeration.[136] Some influence, direct or indirect, from Suetonian Lives may be found in these texts, but the main features, such as the arrangement of the material *per species*, are absent. This is hardly remarkable, since the account of a saint's life demands a very different structure from that of a Roman emperor. In Byzantium, the Roman tradition of Imperial Lives was not continued – the only exception being Constantine Porphyrogenitus' Life of his grandfather Basil I (tenth century) – and neither Suetonius nor the *Historia Augusta* was ever translated into Greek.[137] But when, at the Carolingian court in ninth-century Aachen,

[133] See discussion in Syme 1968, 176–210, and, on date and social setting, Johne 1976.

[134] For the physical descriptions, see Carrié 2006, 198, 208–10.

[135] On Victor's sources, see discussion in Bird 1984, 16–23. *De Caesaribus* is available in an annotated English translation by Bird 1994 and a bilingual edition by Groß-Albenhausen and Fuhrmann 2009.

[136] See Luck 1964, English version 2000b; Townend 1967, 97.

[137] On Imperial biography in Byzantium, see Schreiner 2002.

the great king's life is to be written, a manuscript of Suetonius' *Caesars* is brought from the library at Fulda and his *Augustus* is chosen by Einhard as the tacit undertext for his *Vita Karoli Magni*, 'Life of Charlemagne'.[138] However, this most famous political biography of the Middle Ages seems to have been an exception: neither before nor after was Suetonius similarly used as a direct model for a ruler's Life.[139] It may be added as a curiosity that the detailed physical description of the king, which Einhard dutifully includes (22), is a kind of collage of the corresponding descriptions of the ancient Roman emperors in Suetonius. Even Nero contributes some parts to the Carolingian body, his *cervix obesa* and *venter proiectior*, 'thick neck' and 'somewhat protruding belly'!

[138] See Townend 1967, 98–106; Berschin 1991, 209–16; Bowersock 1998, 209.

[139] Berschin 1991, 219–20. It has recently been suggested, however, that the thirteenth-century Icelandic compilation *Heimskringla* by Snorri Sturluson owes much of its biographical structure (rubric style, etc.) ultimately to Suetonius, see Meldahl, forthcoming. Notably, it is maintained in Appendix 1 that the description of the assassination of Haakon Sigurdsson (Hâkon Jarl) in 995 – he was killed by his own thrall while hiding in a pigsty – is modelled on the death of Nero.

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