LRB

Vol. 16 No. 8 · 28 April 1994

Stage Emperor

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Reflections of Nero: Culture, History and Representation
edited by Ják Elsner and Jamie Masters.
Duckworth, 239 pp., £35, January 1994, 0 7156 2479 2

When Vespasian had put an end at last to the eighteen months of confusion and war that followed the death of Nero, he immediately set about undoing the reign of his predecessor, in an effort to wipe out its traces. The Senate had already voted a *damnatio memoriae*, demanding the erasure of all mention of Nero's name from inscriptions throughout the Empire. His few achievements and many projects, some of them well on the way to completion, were promptly cancelled. His magnificent but still unfinished palace, known as the House of Gold, was dismantled, and the spaces it had occupied were turned over to the people. The artificial lake of its landscape garden was drained and work started on the first stage of a monument to the new dynasty, the huge Flavian amphitheatre. The Colossus of Nero, a gigantic portrait statue which had stood 120 feet high in the palace's vestibule, was cleansed of the tyrant's offending features, and carried upright through the city to stand at the eponymous arena's side. Those same features remained on coins already in circulation, of course, but, according to the philosopher Epictetus, they were avoided wherever possible; in fact, if someone noticed Nero's head among coins offered in payment he would shout out: 'Take it away! It's decayed and rotten! It's not acceptable!'

Considering the uses to which his memory would be put in the ensuing decades and centuries, there must have been times when Nero's ghost wished Vespasian's efforts to oblivionise him had been more successful. Instead, like some antique precursor of Elvis, Nero enjoyed a unique and quite extraordinary afterlife. It began shortly after his death, when images of him dressed in the *toga praetex-tata* appeared on the speakers' platform in the Forum, placed there by unseen hands, and edicts began to circulate under his name in which the recently despatched Princeps claimed to be still alive, planning his return and the destruction of his enemies. The stories of his survival were widely believed and seemed to be justified when a man bearing an extraordinary likeness to the Emperor, and sharing his facility with the lyre, disembarked on the little Aegean island of Cythnos and proceeded to capture it with a small band of deserters and slaves, as a first step to regaining his usurped dominions. This Nero was quickly murdered by the local governor, but more 'false Neros' sprang up in his place over the next twenty years, on each occasion throwing the eastern half of the Empire into a turmoil of rumour and unrest. And when the last of these pretenders was dealt with, it still did not put an end to the stories. Well into the next century, the showpiece orator 'Golden Mouth' Dio claimed in his 21st discourse, 'to this day all men do wholeheartedly believe that Nero is still

living.' Three hundred years later, in the time of Jerome and Augustine, stories were still going around that Nero was alive and ready at any time to make a reappearance.

At this late date, however, there was much more involved in Nero's *nachleben* than the prospect of a comeback concert tour. The tyrant's return had taken on eschatological proportions. This tradition began early in Jewish and Christian circles. The interpolations which Jewish scribes wrote into the text of the pagan *Oracles of the Sibyl* depict Nero as a fugitive from Italy who has fled without trace across the Euphrates. From there he would return at the head of tens of thousands to destroy Rome and the whole world. Whether the writer of the Book of Revelation had Nero in mind as the Beast of the Apocalypse has been hotly debated for centuries, but certainly several early Christian writers explicitly identified him as the Antichrist, and one enterprising German scholar in the 19th century counted up the numerical values in the letters NERO KESAR transliterated into Hebrew, and arrived at the suggestive figure of 666.

In the Middle Ages. Nero seems to have been removed from this exalted position of Antichrist and demoted to the ranks of lesser devils. A local deputation to Pope Pascal II in the year 1000 complained that a 'malevolent tree' had appeared on the site of Nero's tomb on the Pincian Hill, providing a gathering point for the evil spirits fostered by his corpse, who assumed the form of crows. It took a solemn procession, an exorcism and the intervention of the Madonna before the area was made safe and the church of Santa Maria del Popolo could be built in the same place. We get occasional snapshots of what Nero was up to in the Infernal Years from clerical handbooks. One account has him bathing in a seething pool of molten gold, from where he calls money-loving lawyers to join him as they pass. Poor Tom's ravings in *King Lear* mention Nero as 'an angler in the Lake of Darkness'.

In Greek the letters of Nero's name came to 1005, which happened to be the same total as the letters of 'murdered his own mother'. It was for this crime above all that he was known to later generations. In the medieval retelling the crime of matricide became a parable of womb envy, or a fable of how scientific curiosity subverts nature and produces monsters. In a story found in more than one account, Nero has his mother killed just so that he can cut her up and look inside her belly to see where he came from. When the autopsy is performed and he sees for himself his humble mortal origins, it rouses him to the greatest contempt, which he expresses by pissing over the corpse. At the same time he resolves to give birth himself and orders his court physicians to do whatever is necessary. Unable to defy nature, they give him a potion that causes his stomach to swell until he vomits up a big fat frog, 'hideously ugly and richly nourished on human flesh and blood'. The Emperor promptly executes the physicians, but treats the frog like a prince, placing it in a precious bowl and feeding it royal delicacies.

Later generations ceased to see Nero in quite such grotesque terms, but he easily maintained his position in the top ten of evil rulers, while earlier rivals, like Nimrod and Domitian, or Phalaris, who roasted others but not Christians, fell into favour or out of the mind's eye. For historians, writing an account of Nero's reign against such a background of vilification has never been easy. The usual approach has been to sift through Tacitus, Suetonius and Dio Cassius, assessing each of the anecdotes of tyranny on often arbitrary scales of plausibility and throwing out the more outlandish or more hackneyed tales, leaving nonetheless a fat dossier of accepted atrocities from which to construct a cogent prosecution.

The latest scholarly field trip into Nero's boudoir comes in the form of 13 essays on the man and his image from a group of young Classicists and historians most of whom earned their academic colours in Cambridge in the Eighties, a decade more familiar than most perhaps with examples of tyranny and excess. Their approaches to Nero differ, but most of them are on vacation from the Thesis or the Book and clearly out to have a good time. A sense of frivolity is the most notable feature of the essays, a perverse enjoyment of all those aspects of Nero's reign that earlier scholars saw as an embarrassment or a distraction. Instead of treating the stories of his self-indulgence as an impediment that has to be circumvented to get at the 'True Nero' behind the purple smoke, the anecdotal is embraced wholeheartedly. We begin with a marvellous account of Nero's cinematic career from Maria Wyke, and continue with Nero's dinner parties, his performances on stage, his implicit or explicit appearances in literature, and his building programme.

Emily Gowers's essay 'Persius and the Decoction of Nero' is a virtuoso example of this approach, a brilliant cadenza on the imagery and language of 'distillation' in Nero's biography and Neronian literature. It's the season of the dog-star in sweaty Rome. Nero's Colossus rises as high as noon over the city. But this is no slow-motion Arcadia out of Virgil's *Eclogues*. Everything is done in feverish haste, as if the regime's premature termination can be seen impending from the start. The Princeps is a young man but he cannot wait for the festivals and musical competitions to come round again in four or five years' time and hastens to bring them forward. This sense of precipitous foreshortening is manifest above all in the extinctions which spatter his reign. As Roland Barthes pointed out, deaths don't just accumulate in Tacitus' narrative of Nero's reign, they seem to multiply and proliferate, as if racing to some kind of baroque finale. The typical murder attempted by this thespian prince is the staged accident: the collapsible boat, the unstable ceiling or the poisoned mushroom; but baths too feature strongly. Some take their life in their own hands and slit their wrists in a warm tub. Others, like the Empress Octavia and the philosopher Seneca, simply perspire and expire, overcome by the steam.

The imagery of heat is not simply a mirage created in the minds of fevered scholars. Although the old idea that the 'angler in the Lake of Darkness' actually instituted some kind of monarchy *du soleil* is no longer fashionable, there is no question that he sidled up to solar divinity whenever possible, and enjoyed the association at least as much as Louis Quatorze. Sycophantic writers compared him to the god of light and on his later coins he appears with sun-beams emanating from his crown, and with an abnormally plump Apollo strumming the lyre on the reverse. In fawning Greece he was hailed as 'New Sun', and at Aphrodisias in Turkey he was associated with the cult of Helios. The Colossus itself was built in imitation of the famous monument the Rhodians erected at the entrance to their harbour in honour of the Sun, and once Nero's features had been effaced, his successors, anxious not to waste an opportunity to win divine favour, added this Titan too to his collection.

Playing at Apollo or the Sun-god was only one of the roles this most theatrical of emperors assumed. To many citizens of Rome the fact that they had to put up with the tyrant's musical performances on top of everything else was the last straw. 'Orestes may have murdered his mother,' wrote the satirist Juvenal, 'but at least he never sang on stage.' One of the most striking passages in Suetonius' Life is where he describes the Emperor's nervousness before competition. He suffered terribly from stagefright and was in awe of the judges. He tried to be gracious to the other competitors, but couldn't contain his jealousy and abused them behind their backs. When he came to perform he treated his assessors with the utmost reverence and

obeyed the rules very strictly, never daring to clear his throat or use a handkerchief; not that he had any need to worry. No matter what went wrong during the performance he always seemed to win.

His audience was a captive one. ‘No one was allowed to leave the theatre during his recitals,’ observed Suetonius, ‘however pressing the reason. The gates were kept barred. Accounts of the reign describe women in the audience giving birth, men so bored by the music and predictable applause that they slipped discreetly down from the back wall, or pretended conspicuously to die so that they could be carried out for burial.’ So important in Nero’s own imagination was his role as an artist that in his last hours he seems to have forgotten that he was also an emperor. When he came finally to assess the impact his demise would have, he referred not to the fate of the first imperial dynasty, which he was bringing to an end, nor to the civil war that was about to eviscerate the Empire, but to his literary career: *Qualis artifex pereo*, he cried, ‘What craftsmanship dies with me.’

For the philhellene Nero, his poetry, especially his dramatic poetry, must have seemed above reproach, an act of piety even. The most eminent men had been involved in the dramatic festivals of Dionysus at Athens, not just the well-known tragedians but statesmen like Demosthenes and Pericles, and monarchs like Dionysius the Great of Syracuse. At Rome, on the other hand, there was no respectable tradition of sacred theatre, and, as Catharine Edwards points out, the status of the theatre was very different. Actors were classified along with gladiators and prostitutes as *infames*, ‘without reputation’. Usually such people were slaves or foreigners and a Roman citizen who joined their ranks jeopardised his status and his rights. At Rome, Nero’s highfalutin’ ventures into Hellenic drama fell into the wrong context and made him an easy target for satire. It can’t have helped when he chose to play such undignified roles as ‘Canace in childbirth’, as one source alleges.

Contemporaries were able to view the whole reign, and all its faults, through the lens of the Emperor’s theatrical performances. This was already something of a theme for the first imperial dynasty: even its founder Augustus had acknowledged on his deathbed that he was no more than a performer in a pageant, an apparently idle metaphor that contained a profound truth about the new regime. For after witnessing the assassination of Julius Caesar, Augustus had been very careful to avoid creating the institutions of a monarchy, cobbling together for himself a set of quasi-republican titles and extraordinary prerogatives, while leaving the core of the office entirely hollow and pretending the Principate as such didn’t exist. This meant that there was no throne for his successors to succeed to, no divine right to be passed on down the bloodline. Technically, the Principate could not be inherited, but only reproduced by the Senate on each occasion. With the concept of a dynastic monarchy so decisively compromised by a propaganda of denial, each new monarch was left simply to go through the Augustan motions. All the early emperors depended to some extent on impersonating rather than assuming power, therefore, but with Nero the theme of imitation seemed to define the Principate as never before. When he cut the first turf to inaugurate the Isthmus Canal, it was not perceived as a useful and practical measure to improve commerce and revive the dilapidated economy of Greece, but simply as a tyrannical gesture, an imitation of Xerxes’ notorious attempt to bore through Mt Athos during his invasion centuries before, a topos ever since of despotic megalomania. Even his excesses weren’t his own, but considered to be in imitation or emulation of his uncle Caligula, whose reincarnation some suspected he was.

Nero's words and deeds were reduced to gestures, their seriousness and significance fatally compromised by an invisible proscenium arch which seemed to frame his every move. To later writers he was a *scaenicus imperator*, a 'stage-emperor'. He played the Prince but never quite succeeded in being one. He seemed to occupy an uncertain space where the boundaries between the theatre and the world, representation and reality, were smudged and scuffed over. One story describes how, during a performance of *Hercules Distraught*, a young recruit on guard in the wings recognised his lord and master got up in rags and fetters as the part demanded and rushed on stage to rescue him. It was here in this overlapping space that imitations suddenly seemed to become too real, and the real evaporated into mere artifice, an ambivalence that gave a peculiar pungency to Nero's own variety of cruelty and decadence. For his benefit Afranius' play *The Fire* was made more vivid not only by having a real fire on stage but by filling the inferno with valuables the cast were allowed to keep. As a result, a hideous ancestor of the game show was born in Rome, and an old play was brought to life by actors risking life and limb for a chance to escape professional poverty. A ballet recounting the birth of the Minotaur likewise became suddenly more lifelike when the pantomime bull mounted one of the actors. And when, during a re-creation of the flight of Icarus, a young dancer plummeted before the royal box, it was with real blood that the imperial robes were spattered.

By far the most famous example of Nero's tyrannical inability to separate fantasy and reality, however, is the famous story of another fire, the Fire of Rome. The charge that he actually staged the conflagration himself may well be false, but the damaging rumour that he had fiddled while Rome burned achieved a currency and a credibility which has left it almost two thousand years later as the single most persistent image of his reign. What was so damaging about the anecdote, however, was not simply that it seemed to show that the Emperor couldn't have cared less about the fate of the metropolis, but that he had made a drama out of a crisis. The burning homes of his people had been used by him as nothing more than scenery, a hyper-realistic backdrop for a song he sang in full costume about the Fall of Ilium, the cries of the terrified citizens being reduced to nothing more than noises off, and the city itself in the moment of its greatest vulnerability treated like a two-bit actress with a walk-on part, an imitation Troy.

It was not only for the Emperor's pleasure, however, that the boundary between the theatre and the world opened up. The same space offered encouraging signs for those hoping for a fall, and opportunities for those in dissent. For an audience well-accustomed to be on the lookout for omens, trained to believe that the gods' own truth could appear suddenly in words spoken casually, Nero's theatrical career provided abundant foreshadowings of the future and revelations about the past. It can't have been coincidence that he had once played a man who married his mother and murdered his father (Oedipus), or that he numbered Orestes the matricide among his favourite roles. There was surely some significance in the fact that during one theatrical competition, while he was performing the role of a tragic king, the royal sceptre, symbol of office, had slipped from his grasp. Nero's Rome was a city of nods and winks and staged whispers. Too fearful for direct expression, opposition sought refuge in double-entendre. Instead of waiting for omens to come, the exhausted citizens manufactured their own. When Vindex's Gallic revolt seemed to sound the death-knell for the regime, people pretended to be having trouble with their slaves and cried out for 'someone to avenge me' (*vindex*). Others wrote on columns that the Emperor's singing seemed to have woken the cockerels (*galli*).

Any account of Nero's reign has to deal with this complex and confusing mixture of earnest and jest, reality and its simulation. The editors of *Reflections of Nero* and some of their contributors occasionally lapse into a too simplistic and rather old-fashioned approach to these images, one which sees art as separate from and oppositional to truth. If there is structure or symbolism in representations of Nero's tyranny, they seem to argue, the picture presented must be a false one and the ancient accounts can be discarded. But it is precisely that interface between art and reality, the impossibility of separating the two satisfactorily, which is so characteristic of accounts of the reign. There is certainly a case to be made that Nero's vilification has been overdone, that his actions have been sometimes misconstrued, but a more accurate portrait can only be constructed by a careful examination of the ancient picture, by exposing its inconsistencies and elucidating alternative readings, not by rejecting it out of hand at that first hint of artifice. Some aspects of the ancient tradition certainly provide a starting-point for a more positive image. There are hints of a five-year honeymoon period of good government, for example, and a lasting popularity among certain sections of the city's population, who made sure there were always flowers on his tomb, and among the Greeks, who set up honorary inscriptions in gratitude for the shortlived liberation of their country.

Plutarch, a contemporary of his and a Greek, tells a strange story about the tyrant's soul undergoing remodelling in the Underworld in order to be sent back above ground in a new incarnation. The matricidal viper seems at first the obvious choice for his fat form, and there is much pushing and pulling to force his recalcitrant spirit into the required dimensions. Work is interrupted, however, by a bright light and a voice: Nero has suffered enough and paid for his crimes; let him sing again in the shape of a frog.

Things are changing for Nero. There has always perhaps been an undercurrent of sympathy for the tyrant in decadent art. The libretto written for Monteverdi's *Nerone ovvero L'Incoronazione di Poppaea* by the libertine Giovanni Busenello controversially dared to give the tyrant a happy ending. But it was left to the modern era to witness the closest thing to a rehabilitation Nero's ghost is ever likely to enjoy. Out of the studios of Hollywood and Cinecittà he comes across not as menacing and evil but as merely callous and effete, a too-powerful buffoon, no match for the inhuman and fanatical villains the 20th century can put on the field. You can hardly imagine Hitler or Stalin or Pol Pot being used to advertise rayon boxer shorts as Nero was in a merchandising spin-off from the 1951 production of *Quo Vadis* ('eight *fiery* patterns *blazing* with colour'). For this rehabilitation the greatest thanks are probably owed to the casting director. With the irreproachably civilised Peter Ustinov representing him on the screen Nero's ghost could at last begin to rest in peace.