

Technologies of the Self

Michel Foucault

from *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*

I

CONTEXT OF STUDY

My objective for more than twenty-five years has been to sketch out a history of the different ways in our culture that humans develop knowledge about themselves: economics, biology, psychiatry, medicine, and penology. The main point is not to accept this knowledge at face value but to analyze these so-called sciences as very specific “truth games” related to specific techniques that human beings use to understand themselves.

As a context, we must understand that there are four major types of these “technologies,” each a matrix of practical reason: (1) technologies of production, which permit us to produce, transform, or manipulate things; (2) technologies of sign systems, which permit us to use signs, meanings, symbols, or signification; (3) technologies of power, which determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination, an objectivizing of the subject; (4) technologies of the self, which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.

These four types of technologies hardly ever function separately, although each one of them is associated with a certain type of domination. Each implies certain modes of training and modification of individuals, not only in the obvious sense of acquiring certain skills but also in the sense of acquiring certain attitudes. I wanted to show both their specific nature and their constant interaction. For instance, one sees the relation between manipulating things and domination in Karl Marx’s *Capital*, where every technique of production requires modification of individual conduct—not only skills but also attitudes.

Usually the first two technologies are used in the study of the sciences and linguistics. It is the last two, the technologies of domination and self, which have most kept my attention. I have attempted a history of the organization of knowledge with respect to both domination and the self. For example, I studied madness not in terms of the criteria of formal sciences but to show how a type of management of individuals inside and outside of asylums was made possible by this strange discourse. This contact between the technologies of domination of others and those of the self I call governmentality.

Perhaps I’ve insisted too much on the technology of domination and power. I am more and more interested in the interaction between oneself and others and in the technologies of individual domination, the history of how an individual acts upon himself, in the technology of self.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF TECHNOLOGIES OF THE SELF

[excerpted in this copy]

III

In my discussion of Plato’s *Alcibiades*, I have isolated three major themes: first, the relation between care for oneself and care for the political life; second, the relation between taking care of the self and defective education; and third, the relation between taking care of oneself and knowing oneself. Whereas we saw in the *Alcibiades* the close relation between “Take care of yourself” and “Know yourself,” taking care of yourself eventually became absorbed in knowing yourself.

We can see these three themes in Plato, also in the Hellenistic period, and four to five centuries later in Seneca, Plutarch, Epictetus, and the like. If the problems are the same, the solutions and themes are quite different and, in some cases, the opposite of the Platonic meanings.

First, to be concerned with self in the Hellenistic and Roman periods is not exclusively a preparation for political life. Care of the self has become a universal principle. One must leave politics to take better care of the self.

Second, the concern with oneself is not just obligatory for young people concerned with their education; it

is a way of living for everybody throughout their lives.

Third, even if self-knowledge plays an important role in taking care of oneself, it involves other relationships as well.

I want to discuss briefly the first two points: the universality of the care of the self independent of political life, and the care of the self throughout one's life.

1. A medical model was substituted for Plato's pedagogical model. The care of the self isn't another kind of pedagogy; it has to become permanent medical care. Permanent medical care is one of the central features of the care of the self. One must become the doctor of oneself.

2. Since we have to take care throughout life, the objective is no longer to get prepared for adult life, or for another life, but to get prepared for a certain complete achievement of life. This achievement is complete at the moment just prior to death. This notion of a happy proximity to death— of old age as completion—is an inversion of the traditional Greek values on youth.

3. Lastly, we have the various practices to which cultivation of self has given rise and the relation of self-knowledge to these.

In *Alcibiades I*, the soul had a mirror relation to itself, which relates to the concept of memory and justifies dialogue as a method of discovering truth in the soul. But, from the time of Plato to the Hellenistic age, the relationship between care of the self and knowledge of the self changed. We may note two perspectives.

In the philosophical movements of Stoicism in the imperial period there is a different conception of truth and memory, and another method of examining the self. First, we see the disappearance of dialogue and the increasing importance of a new pedagogical relationship—a new pedagogical game where the master/teacher speaks and doesn't ask questions and the disciple doesn't answer but must listen and keep silent. A culture of silence becomes more and more important. In Pythagorean culture, disciples kept silent for five years as a pedagogical rule. They didn't ask questions or speak up during the lesson, but they developed the art of listening. This is the positive condition for acquiring truth. The tradition is picked up during the imperial period, where we see the beginning of the culture of silence and the art of listening rather than the cultivation of dialogue as in Plato.

To learn the art of listening, we have to read Plutarch's treatise on the art of listening to lectures (*Peri tou akouein*). At the beginning of this treatise, Plutarch says that, following schooling, we have to learn to listen to *logos* throughout our adult life. The art of listening is crucial so you can tell what is true and what is dissimulation, what is rhetorical truth and what is falsehood in the discourse of the rhetoricians. Listening is linked to the fact that you're not under the control of the masters but you must listen to *logos*. You keep silent at the lecture. You think about it afterward. This is the art of listening to the voice of the master and the voice of reason in yourself.

The advice may seem banal, but I think it's important. In his treatise *On the Contemplative Life*, Philo of Alexandria describes banquets of silence, not debauched banquets with wine, boys, revelry, and dialogue. There is instead a teacher who gives a monologue on the interpretation of the Bible and a very precise indication of the way people must listen (*De Vita Cont.* 77). For example, they must always assume the same posture when listening. The morphology of this notion is an interesting theme in monasticism and pedagogy henceforth.

In Plato the themes of contemplation of self and care of self are related dialectically through dialogue. Now in the imperial period we have the themes of, on one side, the obligation of listening to truth and, on the other side, of looking and listening to the self for the truth within. The difference between the one era and the other is one of the great signs of the disappearance of the dialectical structure.

What was an examination of conscience in this culture, and how does one look at oneself? For the Pythagoreans, the examination of conscience had to do with purification. Since sleep was related to death as a kind of encounter with the gods, you had to purify yourself before going to sleep. Remembering the dead was an exercise for the memory. But in the Hellenistic and the early imperial periods, you see this practice acquiring new values and signification. There are several relevant texts: Seneca's *De Ira*, and *De Tranquillitate* and the beginning of Marcus Aurelius's fourth book of *Meditations*.

Seneca's *De Ira* (book 3) contains some traces of the old tradition. He describes an examination of conscience. The same thing was recommended by the Epicureans, and the practice was rooted in the Pythagorean tradition. The goal was the purification of the conscience using a mnemonic device. Do good things, have a good examination of the self, and a good sleep follows together with good dreams, which is contact with the gods.

Seneca seems to use juridical language, and it seems that the self is both the judge and the accused. Seneca is the judge and prosecutes the self so that the examination is a kind of trial. But if you look closer, it's rather different from a court. Seneca uses terms related not to juridical but to administrative practices, as when a

comptroller looks at the books or when a building inspector examines a building. Self-examination is taking stock. Faults are simply good intentions left undone. The rule is a means of doing something correctly, not judging what has happened in the past. Later, Christian confession will look for bad intentions.

It is this administrative view of his own life much more than the juridical, model that is important. Seneca isn't a judge who has to punish but a stock-taking administrator. He is a permanent administrator of himself, not a judge of his past. He sees that everything has been done correctly following the rule but not the law. It is not real faults for which he reproaches himself but rather his lack of success. His errors are of strategy, not of moral character. He wants to make adjustments between what he wanted to do and what he had done and reactivate the rules of conduct, not excavate his guilt. In Christian confession, the penitent is obliged to memorize laws but does so in order to discover his sins.

For Seneca it isn't a question of discovering truth in the subject but of remembering truth, recovering a truth which has been forgotten. Second, the subject doesn't forget himself, his nature, origin, or his supernatural affinity, but the rules of conduct, what he ought to have done. Third, the recollection of errors committed in the day measures the distinction between what has been done and what should have been done. Fourth, the subject is not the operating ground for the process of deciphering but is the point where rules of conduct come together in memory. The subject constitutes the intersection between acts which have to be regulated and rules for what ought to be done. This is quite different from the Platonic conception and from the Christian conception of conscience.

The Stoics spiritualized the notion of *anachoresis*, the retreat of an army, the hiding of an escaped slave from his master, or the retreat into the country away from the towns, as in Marcus Aurelius's country retreat. A retreat into the country becomes a spiritual retreat into oneself. It is a general attitude and also a precise act every day; you retire into the self to discover—but not to discover faults and deep feelings, only to remember rules of action, the main laws of behavior. It is a mnemotechnical formula.

IV

I have spoken of three Stoic techniques of self: letters to friends and disclosure of self; examination of self and conscience, including a review of what was done, of what should have been done, and comparison of the two. Now I want to consider the third Stoic technique, *askesis*, not a disclosure of the secret self but a remembering.

For Plato, one must discover the truth that is within one. For the Stoics, truth is not in oneself but in the *logoi*, the teaching of the teachers. One memorizes what one has heard, converting the statements one hears into rules of conduct. The subjectivization of truth is the aim of these techniques. During the imperial period, one couldn't assimilate ethical principles without a theoretical framework such as science, as for example in Lucretius's *De Rerum Naturae*. There are structural questions underlying the practice of the examination of the self every night. I want to underscore the fact that in Stoicism it's not the deciphering of the self, not the means to disclose secrecy, which is important; it's the memory of what you've done and what you've had to do.

In Christianity asceticism always refers to a certain renunciation of the self and of reality because most of the time your self is a part of that reality you have to renounce in order to get access to another level of reality. This move to attain the renunciation of the self distinguishes Christian asceticism.

In the philosophical tradition dominated by Stoicism, *askēsis* means not renunciation but the progressive consideration of self, or mastery over oneself, obtained not through the renunciation of reality but through the acquisition and assimilation of truth. It has as its final aim not preparation for another reality but access to the reality of this world. The Greek word for this is *paraskeuazō* ("to get prepared"). It is a set of practices by which one can acquire, assimilate, and transform truth into a permanent principle of action. *Aletheia* becomes *ethos*. It is a process of becoming more subjective.

What are the principle features of *askēsis*? They include exercises in which the subject puts himself in a situation in which he can verify whether he can confront events and use the discourses with which he is armed. It is a question of testing the preparation. Is this truth assimilated enough to become ethics so that we can behave as we must when an event presents itself?

The Greeks characterized the two poles of those exercises by the terms *meletē* and *gymnasia*. *Melete* means "meditation," according to the Latin translation, *meditatio*. It has the same root as *epimelesthai*. It is a rather vague term, a technical term borrowed from rhetoric. *Meletē* is the work one undertook in order to prepare a discourse or an improvisation by thinking over useful terms and arguments. You had to anticipate the real situation through

dialogue in your thoughts. The philosophical meditation is this kind of meditation: It is composed of memorizing responses and reactivating those memories by placing oneself in a situation where one can imagine how one would react. One judges the reasoning one should use in an imaginary exercise (“Let us suppose. . .”) in order to test an action or event (for example, “How would I react?”). Imagining the articulation of possible events to test how you would react—that’s meditation.

The most famous exercise of meditation is the *premeditatio mallorum* as practiced by the Stoics. It is an ethical, imaginary experience. In appearance it’s a rather dark and pessimistic vision of the future. You can compare it to what Husserl says about eidetic reduction.

The Stoics developed three eidetic reductions of future misfortune. First, it is not a question of imagining the future as it is likely to turn out but to imagine the worst which can happen, even if there’s little chance that it will turn out that way—the worst as certainty, as actualizing what could happen, not as calculation of probability. Second, one shouldn’t envisage things as possibly taking place in the distant future but as already actual and in the process of taking place. For example, imagining not that one might be exiled but rather that one is already exiled, subjected to torture, and dying. Third, one does this not in order to experience inarticulate sufferings but in order to convince oneself that they are not real ills. The reduction of all that is possible, of all the duration and of all the misfortunes, reveals not something bad but what we have to accept. It consists of having at the same time the future and the present event. The Epicureans were hostile to it because they thought it was useless. They thought it was better to recollect and memorize past pleasures in order to derive pleasure from present events.

At the opposite pole is *gymnasia* (“to train oneself”). While *meditatio* is an imaginary experience that trains thought, *gymnasia* is training in a real situation, even if it’s been artificially induced. There is a long tradition behind this: sexual abstinence, physical privation, and other rituals of purification.

Those practices of abstinence have other meanings than purification or witnessing demonic force, as in Pythagoras and Socrates. In the culture of the Stoics, their function is to establish and test the independence of the individual with regard to the external world. For example, in Plutarch’s *De Genio Socratis*, one gives oneself over to very hard sporting activities. Or one tempts oneself by placing oneself in front of many tantalizing dishes and then renouncing these appetizing dishes. Then you call your slaves and give them the dishes, and you take the meal prepared for the slaves. Another example is Seneca’s eighteenth letter to Lucilius. He prepares for a great feast day by acts of mortification of the flesh in order to convince himself that poverty is not an evil and that he can endure it.

Between these poles of training in thought and training in reality, *melete* and *gymnasia*, there are a whole series of intermediate possibilities. Epictetus provides the best example of the middle ground between these poles. He wants to watch perpetually over representations, a technique which culminates in Freud. There are two metaphors important from his point of view: the night watchman, who doesn’t admit anyone into town if that person can’t prove who he is (we must be “watchman” over the flux of thought), and the money changer, who verifies the authenticity of currency, looks at it, weighs and verifies it. We have to be money changers of our own representations of our thoughts, vigilantly testing them, verifying them, their metal, weight, effigy.

The same metaphor of the money changer is found in the Stoics and in early Christian literature but with different meanings. When Epictetus says you have to be a money changer, he means as soon as an idea comes to mind you have to think of the rules you must apply to evaluate it. For John Cassian, being a money changer and looking at your thoughts means something very different: It means you must try to decipher if, at the root of the movement which brings you the representations, there is or is not concupiscence or desire—if your innocent thought has evil origins; if you have something underlying which is the great seducer, which is perhaps hidden, the money of your thought.

In Epictetus there are two exercises: sophistic and ethical. The first are exercises borrowed from school: question-and-answer games. This must be an ethical game; that is, it must teach a moral lesson. The second are ambulatory exercises. In the morning you go for a walk, and you test your reactions to that walk. The purpose of both exercises is control of representations, not the deciphering of truth. They are reminders about conforming to the rules in the face of adversity. A pre-Freudian machine of censorship is described word for word in the tests of Epictetus and Cassian. For Epictetus, the control of representations means not deciphering but recalling principles of acting and thus seeing, through self-examination, if they govern your life. It is a kind of permanent self-examination. You have to be your own censor. The meditation on death is the culmination of all these exercises.

In addition to letters, examination, and askēsis, we must now evoke a fourth technique in the examination of the self, the interpretation of dreams. It was to have an important destiny in the nineteenth century, but it occupied a relatively marginal position in the ancient world. Philosophers had an ambivalent attitude toward the interpretation

of dreams. Most Stoics are critical and skeptical about such interpretation. But there is still the popular and general practice of it. There were experts who were able to interpret dreams, including Pythagoras and some of the Stoics, and some experts who wrote books to teach people to interpret their own dreams. There were huge amounts of literature on how to do it, but the only surviving dream manual is *The Interpretation of Dreams* by Artemidorus (second century A.D.). Dream interpretation was important because in antiquity the meaning of a dream was an announcement of a future event.

I should mention two other documents dealing with the importance of dream interpretation for everyday life. The first is by Synesius of Cyrene in the fourth century A.D. He was well known and cultivated. Even though he was not a Christian, he asked to be a bishop. His remarks on dreams are interesting, for public divination was forbidden in order to spare the emperor bad news. Therefore, one had to interpret one's own dreams; one had to be a self-interpreter. To do it, one had to remember not only one's own dreams but the events before and after. One had to record what happened every day, both the life of the day and the life of the night.

Aelius Aristides' *Sacred Discourses*, written in the second century, records his dreams and explains how to interpret them. He believed that in the interpretation of dreams we receive advice from the gods about remedies for illness. With this work, we are at the crossing point of two kinds of discourses. It isn't the writing of self's daily activities that is the matrix of the *Sacred Discourses* but the ritual inscription of praises to the gods that have healed one.

Self Writing
Michel Foucault
from *The Essential Works of Foucault*

These pages are part of a series of studies on “the arts of oneself,” that is, on the aesthetics of existence and the government of oneself and of others in Greco-Roman culture during the first two centuries of the empire.

The *Vita Antonii* of Athanasius presents the written notation of actions and thoughts as an indispensable element of the ascetic life. “Let this observation be a safeguard against sinning: let us each note and write down our actions and impulses of the soul as though we were to report them to each other; and you may rest assured that from utter shame of becoming known we shall stop sinning and entertaining sinful thoughts altogether. Who, having sinned, would not choose to lie, hoping to escape detection? Just as we would not give ourselves to lust within sight of each other, so if we were to write down our thoughts as if telling them to each other, we shall so much the more guard ourselves against foul thoughts for shame of being known. Now, then, let the written account stand for the eyes of our fellow ascetics, so that blushing at writing the same as if we were actually seen, we may never ponder evil. Molding ourselves in this way, we shall be able to bring our body into subjection, to please the Lord and to trample under foot the machinations of the Enemy.” Here, writing about oneself appears clearly in its relationship of complementarity with reclusion: it palliates the dangers of solitude; it offers what one has done or thought to a possible gaze; the fact of obliging oneself to write plays the role of a companion by giving rise to the fear of disapproval and to shame. Hence, a first analogy can be put forward: what others are to the ascetic in a community, the notebook is to the recluse. But, at the same time, a second analogy is posed, one that refers to the practice of askesis as work not just on actions but, more precisely, on thought: the constraint that the presence of others exerts in the domain of conduct, writing will exert in the domain of the inner impulses of the soul. In this sense, it has a role very close to that of confession to the director, about which John Cassian will say, in keeping with Evagrian spirituality, that it must reveal, without exception, all the impulses of the soul (*omnes cogitationes*). Finally, writing about inner impulses appears, also according to Athanasius’s text, as a weapon in spiritual combat. While the Devil is a power who deceives and causes one to be deluded about oneself (fully half of the *Vita Antonii* is devoted to these ruses), writing constitutes a test and a kind of touchstone: by bringing to light the impulses of thought, it dispels the darkness where the enemy’s plots are hatched. This text—one of the oldest that Christian literature has left us on the subject of spiritual writing—is far from exhausting all the meanings and forms the latter will take on later. But one can focus on several of its features that enable one to analyze retrospectively the role of writing in the philosophical cultivation of the self just before Christianity: its close link with companionship, its application to the impulses of thought, its role as a truth test. These diverse elements are found already in Seneca, Plutarch, Marcus Aurelius, but with very different values and following altogether different procedures.

No technique, no professional skill can be acquired without exercise; nor can the art of living, the *tekhne tou biou*, be learned without an *askesis* that should be understood as a training of the self by oneself. This was one of the traditional principles to which the Pythagoreans, the Socratics, the Cynics had long attached a great importance. It seems that, among all the forms taken by this training (which included abstinences, memorizations, self-examinations, meditations, silence, and listening to others), writing—the act of writing for oneself and for others—came, rather late, to play a considerable role. In any case, the texts from the imperial epoch relating to practices of the self placed a good deal of stress on writing. It is necessary to read, Seneca said, but also to write. And Epictetus, who offered an exclusively oral teaching, nonetheless emphasizes several times the role of writing as a personal exercise: one should “meditate” (*meletan*), write (*graphein*), train one-self (*gumnazein*): “May these be my thoughts, these my studies, writing or reading, when death comes upon me.” Or further: “Let these thoughts be at your command (*prokheiron*) by night and day: write them, read them, talk of them, to yourself and to your neighbor. . . if some so-called undesirable event should befall you, the first immediate relief to you will be that it was not unexpected.” In these texts by Epictetus, writing appears regularly associated with “meditation,” with that

exercise of thought on itself that reactivates what it knows, calls to mind a principle, a rule, or an example, reflects on them, assimilates them, and in this manner prepares itself to face reality. Yet one also sees that writing is associated with the exercise of thought in two different ways. One takes the form of a linear “series”: it goes from meditation to the activity of writing and from there to *gumnazein*, that is, to training and trial in a real situation—a labor of thought, a labor through writing, a labor in reality. The other is circular: the meditation precedes the notes which enable the rereading which in turn reinitiates the meditation. In any case, whatever the cycle of exercise in which it takes place, writing constitutes an essential stage in the process to which the whole *askesis* leads: namely, the fashioning of accepted discourses, recognized as true, into rational principles of action. As an element of self-training, writing has, to use an expression that one finds in Plutarch, an *ethopoietic* function: it is an agent of the transformation of truth into *ethos*.

This ethopoietic writing, such as it appears through the documents of the first and the second centuries, seems to have lodged itself out-side of two forms that were already well known and used for other purposes: the *hupomnemata* and the *correspondence*.

THE HUPOMNEMATA

Hupomnemata, in the technical sense, could be account books, public registers, or individual notebooks serving as memory aids. Their use as books of life, as guides for conduct, seems to have become a common thing for a whole cultivated public. One wrote down quotes in them, extracts from books, examples, and actions that one had witnessed or read about, reflections or reasonings that one had heard or that had come to mind. They constituted a material record of things read, heard, or thought, thus offering them up as a kind of accumulated treasure for subsequent rereading and meditation. They also formed a raw material for the drafting of more systematic treatises, in which one presented arguments and means for struggling against some weakness (such as anger, envy, gossip, flattery) or for overcoming some difficult circumstance (a grief, an exile, ruin, disgrace). Thus, when Fundamus requests advice for struggling against the agitations of the soul, Plutarch at that moment does not really have the time to compose a treatise in the proper form, so he will send him, in their present state, the *hupomnemata* he had written himself on the theme of the tranquility of the soul; at least this is how he introduces the text of the *Peri euthumias*. Feigned modesty? Doubtless this was a way of excusing the somewhat disjointed character of the text, but the gesture must also be seen as an indication of what these notebooks were—and of the use to make of the treatise itself, which kept a little of its original form.

These *hupomnemata* should not be thought of simply as a memory support, which might be consulted from time to time, as occasion arose; they are not meant to be substituted for a recollection that may fail. They constitute, rather, a material and a framework for exercises to be carried out frequently: reading, rereading, meditating, conversing with oneself and with others. And this was in order to have them, according to the expression that recurs often, *prokheiron, ad manum, in promptu*. “Near at hand,” then, not just in the sense that one would be able to recall them to consciousness, but that one should be able to use them, whenever the need was felt, in action. It is a matter of constituting a *logos bioethikos* for oneself, an equipment of helpful discourses, capable—as Plutarch says—of elevating the voice and silencing the passions like a master who with one word hushes the growling of dogs. And for that they must not simply be placed in a sort of memory cabinet but deeply lodged in the soul, “planted in it,” says Seneca, and they must form part of ourselves: in short, the soul must make them not merely its own but itself. The writing of the *hupomnemata* is an important relay in this subjectivation of discourse.

However personal they may be, these *hupomnemata* ought not to be understood as intimate journals or as those accounts of spiritual experience (temptations, struggles, downfalls, and victories) that will be found in later Christian literature. They do not constitute a “narrative of oneself”; they do not have the aim of bringing to the light of day the *arcana conscientiae*, the oral or written confession of which has a purificatory value. The movement they seek to bring about is the reverse of that: the intent is not to pursue the unspeakable, nor to reveal the hidden, nor to say the unsaid, but on the contrary to capture the already-said, to collect what one has managed to hear or read, and for a purpose that is nothing less than the shaping of the self.

The *hupomnemata* need to be resituated in the context of a tension that was very pronounced at the time. Inside a culture strongly stamped by traditionality, by the recognized value of the already-said, by the recurrence of discourse, by “citational” practice under the seal of antiquity and authority, there developed an ethic quite explicitly oriented by concern for the self toward objectives defined as: withdrawing into oneself, getting in touch with oneself, living with oneself, relying on oneself, benefitting from and enjoying oneself. Such is the aim of the

hupomnemata: to make one's recollection of the fragmentary *logos*, transmitted through teaching, listening, or reading, a means of establishing a relationship of oneself with oneself, a relationship as adequate and accomplished as possible. For us, there is something paradoxical in all this: how could one be brought together with oneself with the help of a timeless discourse accepted almost everywhere? In actual fact, if the writing of *hupomnemata* can contribute to the formation of the self through these scattered *logoi*, this is for three main reasons: the limiting effects of the coupling of writing with reading, the regular practice of the disparate that determines choices, and the appropriation which that practice brings about.

1. Seneca stresses the point: the practice of the self involves reading, for one could not draw everything from one's own stock or arm oneself by oneself with the principles of reason that are indispensable for self-conduct: guide or example, the help of others is necessary. But reading and writing must not be dissociated; one ought to "have alternate recourse" to these two pursuits and "blend one with the other." If too much writing is exhausting (Seneca is thinking of the demands of style), excessive reading has a scattering effect: "In reading of many books is distraction." By going constantly from book to book, without ever stopping, without returning to the hive now and then with one's supply of nectar—hence without taking notes or constituting a treasure store of reading—one is liable to retain nothing, to spread oneself across different thoughts, and to forget oneself. Writing, as a way of gathering in the reading that was done and of collecting one's thoughts about it, is an exercise of reason that counters the great deficiency of *stultitia*, which endless reading may favor. *Stultitia* is defined by mental agitation, distraction, change of opinions and wishes, and consequently weakness in the face of all the events that may occur; it is also characterized by the fact that it turns the mind toward the future, makes it interested in novel ideas, and prevents it from providing a fixed point for itself in the possession of an acquired truth. The writing of *hupomnemata* resists this scattering by fixing acquired elements, and by constituting a share of the past, as it were, toward which it is always possible to turn back, to withdraw. This practice can be connected to a very general theme of the period; in any case, it is common to the moral philosophy of the Stoics and that of the Epicureans—the refusal of a mental attitude turned toward the future (which, due to its uncertainty, causes anxiety and agitation of the soul) and the positive value given to the possession of a past that one can enjoy to the full and without disturbance. The *hupomnemata* contribute one of the means by which one detaches the soul from concern for the future and redirects it toward contemplation of the past.

2. Yet while it enables one to counteract dispersal, the writing of the *hupomnemata* is also (and must remain) a regular and deliberate practice of the disparate. It is a selecting of heterogeneous elements. In this, it contrasts with the work of the grammarian, who tries to get to know an entire work or all the works of an author; it also conflicts with the teaching of professional philosophers who subscribe to the doctrinal unity of a school. It does not matter, says Epictetus, whether one has read all of Zeno or Chrysippus; it makes little difference whether one has grasped exactly what they meant to say, or whether one is able to reconstruct their whole argument. The notebook is governed by two principles, which one might call "the local truth of the precept" and "its circumstantial use value." Seneca selects what he will note down for himself and his correspondents from one of the philosophers of his own sect, but also from Democritus and Epicurus.¹⁰ The essential requirement is that he be able to consider the selected sentence as a maxim that is true in what it asserts, suitable in what it prescribes, and useful in terms of one's circumstances. Writing as a personal exercise done by and for oneself is an art of disparate truth—or, more exactly, a purposeful way of combining the traditional authority of the already said with the singularity of the truth that is affirmed therein and the particularity of the circumstances that determine its use. "So you should always read standard authors; and when you crave a change, fall back upon those whom you read before. Each day acquire something that will fortify you against poverty, against death, indeed against other misfortunes as well; and after you have run over many thoughts, select one to be thoroughly digested that day. This is my own custom; from the many things which I have read, I claim some part for myself. The thought for today is one which I discovered in Epicurus; for I am wont to cross over even to the enemy's camp,—not as a deserter, but as a scout (*tanquam exploraton*)."

3. This deliberate heterogeneity does not rule out unification. But the latter is not implemented in the art of composing an ensemble; it must be established in the writer himself, as a result of the *hupomnemata*, of their construction (and hence in the very act of writing) and of their consultation (and hence in their reading and their rereading). Two processes can be distinguished. On the one hand, it is a matter of unifying these heterogeneous fragments through their subjectivation in the exercise of personal writing. Seneca compares this unification, according to quite traditional metaphors, with the bee's honey gathering, or the digestion of food, or the adding of numbers forming a sum: "We should see to it that whatever we have absorbed should not be allowed to remain unchanged, or it will be no part of us. We must digest it; otherwise it will merely enter the memory and not the

reasoning power [*in memoriam non in ingenium*]. Let us loyally welcome such foods and make them our own, so that something that is one may be formed out of many elements, just as one number is formed of several elements.” The role of writing is to constitute, along with all that reading has constituted, a “body” (*quicquid lectione collectum est, stilus nedigat in corpus*). And this body should be understood not as a body of doctrine but, rather—following an often-evoked metaphor of digestion—as the very body of the one who, by transcribing his readings, has appropriated them and made their truth his own: writing transforms the thing seen or heard “into tissue and blood” (*in vires et in sanguinem*). It becomes a principle of rational action in the writer himself.

Yet, conversely, the writer constitutes his own identity through this recollection of things said. In this same Letter 84—which constitutes a kind of short treatise on the relations between reading and writing— Seneca dwells for a moment on the ethical problem of resemblance, of faithfulness and originality. One should not, he explains, reshape what one retains from an author in such a way that the latter might be recognized; the idea is not to constitute, in the notes that one takes and in the way one restores what one has read through writing, a series of “portraits,” recognizable but “lifeless” (Seneca is thinking here of those portrait galleries by which one certified his birth, asserted his status, and showed his identity through reference to others). It is one’s own soul that must be constituted in what one writes; but, just as a man bears his natural resemblance to his ancestors on his face, so it is good that one can perceive the filiation of thoughts that are engraved in his soul. Through the interplay of selected readings and assimilative writing, one should be able to form an identity through which a whole spiritual genealogy can be read. In a chorus there are tenor, bass, and baritone voices, men’s and women’s tones: “The voices of the individual singers are hidden; what we hear is the voices of all together. . . I would have my mind of such a quality as this; it should be equipped with many arts, many precepts, and patterns of conduct taken from many epochs of history; but all should blend harmoniously into one.”

CORRESPONDENCE

Notebooks, which in themselves constitute personal writing exercises, can serve as raw material for texts that one sends to others. In return, the missive, by definition a text meant for others, also provides occasion for a personal exercise. For, as Seneca points out, when one writes one reads what one writes, just as in saying something one hears oneself saying it. The letter one writes acts, through the very action of writing, upon the one who addresses it, just as it acts through reading and rereading on the one who receives it. In this dual function, correspondence is very close to the *hupomnemata*, and its form is often very similar. Epicurean literature furnishes examples of this. The text known as the “Letter to Pythocles” begins by acknowledging receipt of a letter in which the student has expressed his affection for the teacher and has made an effort to “recall the [Epicurean] arguments” enabling one to attain happiness; the author of the reply gives his endorsement: the attempt was not bad; and he sends in return a text—a summary of Epicurus’s *Peri phuseos*—that should serve Pythocles as material for memorization and as a support for his meditation.

Seneca’s letters show an activity of direction brought to bear, by a man who is aged and already retired, on another who still occupies important public offices. But in these letters, Seneca does not just give him advice and comment on a few great principles of conduct for his benefit. Through these written lessons, Seneca continues to exercise himself, according to two principles that he often invokes: it is necessary to train oneself all one’s life, and one always needs the help of others in the soul’s labor upon itself. The advice he gives in Letter 7 constitutes a description of his own relations with Lucilius. There he characterizes the way in which he occupies his retirement with the twofold work he carries out at the same time on his correspondent and on himself: withdrawing into oneself as much as possible; attaching oneself to those capable of having a beneficial effect on oneself; opening one’s door to those whom one hopes to make better—“The process is mutual; for men learn while they teach.”

The letter one sends in order to help one’s correspondent—advise him, exhort him, admonish him, console him—constitutes for the writer a kind of training: something like soldiers in peacetime practicing the manual of arms, the opinions that one gives to others in a pressing situation are a way of preparing oneself for a similar eventuality. For example, Letter gg to Lucilius: it is in itself the copy of another missive that Seneca had sent to Marullus, whose son had died some time before. The text belongs to the “consolation” genre: it offers the correspondent the “logical” arms with which to fight sorrow. The intervention is belated, since Marullus, “shaken by the blow,” had a moment of weakness and “lapsed from his true self”; so, in that regard, the letter has an admonishing role. Yet for Lucilius, to whom it is also sent, and for Seneca who writes it, it functions as a principle of reactivation—a reactivation of all the reasons that make it possible to overcome grief, to persuade oneself that

death is not a misfortune (neither that of others nor one's own). And, with the help of what is reading for the one, writing for the other, Lucilius and Seneca will have increased their readiness for the case in which this type of event befalls them. The *consolatio* that should assist and correct Marullus is at the same time a useful *praemeditatio* for Lucilius and Seneca. The writing that aids the addressee arms the writer—and possibly the third parties who read it.

Yet it also happens that the soul service rendered by the writer to his correspondent is handed back to him in the form of “return advice”; as the person being directed progresses, he becomes more capable, in his turn, of giving opinions, exhortations, words of comfort to the one who has undertaken to help him. The direction does not remain one-way for long; it serves as a context for exchanges that help it become more egalitarian. Letter 34 already signals *this* movement, starting from a situation in which Seneca could nonetheless tell his correspondent: “I claim you for myself. . . I exhorted you, I applied the goad and did not permit you to march lazily, but roused you continually. And now I do the same; but by this time I am now cheering on one who is in the race and so in turn cheers me on.” And in the following letter, he evokes the reward for perfect friendship, in which each of the two will be for the other the continuous support, the inexhaustible help, that will be mentioned in Letter 109: “Skilled wrestlers are kept up to the mark by practice; a musician is stirred to action by one of equal proficiency. The wise man also needs to have his virtues kept in action; and as he prompts himself to do things, so he is prompted by another wise man.”

Yet despite all these points in common, correspondence should not be regarded simply as an extension of the practice of *hupomnemata*. It is something more than a training of oneself by means of writing, through the advice and opinions one gives to the other: it also constitutes a certain way of manifesting oneself to oneself and to others. The letter makes the writer “present” to the one to whom he addresses it. And present not simply through the information he gives concerning his life, his activities, his successes and failures, his good luck or misfortunes; rather, present with a kind of immediate, almost physical presence. “I thank you for writing to me so often; for you are revealing yourself to me (*te mihi ostendis*) in the only way you can. I never receive a letter from you without being in your company forthwith. If the pictures of our absent friends are pleasing to us. . . how much more pleasant is a letter, which brings us real traces, real evidence of an absent friend! For that which is sweetest when we meet face to face is afforded by the impress of a friend's hand upon his letter—recognition.”

To write is thus to “show oneself,” to project oneself into view, to make one's own face appear in the other's presence. And by this it should be understood that the letter is both a gaze that one focuses on the addressee (through the missive he receives, he feels looked at) and a way of offering oneself to his gaze by what one tells him about oneself. In a sense, the letter sets up a face-to-face meeting. Moreover Demetrius, explaining in *De elocutione* what the epistolary style should be, stressed that it could only be a “simple” style, free in its composition, spare in its choice of words, since in it each one should reveal his soul. The reciprocity that correspondence establishes is not simply that of counsel and aid; it is the reciprocity of the gaze and the examination. The letter that, as an exercise, works toward the subjectivation of true discourse, its assimilation and its transformation as a “personal asset,” also constitutes, at the same time, an objectification of the soul. It is noteworthy that Seneca, commencing a letter in which he must lay out his daily life to Lucilius, recalls the moral maxim that “we should live as if we lived in plain sight of all men,” and the philosophical principle that nothing of ourselves is concealed from god who is always present to our souls. Through the missive, one opens oneself to the gaze of others and puts the correspondent in the place of the inner god. It is a way of giving ourselves to that gaze about which we must tell ourselves that it is plunging into the depths of our heart (*in pectus intimum intrinsecere*) at the moment we are thinking.

The work the letter carries out on the recipient, but is also brought to bear on the writer by the very letter he sends, thus involves an “introspection”; but the latter is to be understood not so much as a decipherment of the self by the self as an opening one gives the other onto oneself. Still, we are left with a phenomenon that may be a little surprising, but which is full of meaning for anyone wishing to write a history of the cultivation of the self: the first historical developments of the narrative of the self are not to be sought in the direction of the “personal notebooks,” the *hupomnemata*, whose role is to enable the formation of the self out of the collected discourse of others; they can be found, on the other hand, in the correspondence with others and the exchange of soul service. And it is a fact that in the correspondence of Seneca with Lucilius, of Marcus Aurelius with Fronto, and in certain of Pliny's letters, one sees a narrative of the self develop that is very different from the one that could be found generally in Cicero's letters to his acquaintances: the latter involved accounting for oneself as a subject of action (or of deliberation for action) in connection with friends and enemies, fortunate and unfortunate events. In Seneca and Marcus Aurelius, occasionally in Pliny as well, the narrative of the self is the account of one's relation to oneself; there one sees two elements stand out clearly, two strategic points that will later become the privileged objects of what could be called

the writing of the relation to the self: the interferences of soul and body (impressions rather than actions), and leisure activity (rather than external events); the body and the days.

1. Health reports traditionally are part of the correspondence. But they gradually increased in scope to include detailed description of the bodily sensations, the impressions of malaise, the various disorders one might have experienced. Sometimes one seeks to introduce advice on regimen that one judges useful to one's correspondent. Sometimes, too, it is a question of recalling the effects of the body on the soul, the reciprocal action of the latter, or the healing of the former resulting from the care given to the latter. For example, the long and important Letter 78 to Lucilius: it is devoted for the most part to the problem of the "good use" of illnesses and suffering; but it opens with the recollection of a grave illness that Seneca had suffered in his youth, which was accompanied by a moral crisis. Seneca relates that he also experienced, many years before, the "catarrh," the "short attacks of fever" Lucilius complains of: "I scorned it in its early stages. For when I was still young, I could put up with hardships and show a bold front to illness. But I finally succumbed, and arrived at such a state that I could do nothing but snuffle, reduced as I was to the extremity of thinness. I often entertained the impulse of ending my life then and there; but the thought of my kind old father kept me back." And what cured him were the remedies of the soul. Among them, the most important were his friends, who "helped me greatly towards good health; I used to be comforted by their cheering words, by the hours they spent at my bedside, and by their conversation." It also happens that the letters retrace the movement that has led from a subjective impression to an exercise of thought. Witness that meditation walk recounted by Seneca: "I found it necessary to give my body a shaking up, in order that the bile which had gathered in my throat, if that was the trouble, might be shaken out, or, if the very breath had become, for some reason, too thick, that the jolting, which I have felt was a good thing for me, might make it thinner. So I insisted on being carried longer than usual, along an attractive beach, which bends between Cumae and Servilius Vatia's country house, shut in by the sea on one side and the lake on the other, just like a narrow path. It was packed under foot, because of a recent storm.... As my habit is, I began to look about for something there that might be of service to me, when my eyes fell upon the villa which had once belonged to Vatia." And Seneca tells Lucilius what formed his meditation on retirement—solitude and friendship.

2. The letter is also a way of presenting oneself to one's correspondent in the unfolding of everyday life. To recount one's day—not because of the importance of the events that may have marked it, but precisely even though there was nothing about it apart from its being like all the others, testifying in this way not to the importance of an activity but to the quality of a mode of being—forms part of the epistolary practice: Lucilius finds it natural to ask Seneca to "give an account of each separate day, and of the whole day too." And Seneca accepts this obligation all the more willingly as it commits him to living under the gaze of others without having anything to conceal: "I shall therefore do as you bid, and shall gladly inform you by letter what I am doing, and in what sequence. I shall keep watching myself continually, and—a most useful habit—shall review each day." Indeed, Seneca evokes this specific day that has gone by, which is at the same time the most ordinary of all. Its value is owing to the very fact that nothing has happened which might have diverted him from the only thing that is important for him: to attend to himself. "Today has been unbroken; no one has filched the slightest part of it from me." A little physical training, a bit of running with a pet slave, a bath in water that is barely lukewarm, a simple snack of bread, a very short nap. But the main part of the day—and this is what takes up the longest part of the letter—is devoted to meditating on the theme suggested by a Sophistic syllogism of Zeno's, concerning drunkenness.

When the missive becomes an account of an ordinary day, a day to oneself, one sees that it relates closely to a practice that Seneca discreetly alludes to, moreover, at the beginning of Letter 83, where he evokes the especially useful habit of "reviewing one's day": this is the self-examination whose form he had described in a passage of the *De Ira*. This practice—familiar in different philosophical currents: Pythagorean, Epicurean, Stoic—seems to have been primarily a mental exercise tied to memorization: it was a question of both constituting oneself as an "inspector of oneself," and hence of gauging the common faults, and of reactivating the rules of behavior that one must always bear in mind. Nothing indicates that this "review of the day" took the form of a written text. It seems therefore that it was in the epistolary relation—and, consequently, in order to place oneself under the other's gaze—that the examination of conscience was formulated as a written account of oneself: an account of the everyday banality, an account of correct or incorrect actions, of the regimen observed, of the physical or mental exercises in which one engaged. One finds a notable example of this conjunction of epistolary practice with self-examination in a letter from Marcus Aurelius to Fronto. It was written during one of those stays in the country which were highly recommended as moments of detachment from public activities, as health treatments, and as occasions for attending to oneself. In this text, one finds the two combined themes of the peasant life—healthy because it was

natural—and the life of leisure given over to conversation, reading, and meditation. At the same time, a whole set of meticulous notations on the body, health, physical sensations, regimen, and feelings shows the extreme vigilance of an attention that is intensely focused on oneself. “We are well. I slept somewhat late owing to my slight cold, which seems now to have subsided. So from five A.M. till nine I spent the time partly in reading some of Cato’s *Agriculture* and partly in writing not such wretched stuff, by heaven, as yesterday. Then, after paying my respects to my father, I relieved my throat, I will not say by gargling—though the word *gargarisso* is I believe, found in Novius and elsewhere—but by swallowing honey water as far as the gullet and ejecting it again. After easing my throat I went off to my father and attended him at a sacrifice. Then we went to luncheon. What do you think I ate? A wee bit of bread, though I saw others devouring beans, onions, and herrings full of roe. We then worked hard at grape-gathering, and had a good sweat, and were merry. . . . After six o’clock we came home.”

“I did but little work and that to no purpose. Then I had a long chat with my little mother as she sat on the bed... Whilst we were chattering in this way and disputing which of us two loved the one or other of you two the better, the gong sounded, an intimation that my father had gone to his bath. So we had supper after we had bathed in the oil-press room; I do not mean bathed in the oil-press room, but when we had bathed, had supper there, and we enjoyed hearing the yokels chaffing one another. After coming back, before I turn over and snore, I get my task done (*meum penso explico*) and give my dearest of masters an account of the day’s doings (*diei rationem meo suavissimo magistro reddo*) and if I could miss him more, I would not grudge wasting away a little more.”

The last lines of the letter clearly show how it is linked to the practice of self-examination: the day ends, just before sleep, with a kind of reading of the day that has passed; one rolls out the scroll on which the day’s activities are inscribed, and it is this imaginary book of memory that is reproduced the next day in the letter addressed to the one who is both teacher and friend. The letter to Fronto recopies, as it were, the examination carried out the evening before by reading the mental book of conscience.

It is clear that one is still very far from that book of spiritual combat to which Athanasius refers a few centuries later, in the *Life of Saint Antony*. But one can also measure the extent to which this procedure of self-narration in the daily run of life, with scrupulous attention to what occurs in the body and in the soul, is different from both Ciceronian correspondence and the *practice of hupomnemata*, a collection of things read and heard, and a support for exercises of thought. In this case—that of the *hupomnemata*—it was a matter of constituting oneself as a subject of rational action through the appropriation, the unification, and the subjectivation of a fragmentary and selected already-said; in the case of the monastic notation of spiritual experiences, it will be a matter of dislodging the most hidden impulses from the inner recesses of the soul, thus enabling oneself to break free of them. In the case of the epistolary account of oneself, it is a matter of bringing into congruence the gaze of the other and that gaze which one aims at oneself when one measures one’s everyday actions according to the rules of a technique of living.