

MICHEL FOUCAULT

# ETHICS

SUBJECTIVITY AND TRUTH

*Edited by*  
PAUL RABINOW

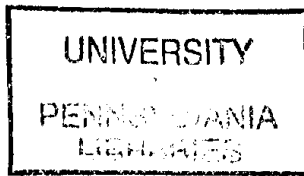
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## SELF WRITING

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**T**hese 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.”<sup>1</sup> 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 ascesis 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 *tekhnē tou biou*, be learned without an *askēsis* 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.<sup>2</sup> 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-

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self (*gumnazein*): "May these be my thoughts, these my studies, writing or reading, when death comes upon me."<sup>3</sup> 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."<sup>4</sup> 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 *askēsis* 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 *ēthos*.

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

THE HUPOMNĒMATA

*Hupomnēmata*, 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 *hupomnēmata* 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*.<sup>5</sup> 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 *hupomnēmata* 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 bioēthikos* 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.<sup>6</sup> 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 *hupomnēmata* is an important relay in this subjectivation of discourse.

However personal they may be, these *hupomnēmata* 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

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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 *hupomnēmata* 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, benefiting from and enjoying oneself. Such is the aim of the *hupomnēmata*: 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 *hupomnēmata* 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."<sup>7</sup> 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 con-

sequently 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.<sup>8</sup> The writing of *hupomnēmata* 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 *hupomnēmata* 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 *hupomnēmata* 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 Zenō 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.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> 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 explorator*]."<sup>11</sup>

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 *hupomnēmata*, 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."<sup>12</sup> The role of writing is to constitute, along with all that reading has constituted, a "body" (*quicquid lectione collectum est, stilus redigat 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."<sup>15</sup>

#### 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 *hupomnēmata*, 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 phuseōs*—that should serve Pythocles as material for memorization and as a support for his meditation.<sup>14</sup>

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 neces-

sary 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."<sup>15</sup>

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 99 to Lucilius: it is in itself the copy of another missive that Seneca had sent to Marullus, whose son had died some time before.<sup>16</sup> 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 correspon-

dent: "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."<sup>17</sup> 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."<sup>18</sup>

Yet despite all these points in common, correspondence should not be regarded simply as an extension of the practice of *hupomnēmata*. 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."<sup>19</sup>

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.<sup>20</sup> 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,"<sup>21</sup> 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 introspicere*) 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 *hupomnēmata*, 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.<sup>22</sup> 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."<sup>23</sup> 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 [in my lungs] 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."<sup>24</sup> 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 [him] 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.<sup>25</sup>

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*.<sup>26</sup> 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.”<sup>27</sup>

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*



## Self Writing

*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 *hupomnēmata*, a collection of things read and heard, and a support for exercises of thought. In this case—that of the *hupomnēmata*—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.

## NOTES

- 1 Saint Athanasius, *Vita Antonii: Vie et conduite de notre Saint-Père Antoine, écrite et adressée aux moines habitant en pays étranger, par notre Saint-Père Athanase, évêque d'Alexandrie*, trans. B. Lavaud (repub. Paris: Cerf, 1989), pp. 69-70 [*The Life of Saint Antony*, trans. Robert T. Meyer (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1950), §55, pp. 67-68].
- 2 Seneca, *Lettres à Lucilius*, trans. H. Nublot (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1945-64), vol. 3 (1957), bk. 11, let. 84, §1, p. 121 [*Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales, with an English translation by Richard M. Gummere* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1961), vol. 2, let. 84, p. 277].
- 3 Epictetus, *Entretiens*, trans. J. Souilhé (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1963), vol. 3, bk. 3, ch. 5: "A ceux qui quittent l'école pour raisons de santé," §11, p. 23 [*The Discourses and Manual*, trans. P. E. Matheson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1916), vol. 2, bk. 3: "Against those who make illness an excuse for leaving the lecture-room," p. 20].
- 4 *Ibid.*, bk. 3, ch. 24: "Qu'il ne faut pas s'émouvoir pour ce qui ne depend pas de nous," §103, p. 109 [ch. 24: "That We Ought Not Spend Our Feelings on Things Beyond Our Power," p. 99].
- 5 Plutarch, *De Tranquillitate*, 464e.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 465c.
- 7 Seneca, *Lettres*, vol. 1 (1945), bk. 1, let. 2, §5, p. 6 [vol. 1, let. 2, §5, p. 7].
- 8 *Ibid.*, vol. 2 (1947), bk. 5, let. 52, §§1-2, pp. 41-42 [vol. 1, let. 52, p. 345].
- 9 Epictetus, *Entretiens*, vol. 2, bk. 1, ch. 17: "De la Nécessité de la logique," §§11-14, p. 65 [vol. 1, bk. 1, ch. 17, p. 95: "That the Processes of Logic Are Necessary"].
- 10 Seneca, *Lettres*, vol. 1 (1945), bk. 1, lets. 2, §5, p. 6; 3, §6, p. 9; 4, §10, p. 12; 7, §11, pp. 21-22; 8, §§7-8, p. 24, etc. [vol. 1, lets. 2, §5, p. 9; 2, §6, p. 13; 4, §10, p. 19; 7, §11, pp. 35-37; 8, §§7-9, p. 41].
- 11 *Ibid.*, let. 2, §§4-5, p. 6 [vol. 1, let. 2, §§4-5, p. 9].

- 12 Ibid., vol. 3 (1957), bk. 11, let. 84, §§6-7, p. 123 [let. 84, §§6-7, p. 281].
- 13 Ibid., §§9-10, p. 124 [§§9-10, pp. 281-83].
- 14 *Lettre à Pythocles*, trans. A. Ernout, in Lucretius, *De Rerum natura: Commentaire par Alfred Ernout et Léon Robin* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1925), vol. 1, §§84-85, p. 87 ["Letter to Pythocles," in *Epicurus: The Extant Remains*, trans. Cyril Bailey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1926), p. 57].
- 15 Seneca, *Lettres*, vol. 1 (1945), bk. 1, let. 7, §8, p. 21 [vol. 1, let. 7, §8, p. 35].
- 16 Ibid., vol. 4 (1962), bk. 16, let. 99, pp. 125-34 [vol. 3, let. 99, pp. 129-49].
- 17 Ibid., vol. 1 (1945), bk. 4, let. 34, §2, p. 190 [vol. 1, let. 34, §2, p. 241].
- 18 Ibid., vol. 4 (1962), bk. 18, let. 109, §2, p. 190 [vol. 3, let. 109, §2, p. 255].
- 19 Ibid., vol. 1 (1945), bk. 4, let. 40, §1, p. 161 [vol. 1, let. 40, §1, pp. 263-65].
- 20 Demetrius of Phaleron, *De Elocutione* 4. §§223-25.
- 21 Seneca, *Lettres*, vol. 3 (1957), bk. 10, let. 83, §1, p. 110 [vol. 2, let. 84, §1, p. 259].
- 22 Pliny, The Younger, *Lettres*, bk. 3, let. 1, trans. A.-M. Guillemin (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1927), vol. 1, pp. 97-100 [Pliny, *Letters and Panegyricus*, trans. Betty Radice (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969), vol. 1, bk. 3, §1, pp. 159-63].
- 23 Seneca, *Lettres*, vol. 3 (1957), bk. 9, let. 78, §§1-4, pp. 71-72 [vol. 2, let. 78, §§1-4, pp. 181-83].
- 24 Ibid., vol. 2 (1947), bk. 6, let. 55, §§2-3, pp. 56-57, or also let. 57, §§2-3, p. 67 [vol. 1, let. 55, §§2-3, pp. 365-67, or also let. 57, §§2-3, pp. 383-85].
- 25 Ibid., vol. 3 (1957), bk. 10, let. 83, §§2-3, pp. 110-11 [vol. 2, let. 83, §§2-3, pp. 259-61].
- 26 Seneca, *De Ira: De la Colère*, trans. A. Bourgery, let. 36, §§1-2, in *Dialogues* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1922), vol. 1, pp. 102-103 [let. 36, §§1-2, in *Moral Essays*, trans. John W. Basore (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958), vol. 1, pp. 339-41].
- 27 Marcus Aurelius, *Lettres*, bk. 4, let. 6, trans. A. Cassan (Paris: Levasseur, 1830), pp. 249-51 [in *The Correspondence of Marcus Cornelius Fronto*, trans. C. R. Haines (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), vol. 1, p. 183].