

Writing the Self

Michel Foucault

Translated by Ann Hobart

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

Athanasius's *Vita Antonii* presents the written expression of actions and thoughts as an indispensable element of the ascetic life.

Here is one thing to observe to ensure that one does not sin. Let us each take note of and write down the actions and movements of our souls as though to make them mutually known to one another, and let us be sure that out of shame at being known, we will cease sinning and have nothing perverse in our hearts. Who, after all, consents to be seen when he sins, and when he has sinned does not prefer to lie to hide his fault. One would not fornicate in front of witnesses. By the same token, by writing our thoughts as if we had to communicate them mutually to one another, we will better keep ourselves from impure thoughts out of shame at having them known. May writing replace the looks of our companions in asceticism; blushing to write as well as to be seen, let us keep ourselves from every bad thought. Disciplining ourselves in this way, we can reduce the body to servitude and outsmart the enemy.¹

The "series of studies" of which Foucault speaks had been conceived initially as an introduction to *L'Usage des plaisirs* (*The History of Sexuality, Volume 2: The Use of Pleasure*) under the title *Le Souci de soi* (*The History of Sexuality, Volume 3: The Care of the Self*). This title having been retained for a new arrangement of the parts of *L'Usage des plaisirs*, a more general series of studies on governmentality was then planned with Éditions du Seuil under the title *Le Gouvernement de soi et des autres*.

1. Athanasius, *Vie et conduite de notre Père Saint Antoine*, in *Antoine Le Grand: Père des moines*, trans. Benoit Lavaud (Paris, 1943), pp. 69–70.

Self-writing clearly appears here in its complementary relation to an-choritism; it offsets the dangers of solitude; it exposes what one has done or thought to a possible gaze; the fact of being obliged to write fills the role of companion by inciting human respect and shame. One can thus posit a primary analogy: that which others are to the ascetic in his community the notebook will be to him in his solitude. But, at the same time, a second analogy is posited that refers to the practice of asceticism as work not only on actions but more precisely on thoughts. The constraint that the presence of others exerts in the domain of behavior, writing will exert in the domain of the interior movements of the soul. In this sense, it has a role very near to that of confession to the spiritual director in the Algerian line of spirituality, which Cassien will say must reveal, without exception, all movements of the soul (*omnes cogitationes*). Finally, the writing of interior movements also appears, according to the text of Athanasius, as a weapon of spiritual combat. Since the devil has the power to deceive and make one deceive oneself (a large portion of the *Vita Antonii* is dedicated to his ruses), writing constitutes a test and acts as a touchstone. In bringing to light the movements of thought, it dissipates the interior shadow where the snares of the enemy are laid. This text—one of the oldest that Christian literature has left us on this subject of spiritual writing—far from exhausts all the significations and forms that the latter will take later on. But one can draw from it several features that permit a retrospective analysis of the role of writing in the philosophical culture of the self just prior to Christianity: its close tie with apprenticeship; its applicability to movements of thought; its role as test of truth. These various elements are already to be found in the writing of Seneca, Plutarch, and Marcus Aurelius, but with very different values and following completely different procedures.

No technique, no professional skill can be acquired without exercise; nor can one learn the art of living, the *techne tou biou*, without an *askesis* that must be understood as a training of the self by the self. This was one of the traditional principles to which the Pythagoreans, the Socratics, and the Cynics had long attached great importance. Indeed it seems that among all the forms that this training took (and that included abstinences, memorizations, examinations of consciousness, meditations, silence, and listening to others), writing—the fact of writing for oneself and for others—came to play a considerable role rather late. In any case, the texts of the imperial period that refer to the practices of the self are devoted in large part to writing. One must read, Seneca said, but write as well.² And Epictetus, who however gave only oral teaching, insisted several times on the role of writing as personal exercise. One must "medi-

2. Seneca, lettre 84, *Lettres à Lucilius*, trans. Henri Noblot, ed. François Préchac, 5 vols. in 4 (Paris, 1945–62), 3:121; hereafter abbreviated *LL*.

tate" [*meletan*], write [*graphein*], train [*gumnazein*]; "may death take me while thinking, writing, reading this." Or again, "Keep these thoughts ready day and night [*prokheiron*]; write them down; read them; let them be the object of your conversations with yourself, with another . . . if one of those events that are called undesirable should happen to you, you will find yourself comforted by the thought that it was not unexpected."³ In these texts of Epictetus, writing is regularly associated with "meditation," with that exercise of thought on itself that reactivates what it knows, that makes present a principle, a rule, or an example, reflects on them, assimilates them, and thus prepares itself to confront the real. But one sees as well 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 in a real and taxing situation: work of thought, work through writing, work in reality. The other is circular; meditation precedes the notes that permit rereading, which in its turn revives meditation. In any case, in whatever cycle of practice it takes place, writing constitutes an essential step in the process to which all *askêsis* tends: to know the elaboration of received and recognized discourses as true in rational principles of action. As an element of the training of the self, writing has, to use an expression found in the writing of Plutarch, an *ethopoetic* function. It is an operator of transformation of truth into *êthos*.

This ethopoetic writing, such as it appears throughout the documents of the first and second centuries, seems to locate itself outside of two forms already known and used for other ends: *hupomnêmata* and *correspondence*.

Hupomnemata

Hupomnemata, in the technical sense, can be books of accounts, public registers, or personal notebooks to be used as memoranda. Their use as books of life or guides of conduct seems to have become a common thing among an entire cultivated public. They contained quotations, fragments of works, examples, and actions of which one had been the witness or had read the narrative, reflections or arguments that one had heard or that had occurred to one. They constituted a material memory of things read, heard, or thought; they would offer them thus as treasures accumulated for later rereading and meditation. They also formed the primary material for writing more systematic treatises in which one gave the arguments and methods to struggle against some fault (like anger, envy, gossiping, or flattery) or to surmount some difficult circumstance (mourning, exile, ruin, disgrace). Thus, when Fundanus asks for advice on struggling

against agitations of the soul, Plutarch at that very moment hardly has the time to compose a treatise in proper form; he is thus going to send him without delay the *hupomnemata* that he had himself written on the theme of tranquillity of spirit. At least it is thus that he presents the text of *Peri euthumias*.⁴ Feigned modesty? No doubt this was a way of making excuses for the somewhat disjointed quality of the text; but one must also see here an indication of what these notebooks were—as well as of the practice of making the treatise itself, which retained something of its form of origin.

One should not envision these *hupomnemata* as a simple prop of memory that one could consult from time to time if the opportunity presented itself. They were not destined to be substituted for the possibly failing memory. Rather, they constituted the material and a framework for exercises to be done frequently: to read, reread, meditate, converse with oneself and with others, and so on. And this in order to have them, according to a frequently appearing expression, *prokheiron, ad manum, in promptu*. "At hand," thus, not simply in the sense that one could recall them to consciousness, but rather in the sense that one must be able to use them, as soon as one has need of them, in action. It is a matter of constituting a *logos bioethikos*, a supply of helpful discourses capable—as Plutarch put it—of raising their voices themselves to quiet the passions as a master may, with one word, calm the growling of dogs.⁵ And for this it is necessary that they not simply be tucked away as though in an armoire of memories but rather be deeply implanted in the soul, "driven into it," as Seneca says, and that they thus make up a part of ourselves; in short, that the soul make them not simply its own but itself. The writing of *hupomnemata* is an important relay in this subjectification of discourse.

As personal as they are, these *hupomnemata* must not, however, be understood as the intimate journals or as the narratives of spiritual experience (temptations, struggles, failures, and victories) that will be found in later Christian literature. They do not constitute a "narrative of the self"; their objective is not to bring into the light the *arcana conscientiae* for which confession—oral or written—has a purifying value. The movement that they seek to effect is the inverse of that; it is not a matter of pursuing the unsayable, nor of revealing the hidden, nor of saying the unsaid, but on the contrary of capturing the already-said, of reassembling what one could hear or read, and this for an end that is nothing less than the constitution of the self.

The *hupomnemata* must be resituated in the context of a very appreciable tension of the age. At the interior of a culture very strongly marked by traditionalism, by the recognized value of the already-said, by the re-

4. See Plutarch, *De la tranquillité de l'âme*, trans. Jean Dumortier and Jean Defradas, *Oeuvres morales*, 7 vols. (Paris, 1975), I. 464, 7:98.

5. See *ibid.*, I. 465, 7:98.

3. Epictetus, *Entretiens*, trans. and ed. Joseph Souilhé, 4 vols. (Paris, 1963), 3:23, 109.

currence of discourse, by a "citational" practice under the seal of antiquity and authority, developed an ethic very explicitly oriented by the care of the self toward definite objectives such as withdrawing into the self, getting in touch with the self, living with the self, sufficing in the self, profiting from and enjoying the self. Such indeed is the objective of *hupomnemata*: to make of this recollection of the fragmentary logos transmitted through teaching, listening, or reading a means of establishing between the self and the self as appropriate and complete a relationship as possible. There is, for us, something paradoxical in this. How can one be put in the presence of oneself through the aid of an ageless discourse that is received just about everywhere? In fact, if the writing of *hupomnemata* can contribute to the formation of the self across these scattered *logoi*, it is for three principal reasons: the effects of limitation owing to the coupling of writing and reading, the regulated practice of the disparate that determines the choices, and the appropriation that it effects.

1) Seneca insists on it: the practice of self implies reading, because one cannot draw everything from one's own funds nor arm oneself by oneself with the principles of reason that are indispensable to conduct oneself. As guide or example, the help of others is necessary. But one must not dissociate reading and writing; one must "have recourse by turns" to these two occupations and "temper one by means of the other." If writing too much exhausts (Seneca is thinking here of the work of style), an excess of reading disperses. "Abundance of books, agonizing indecision of mind."⁶ Passing ceaselessly from one book to another, without ever stopping, without returning from time to time to the hive with one's provision of nectar, as a consequence, without taking notes or composing in writing a collection of reading, one exposes oneself to retaining nothing, to dispersing oneself through different thoughts, and to forgetting oneself. Writing as a way of collecting reading already done and of reflecting on it is an exercise of reason that is opposed to the great fault of *stultitia*, which infinite reading risks promoting. *Stultitia* is defined by agitation of spirit, instability of attention, changes of opinion and intention, and, consequently, by fragility before all events that can occur. It is also characterized by the fact that it turns the spirit toward the future, makes it curious about novelties and keeps it from giving itself a fixed point in the possession of an acquired truth.⁷ The writing of *hupomnemata* contrasts with this dissipation in fixing the acquired elements and in constituting them, as it were, "from the past," to which it is always possible to return and retire. This practice can be linked to a very general theme of the period. In any case, it is common to the morality of the Stoics and the Epicureans: the refusal of a spiritual attitude directed toward the future (which, because of its uncertainty, provokes anxiety and agitation of

spirit) and the positive value accorded to the possession of a past that one may enjoy utterly and without embarrassment. The contribution of the *hupomnemata* is one of the means by which one detaches the soul from concern for the future in order to bend it toward meditation on the past.

2) However, if it permits thwarting the dispersion of the *stultitia*, the writing of *hupomnemata* is also (and it must remain) a regulated and voluntary practice of the disparate. It is a choice of heterogeneous elements. In that way it contrasts to the work of the grammarian who seeks to know all of a work or all of the works of the professional philosophers who lay claim to the doctrinal unity of a school. "It is of little importance," says Epictetus, "that one has or has not read all of Zeno or Chrysippus; it is of little importance that one has seized exactly what they meant, and that one is capable of reconstructing the unity of their reasoning."⁸ The notebook is controlled by two principles that could be called "the local truth of the maxim" and "its circumstantial, customary value." Seneca chooses what he notes for himself and for his correspondents from the work of one of the philosophers of his own sect, but from the work of Democritus and Epicurus as well.⁹ The essential thing is that he can consider the sentence retained as a maxim true in what it affirms, acceptable in what it prescribes, and useful according to the circumstances in which one finds oneself. Writing as a personal exercise done by the self and for the self is an art of disparate truth; or, more precisely, a reflexive way of combining the traditional authority of the thing already said with the singularity of the truth that is affirmed there and the particularity of the circumstances that determine its use. "Thus always read," says Seneca to Lucilius,

authors of recognized authority, and if the desire takes you to pursue a point in the writings of others, return quickly to the former. Secure yourself every day a defense against poverty, against death, without forgetting our other scourges. From all that you have skimmed, extract one thought to digest well that day. This is also what I do. Among several texts that I have just read, I set my heart on one of them. Here is my booty for today: it is in the work of Epicurus that I found it, because I also like to pass through the camps of others. As a renegade? no; as a scout [*tamquam explorator*].¹⁰

3) This deliberate ill-assortment does not preclude unification. But this is not brought about in the art of making up a collection; it must develop in the writer himself as a result of *hupomnemata*, of their composition (and thus in the very act of writing), of their consultation (and thus in reading and rereading them). Two processes can be distinguished. It is a matter, on the one hand, of unifying these heterogeneous fragments

6. Seneca, lettre 2, *LL*, 1:6.

7. See Seneca, lettre 52, *LL*, 2:41-42.

8. Epictetus, *Entretiens*, 2:65.

9. See Seneca, letters 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, *LL*, 1:6, 9, 12, 21-22, 24.

10. Seneca, lettre 2, *LL*, 1:6.

by their subjectification in the exercise of personal writing. Seneca compares this unification, according to very traditional metaphors, to either the labor of the bee, or to the digestion of food, or to the addition of figures making up a sum.

Let us not permit anything that enters us to remain intact, for fear that it will never be assimilated. Let us digest the material, otherwise it will enter into our memory, not into our intelligence [*in memoriam . . . non in ingenium*]. Let us cordially adhere to these thoughts of others and be conscious of making them ours in order to unify one hundred different elements, just as addition makes a single number of isolated numbers.

The role of writing is to constitute, with all that reading has constituted, a "body" [*quicquid lectione collectum est, stilus redigat in corpus*]. And this body must not be understood as a body of doctrine, but rather—following the metaphor of digestion so often invoked—as the body itself of he who, in transcribing his readings, appropriates them and makes their truth his. Writing transforms the thing seen or heard "into strength and blood" [*in vires, in sanguinem*]. It becomes a principle of rational action in the writer himself.¹¹

But, inversely, the writer constitutes his own identity through this recollection of things said. In this same letter 84—which is like a small treatise on the connections between reading and writing—Seneca dwells for an instant on the ethical problem of resemblance, fidelity, and originality. He explains that one must not elaborate on what one retains of an author in such a way that he may be recognized. It is not a matter of composing in the notes that one takes and in the manner that one reconstitutes in writing what one has read a series of portraits that are recognizable but "dead" (Seneca is thinking here of those portrait galleries by which one vouched for his birth; validated his status; and marked his identity with reference to others). It is his own soul that he must constitute in what he writes; but, as a man wears in his face natural resemblance to his ancestors, so it is good that one can perceive in what he writes the filiation of the thoughts that are engraved in his soul. Through the play of chosen reading and assimilative writing, one must be able to form an identity through which a complete spiritual genealogy may be read. In a choir there are high, low, and medium voices, the timbres of men and women. "No individual voice can be distinguished; only the whole imposes itself on the ear. . . . I want it to be thus with our souls, that they have a good supply of knowledge, precepts, examples borrowed from many ages, but that converge into one unity."

11. Seneca, lettre 84, *LL*, 3:123, 121–22, 123.

Correspondence

Notebooks that, in themselves, constitute exercises of personal writing, can serve as the primary material for texts that one sends to others. On the other hand, the missive, a text that by definition is destined for others, also leads to personal exercise. Seneca recalls that when one writes, one reads what one writes just as in saying something one hears what one says.¹² The letter that one sends acts, by the very act of writing, on the one who sends it, as it acts through reading and rereading on the one who receives it. In this double function, correspondence is very close to *hypomnemata*, and its form is often very close. Epicurean literature gives some examples. The text known as the "letter to Pythocles" begins by acknowledging reception of a letter in which a student testifies to his friendship for the master and in which he does his best to "recall the Epicurean arguments" that permit one to attain happiness. The author of the response gives his support. The attempt was not bad, and it in turn expedited a text—the resumé of the *Peri phuseos* of Epicurus—which was to serve Pythocles as material to memorize and as an aid to meditation.¹³

The letters of Seneca show an activity of direction, from an aged man who was already retired, aimed at another who still occupied an important public office. But in these letters, Seneca does not only inquire about Lucilius and his progress. He is not satisfied with giving him advice and giving him a commentary on some great principles of conduct. Through these written lessons, Seneca continues to exert himself according to two principles that he frequently invokes: that it is necessary to train oneself all one's life and that one always needs the help of others in the development of the soul in itself. The advice that he gives in letter 7 constitutes a description of his own relationship with Lucilius. He there characterizes well the way he spends his retirement in the dual labor that he performs simultaneously on his correspondent and on himself: withdrawing into himself as much as possible; becoming attached to those who are capable of having a beneficial effect on him; opening the door to those that one hopes oneself to make better; these are "the reciprocal duties. Whoever teaches, educates himself."¹⁴

The letter that one sends to help one's correspondent—to counsel him, exhort him, admonish him, console him—constitutes for the writer a manner of training. A little like soldiers in peacetime training through drills at arms, the advice that one gives others in the urgency of their situation is one way of preparing oneself for a similar eventuality. Thus, letter 99 to Lucilius. It is itself the copy of another letter that Seneca had

12. See *ibid.*, 3:124.

13. See "Lettre à Pythoclès," in Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, trans. Alfred Ernout, ed. Ernout and Léon Robin, 3 vols. (Paris, 1925–28), 1:lxvii.

14. Seneca, lettre 7, *LL*, 1:21.