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BESIDES CHRISTIANITY AND COMMENTARY: TECHNIQUES OF THE SELF, SELF-WRITING, AND GENEALOGY OF THE MODERN SUBJECT¹

AL MARGEN DEL CRISTIANISMO Y DEL COMENTARIO: TÉCNICAS DEL YO, AUTO-ESCRITURA Y GENEALOGÍA DEL SUJETO MODERNO

Maureen Kelly

The University of Chicago Divinity School

makelly@uchicago.edu

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Abstract: In this piece, I read the examples and references to Christianity in Foucault's 1983 text "Self-writing" through the lens of Foucault's comparison between Greco-Roman and Christian techniques of the self. I argue that the comparison between the two is connected to Foucault's lasting concern with the genealogy of the modern subject, in particular the Christian invention of the hermeneutics of the self, and that the contrast between Greco-Roman and Christian practices illustrate alternative modes of being to the legacy of Christian practices which persist for modern forms of subjectivity. On these grounds, the Greco-Roman examples illustrate the conceptual possibility of an alternative to the hermeneutics of the self. In the end, I compare a self-writing text from the twentieth century (in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*) to the Greco-Roman cases in "Self-writing" as

¹ My thanks to the University of Chicago and the Divinity School, especially to Arnold I. Davidson and Sarah Hammerschlag; to the editors and reviewers at the *Theory Now* journal; and to Isabelle Galichon and the speakers at the 2019 "Une généalogie littéraire des pratiques de soi" conference at the Université Bordeaux-Montaigne.

examples of writing which illustrate a contrast to the Christian and modern tradition of the hermeneutic of the self.

Keywords: Foucault; *askesis*; Christianity; self-writing; ethics; hermeneutics.

Resumen: A lo largo de este trabajo se leerán los ejemplos y referencias al cristianismo que encontramos en el texto de Foucault de 1983 “La escritura de sí” a través de la comparación que este hace entre las técnicas de sí grecorromanas y las cristianas. Sostendremos que la comparación entre ambas se conecta al persistente interés de Foucault por la genealogía del sujeto moderno, en particular por la invención cristiana de la “hermenéutica de sí”, y a que el contraste entre las prácticas grecorromanas y las cristianas ilustra dos modelos alternativos de existencia que se mantienen en las formas de subjetividad modernas. Sobre estas bases, los ejemplos grecorromanos ilustran la posibilidad conceptual de una alternativa a la hermenéutica de sí. Por último, se comparará un texto de escritura del yo del siglo XX —el *Roland Barthes por Roland Barthes*— con los casos grecorromanos presentes en “La escritura de sí” como ejemplos de escritura del yo que ilustran el contraste entre las tradiciones grecorromana y cristiana de la hermenéutica de sí.

Palabras clave: Foucault; *askesis*; cristianismo; escritura del yo; ética; hermenéutica.

When Foucault brings writing to the center of his discussion in the 1983 piece “Self writing”, he opens an intersection between his late work on ethics as practices of the self and the diverse world of twentieth-century materials which take writing as a central theme. The “Self writing” piece then holds some relevance for modern self-writing, though the connection to modern writing or literature is not elaborated in the text. The piece is also complicated, and enriched, by Foucault’s own related passages on writing from this period. For example, Isabelle Galichon notes that writing appears in the *Hermeneutics of the Subject* lecture course and the 1983 Berkeley lectures, but with a subordinated status in the argument and only as an example of other ethical work (Galichon 21). The point also highlights a clear distinction between modern self-writing practices and those from antiquity, by bounding them to their historical context and the ethical practices therein. The contextualization of Foucault’s discussion of writing in the framework of ethics highlights the distinctions between the examples of “Self writing” and examples of modern literature. In effect, the discussion of ethics also makes the “Self writing” piece and its ancient materials speak to questions of modern literature, precisely through the distinctions that emerge.

In this piece, I would like to read “Self-writing” through the framework of technologies of the self by drawing on the 1982 lecture at the University of Vermont “Technologies of the Self” and the 1980 lectures at Dartmouth College in *About the Beginning of the Hermeneutic of the Self*. In the lectures, Foucault offers a discussion of technologies of the self as a framework for his late work, the contrast between Greco-Roman and Christian technologies of the self, and the relevance of the contrast for the genealogy of the modern subject. The lectures also highlight the central question of the hermeneutics of the self, which opens a distinction for the modern subject between its inheritance of the Christian invention of self-hermeneutic techniques and its counterpoint of Greco-Roman techniques which illustrate a clear contrast to the hermeneutic relation to the self. The contrast between Greco-Roman and Christian techniques of the self runs through the “Self writing” piece as well, and speaks to the role of the Christian materials in the text. The comparison to Christian practices in “Self writing” connects the depiction of Greco-Roman self-writing practices to a question for modern subjectivity because they illustrate counterpoints to the Christian legacy for the modern subject. I will conclude with a short passage by Roland Barthes from his 1975 autobiographical text, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, to illustrate the possibility of modern self-writing performing a similar function as the Greco-Roman examples in “Self writing,” that is to say, expanding the conceptual possibilities for writing and the relation to the self beyond the Christian legacy of the hermeneutic relation to oneself.

Technologies of the self

After the publication of the first volume of the *History of Sexuality*, Foucault’s research project and trajectory shift from a set of topics on modern sexuality to work on sexual ethics in Greco-Roman antiquity into the Imperial period and early Christianity². Across the historical and methodological shifts in his work, the ways in which individuals are formed in and as subjects remains the central question. While Foucault’s earlier works focus on the techniques of power and the formation of subjects through the questions of power or domination, the late work on ethics increasingly examines the relation one has to oneself and the practices through which one could transform oneself (Foucault, *Technologies* 19). In later works, Foucault reframes the questions on the way subjects are formed in the vocabulary of “specific techniques”:

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

² For the trajectory of Foucault’s project, see Davidson, “Archaeology, Genealogy, Ethics”.

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 (Foucault, *Technologies* 18).

The “techniques of the self”³ serve as the framework for Foucault’s work on ethics and the examination of materials from antiquity, for example in the “Self writing” piece. The techniques of the self refer to practices that one could take up, alone or with the help of others, in order to form oneself into a certain kind of subject. As Foucault delves into the techniques of the self, the examination across cultural and historical markers shows differentiations in the kind of subjectivity they create, the practices and truth games connected to them, and their historical conditions, possibilities, and legacies. In particular, a running comparison develops between Greco-Roman and early Christian practices. Refrains such as “La subjectivation de l’homme occidental, elle est chrétienne, elle n’est pas gréco-romaine” (Foucault, *Du Gouvernement des Vivants* 231) and “we inherit the tradition of Christian morality” (Foucault, *Technologies* 22) sharpen the focus around this distinction between Greco-Roman and Christian techniques for the genealogy of the modern subject.

Though central for the modern subject, we should note the distinction between Greco-Roman and Christian techniques of the self are still complex to parse. The techniques take shape in “historically contiguous” spaces (Foucault, *Technologies* 19) and continuities and adoptions occur between Imperial Roman and Christian techniques: “we can see the transfer of several Stoic technologies of the self to Christian spiritual techniques” (Foucault, *Technologies* 44). For example, Foucault notes, “the same metaphor [...] is found in the Stoics and in early Christian literature but with different meanings” (Foucault, *Technologies* 38). Foucault repeats this notion in “Self writing” as well, pointing out that looking back from the *Vita Antonii*: “these diverse elements are found already in Seneca, Plutarch, Marcus Aurelius, but with very different values and following altogether different procedures” (Foucault, *Ethics* 208). To trace the distinction between Greco-Roman and Christian techniques of the self, and their stakes for modern subjectivity and writing in this short piece, I would like to flag the hermeneutic relation to the self. This distinction helps to configure the contrast Foucault raises between the practices of self-writing as models of distinct Greco-Roman and Christian techniques of the self.

In the opening of “Christianity and Confession,” (both at the Dartmouth and Berkeley

3 Foucault uses technology and technique for this: “Let’s call this kind of techniques a ‘techniques’ or ‘technology of the self’” (Foucault, *About the Beginning* 24-25).

delivery of the lecture, which the edition represents together) Foucault formulates a contrast in Greco-Roman and Christian technologies of the self around the hermeneutics of the self:

How was formed in our societies what I would like to call the interpretive analysis of the self; or, how was formed the hermeneutics of the self in the modern, or at least in the Christian and the modern, societies? In spite of the fact that we can find very early, in the Greek, in the Hellenic, in the Latin cultures, techniques of the self as self-examination and confession, I think that there are very large differences between the Latin and Greek—the classical—techniques of the self and the techniques developed in Christianity [...] modern hermeneutics of the self is rooted much more in those Christian techniques than in the classical ones.*

* *Berkeley*: [...] the practices of self-examination and confession [...] seem to me to be good witnesses for a major problem, that is, the genealogy of the modern self [...] I'd like to outline [this genealogy] from the point of view of techniques, what I call techniques of the self and among those techniques of the self, the most important, in our modern societies are, I think, those which deal with the interpretive analysis of the subject, with the hermeneutics of the self [...] to decipher a hidden truth in the depths of the individual. [...] let's turn toward Christianity as the cradle of the Western hermeneutics of the self. (Foucault, *About the Beginning* 53-54).

Self-writing

Foucault's piece, "Self-writing," invokes three cases in which writing functions as an *askesis*, or practice, in Greco-Roman and Christian techniques of the self⁴. The comparison among the materials as practices of the self illustrates the contrast among them as either Greco-Roman or Christian techniques. If we trace the hermeneutics of the self as a delineation in these techniques, the Greco-Roman examples might speak to the forms of modern self-writing which inherit the Christian legacy of the hermeneutics of the self.

For a Christian model of self-writing, Foucault highlights the *Life of Antony* by Athanasius. In a very brief opening passage, Foucault points out the elements of writing which support the Christian techniques of the self. First, the text works like the presence of another, "let the written account stand for the eyes of our fellow ascetics, so that blushing at writing as if we were actually seen, we may never ponder evil" (Foucault, *Ethics* 207). In replicating the gaze of another as a deterrent, the practice discourages temptations in the life of a recluse as it would in the community life of a monk. Second, the way the text records one's thoughts has "a role very close to that of confession" (Foucault, *Ethics* 207). Foucault compares this aspect with later Christian technologies of the self, for example in Cassian, the imperative in monastic life to tell the director everything (Foucault, *Ethics* 208)⁵.

4 For a helpful definition of *askesis* in Foucault's ethics, see "On the Genealogy of Ethics".

5 For one useful discussion of relevant passages on Cassian in Foucault, see the "26 March 1980" lecture of *On the Government of the Living*.

Foucault describes the scrutiny of thoughts in Cassian: “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” (Foucault, *Technologies* 38). The *Life of Antony* aligns with this logic as well as a truth-test; writing works to examine one’s insides thoroughly for the possibility of deception that arises from a devil within. The exercise of “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” (Foucault, *Ethics* 207). The example illustrates the movement to examine and decipher oneself as part of an ethical practice invented by Christianity. The imperative to decipher oneself at the base of the hermeneutics of the self creates a legacy of “Christianity as the cradle of the Western hermeneutics of the self”.

This contrasts with what Foucault will describe as an *ethopoietic* writing in the Greco-Roman cases, in which the truth likewise has a central function in the formation of the self in the practices of writing but following an altogether different arrangement. In the Greco-Romans cases:

Writing constituted 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* (Foucault, *Ethics* 209).

In the end, the distinction will be laid out most clearly in the contrast between the Senecan self-examination and the Christian one suggested in the *Vita Antonii*. From the beginning, Foucault tracks the *ethopoietic* operation as characteristic of the Greco-Roman techniques of the self that take place in self-writing (Foucault, *Ethics* 209). If the legacy for the modern subject has to do with the invention of self-hermeneutics, then the crucial distinction will not be in the genre shift from Greco-Roman diaries to letters, but in the ethical shift from Greco-Roman examination to Christian decipherment of the self. From the earliest Greco-Roman use of writing as a techniques of the self, Foucault identifies the *ethopoietic* operation of ancient *hupomnemata*, notebooks in which one would record many disparate elements:

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 (Foucault, *Ethics* 209).

As in the *Vita Antonii*, the ethical function of the writing practice was to create a subject, to make oneself into a kind of subject, through the use of notebooks. Foucault points out the diverse practices notebooks support, from writing the found discourses, to rereading and rewriting them, to meditating on them and turning to them as needed in times of strain or

per circumstances that arise (such as in mourning or grief). The notebooks were a medium for the exercises, “a material and a framework for exercises to be carried out frequently: reading, rereading, meditating, conversing with oneself and with others” (Foucault, *Ethics* 210). The writing practices served the purpose of “shaping of the self” (Foucault, *Ethics* 211), and aimed at certain ends, for example, “struggling against some weakness (such as anger, envy, gossip, flattery) or for overcoming some difficult circumstance (a grief, an exile, ruin, disgrace)” (Foucault, *Ethics* 210).

Foucault describes the ways notebooks work in a practice of forming oneself. For example, through the exercise, the connected practice of writing and rereading the “*hupomnemata* resists [the] scattering” from an anxiety about the future which creates an “agitation of the soul” (Foucault, *Ethics* 212). Through the writing, which would work “by fixing acquired elements, and by constituting a share of the past, as it were, toward which it is always possible to turn back,” (Foucault, *Ethics* 212), one could effect a change in oneself, a composure gained from an anchoring reference to past experiences. Foucault’s examples also illustrate the function of truth in the exercises. As the criteria of selection, the collection of disparate discourses had to meet “the essential requirement” to be “true in what it asserts, suitable in what it prescribes, and useful in terms of one’s circumstances” (Foucault, *Ethics* 212). The disparate nature of the sources does not generate a scattered writer; the fragments are collected, digested, and processed to create a unified subject in whom all of these disparate elements are blended into a harmonious composition. Foucault shares a metaphor for the process:

The role of writing is to constitute [...] a ‘body’ [...] And this body should be understood not as a body of doctrine but, rather – following an often-invoked metaphor of digestion – as the very body of the one who, by transcribing his readings, has appropriated them and made their truth his own (Foucault, *Ethics* 213).

The truth, in this practice, lies in the discourses that one collects. The ethical operation of forming oneself into a subject is the composition of oneself through the processing of these true discourses⁶. As Foucault writes (noting the ancient analogy of music), “through the interplay of selected readings and assimilative writing, one should be able to form an identity” (Foucault, *Ethics* 214). From the opening example of the *Vita Antonii* to the *hupomnemata*, the comparative uses of writing as a technique of the self, and notably, the role of truth in each, illustrate key differences. In the notebooks, the writing practice has an *ethopoietic* operation; the notebooks “capture” true discourses “for a purpose that is nothing less than the shaping of the self” (Foucault, *Ethics* 210-11). This contrasts with the function of the truth in Christian self-writing:

6 For the nature of the true discourses, see Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*.

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 values (Foucault, *Ethics* 210).

In effect, Foucault makes a distinction in the genealogy of writing practices: between the narrative of oneself seen in early Christian self-writing, and the alternative possibility, the *ethopoietic* self-writing seen in Greco-Roman notebooks. While the notebooks and later Christian journals each use writing to transform the self, the examples are part of distinct Greco-Roman and Christian techniques. The role of truth illustrates the contrast. While the *hupomnemata* create a coherent subject through the digestion and assimilation of disparate truths, the Christian counterparts seek to purify a subject through the confession of a hidden truth. As the contrast points out, practices of writing in the *hupomnemata* do not effect a change in the self through “bringing to the light of day the *arcana conscientiae*”, the hermeneutic of the self that will become central in Christian literature.

The distinction also characterizes the difference between Senecan letters and the *Vita Antonii*. Though the letters (*correspondances*) from the Imperial period share common ethical values with the notebooks—to shore one up against misfortunes, to offer guides for conduct, and a resource for meditation in times of distress (Foucault, *Ethics* 215)—new elements of the writing practice arise when the texts are sent between two individuals: “the reciprocity that correspondence establishes is not simply that of counsel and aid; it is the reciprocity of the gaze and the examination” (Foucault, *Ethics* 216)⁷. These elements will be adopted by Christianity, and—like Epictetus’s metaphor of the money-changer (Foucault, *Technologies* 37-38)—the Christian practices will transform these Senecan techniques and give them new values (Foucault, *Ethics* 208). The differences between them despite their historical proximity and shared parts illustrate the distinct Greco-Roman and Christian iterations of techniques of the self.

The self-examination that develops in the letters is particularly interesting because it features a Greco-Roman practice of self-writing which takes oneself as the object before the Christian adoption which grafts self-hermeneutics to the practice. Foucault points to this moment as the start of the narrative of the self (Foucault, *Ethics* 217), with, we might note, critical import because the example illustrates a mode of writing—the narrative of the self—which falls just outside the Christian hermeneutic relation to the self. The not-yet-hermeneutical relation to the self can be seen in the health reports of the letters. Even as they

7 These developments in the techniques might also be situated with respect to the “culture de soi” and the Imperial period. See Foucault’s *Culture de soi* and its critical introduction by Arnold I. Davidson and Daniele Lorenzini.

“gradually increased in scope” to include “detailed description of the bodily sensations, the impressions of malaise, the various disorders one might have experienced” (Foucault, *Ethics* 218), the purpose of writing the details is governed by the values and procedures of Greco-Roman techniques:

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 (Foucault, *Ethics* 218).

The details of the writing serve to offer useful advice, improve one’s regimen, attend to oneself, recall the movements of the soul, and care of the self. The practice here “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” (Foucault, *Ethics* 217). The gaze of the other and the examination of the self, which will serve to decipher the self in the *Vita Antonii*, serve an altogether different set of values and kind of exercise here. The difference manifests again in the report of one’s day in the letters, which follow the ethical practice of Seneca’s review of the day (Foucault, *Ethics* 219). This report would include “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” (Foucault, *Ethics* 219). The technique serves to support practices of attending to oneself, measuring oneself against a set of rules for behaviors, taking account of oneself and one’s physical and mental exercises. The practices of recounting one’s day ensure attention to oneself which supports a mode of being, Foucault writes:

Seneca evokes this specific day that has gone by, which is at the same time the most ordinary of all. Its value 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 (Foucault, *Ethics* 219).

The exercises create a relationship of attention to oneself, “constituting oneself as an ‘inspector of oneself,’” (Foucault, *Ethics* 219). This contrasts with the hermeneutic relation to oneself, of deciphering the self. In the Senecan model, practices transform oneself by “gauging the common faults, and of reactivating the rules of behavior that one must always bear in mind” (Foucault, *Ethics* 219). This contrasts with the Christian model, and its:

[...] examination of self with respect to the relation between the hidden thought and an inner impurity. At this moment begins the Christian hermeneutics of the self with its deciphering of inner thoughts. It implies that there is something hidden in ourselves and that we are always in a self-illusion which hides the secret (Foucault, *Technologies* 46).

Modern Literature

The comparative movement of the piece opens a question for the modern subject. In his work on techniques of the self, and the comparison of Greco-Roman and Christian techniques of the self, Foucault highlights the elements which remain for modern forms of subjectivity. As elements of Christian techniques of the self are drawn into a comparison with elements of modern subjectivity, the examination of the early Christian sources tells a genealogical story about, for example, practices of self-negation and truth-telling, or deciphering oneself and purification. The Greco-Roman techniques of the self, by contrast to the Christian ones, illustrate techniques of the self that are (likewise part of the origin story, but in the end) contrasted to modern forms of subjectivity. The contrast is illustrated through the different ethical practices of the self between the Christian and Greco-Roman formulations, even of seemingly similar practices such as the self-examination. As the Greco-Roman practices were transformed in the Christian adoption of these techniques, the comparison contributes to the genealogy of the modern subject. The Greco-Roman practices illustrate a crucial philosophical-historical context, the Christian practices invent techniques that endure for modern subjectivity when they adopt and transform these practices, and in effect, the Greco-Roman practices present an alternative which allows us to see, historically, modes distinctly different from the Christian legacy.

For example, in “Self-writing,” Foucault finds the “narrative of oneself” among the instances of self-writing in Antiquity, pointing out that the narrative of oneself begins not in early notebooks, but in letter writing. He further discerns that, in the end, manifesting the truth of oneself and deciphering the self only becomes a part of the narrative of oneself with the Christian iteration of the self-writing techniques. As Foucault compares the elements of the self-writings—the gaze, the examination, and so on—in effect, the comparison illuminates the different ethical values and procedures of techniques of the self. The piece centrally attends to the relationship between the elements of the texts and the ethical practices towards which they are meant to work. But the result of this piece, besides an expanded understanding of techniques of the self and writing as *askesis*, is that the elements of self-writing have been introduced into a comparative framework of different technologies of the self. The comparison with Christianity, or rather the contrast between Greco-Roman and Christian techniques, opens up a question for modern practices as well, in how the writing elements are being used in techniques that compare or contrast to the Christian (history of) techniques of the self. For literature, this means a question of the way practices of self-writing compare to the Christian or Greco-Roman techniques of the self.

For Foucault, it is crucial to emphasize the legacy of Christian techniques of self-hermeneutics in modern literature. Beginning with Montaigne, Foucault describes:

Modern literature began, I think, when hermeneutics of the self gave rise to a kind of *écriture*, of writing [...] where the hermeneutics of the self, which till then had been a purely religious practice, was opened to everybody. And that was not at all the result of a decline of religious experience, but the result of the extension of religious experience. Luther and the Counter-Reformation are at the root of modern literature, since modern literature is nothing else but the development of self-hermeneutics (Foucault, *About the Beginning* 110).

If Christian techniques of self-writing are characterized by a hermeneutics of the self, then the hermeneutics of the self as the cornerstone of modern literature puts it squarely in this Christian tradition. Indeed historically, Foucault connects the beginnings of modern literature to the expansion of a Christian religious experience.

As a thought experiment, I would like to wager a comparison between the Greco-Roman examples and a modern piece of self-writing. Not, crucially, in terms of the contents of the writing of Barthes and ancient sources. I do not aim to demonstrate a comparison between the *ethopoietic* truth of the Greco-Roman self-writings and a truth of Barthes's self-writing piece. And not, equally crucially, in terms of a prescription or program. My point here is not that the Greco-Roman examples offer a counterpoint that we should follow, or even that the modern forms of writing offer a counterpoint that we should follow. Instead, I would like to wager a comparison of the comparison. I would like to suggest that the piece by Barthes works like the Greco-Roman examples in illustrating a counterpoint and conceptual alternative to the Christian legacy of the hermeneutics of the self. Indeed, the Greco-Roman examples serve as a contrast in demonstrating a different set of techniques of the self with a different set of values and procedures. I would like to compare the way a piece of modern self-writing could likewise illustrate the possibility of a non-hermeneutical relation to the self.

In this way, the literary example could function like the historical example in pursuing Foucault's question, "do we need, really, this hermeneutics of the self?" (Foucault, *About the Beginning* 75). Foucault points out:

A hermeneutics of the self has been diffused across Western culture through numerous channels and integrated with various types of attitudes and experiences so that it is difficult to isolate and separate it from our own spontaneous experiences (Foucault, *Technologies* 17).

As a conceptual framework, the imperative to decipher the self is not only connected to traditions of subject formation, it also presents an obstacle to even imagine different conceptualizations of ourselves or possible modes of being. Arnold Davidson stresses the stakes of the assumption of the hermeneutic relation to the self, and Foucault's reading of history as a response:

How is it possible for us to imagine an alternative to the hermeneutics of the subject? Our imagination is impoverished due to its long subjugation by this hermeneutic. Fortunately, our history is much more rich. Foucault, through his unique perspective, reads ancient philosophy in order to make emerge the alternative to the yoke of the hermeneutics of the self, in order to show us that a concrete alternative existed, and therefore, that nothing can make unimaginable the work of invention that will create a new alternative, undoing our subjection (Davidson 73).

In this passage, Davidson brings the urgency of the political problem of the hermeneutics of the self to the fore and points out that Foucault's reading of ancient philosophy allows one to imagine—even against the way these hermeneutics have impoverished our imagination—other possible modes of being.

In addition to the historical sources which illustrate this alternative, there may—despite the bleak view of modern literature—be literary sources that likewise illustrate a non-hermeneutical relation to the self. As Isabelle Galichon points out, Foucault's work on ethics and practices of the self was also influenced by writers such as Roland Barthes and Claude Mauriac. In Roland Barthes' own piece of self-writing, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, we might be able to see an example of precisely this alternative: the narrative of one-self uncoupled from a hermeneutical function. In this case, this piece of twentieth-century self-writing, like the Greco-Roman examples from antiquity, would have the critical effect of opening a conceptual space to imagine other possibilities in formations of subjectivity and techniques of the self.

The coincidence

The “coincidence” is a fragment in Roland Barthes' autobiographical text, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*. Already in its title, the text brings genre norms of modern self-writing, expectations of confession, and the legacy of self-hermeneutics into an ironic, open negotiation. The fragment, “the coincidence” is composed of two related parts. The first illustrates an extra-hermeneutic relation to the self through the model of music and stages the experience of surprise when confronted by this mode as an alternative to the hermeneutical expectation. In the second part, the author illustrates a practice of writing the self which replicates the alternative relation to oneself found in music.

In the first scene, the author describes the experience of listening to a piece of music played earlier by this same self. The coincidence arises as the author listens to the music in order to discern something about the self. Despite the expectation, the experience is interrupted by the effect: “I record myself playing the piano; initially, out of curiosity to *hear myself*; but very soon I no longer hear myself; what I hear is [...] the pure materiality of their music” (55-56). Expecting to discern the self, indeed listening to the music for this purpose,

the practice yields an unexpected result: instead of hearing oneself playing, the author hears the music played. The displacement is considered:

What is it that happens? When I listen to myself *having played*—after an initial moment of lucidity in which I perceive one by one the mistakes I have made—there occurs a kind of rare coincidence: the past of my playing coincides with the present of my listening, and in this coincidence, commentary is abolished: there remains nothing but the music (of course what remains is not at all the ‘truth’ of the text) (56).

Beginning with the expected relation, the passage describes the initial scrutiny of the self. The present-listening-self and the past-playing-self belong to a relation of examination. The present-listening-self is lucid, perceiving, and finds mistakes. The past-self is the object of examination, inspiring curiosity. After a moment, the author describes a change. The experience of the music creates a collapse between listening and playing, the past and present. The coincidence between the activities and temporal markers, in effect, erases the distinctions which allowed to take such a view of the self. The change in the experience also changes the text produced by it. The figure can no longer weigh in on this self-listened-to, or give the insights of this-self-who-listens, because the moment of coincidence collapses the distinction between the selves, the analytic relation between them, and the commentary this produces. In the coincidence, “commentary is abolished: there remains nothing but the music”.

The contrast between “commentary” and “nothing but the music” generated in the scene of the coincidence configures the contrast between modes of self-writing in the second part of the passage. The commentary abolished through the loss of the analytic distance between the listening and playing selves in music is likewise abolished in writing when the author ceases to aim at the truth of the self. The description of self-writing follows the pattern of the coincidence:

When I pretend to write on what I have written in the past, there occurs in the same way a movement of abolition, not of truth. I do not strive to put my present expression in the service of my previous truth (in the classical system, such an effort would have been sanctified under the name of *authenticity*), I abandon the exhausting pursuit of an old piece of myself, I do not try to *restore* myself (as we say of a monument). I do not say: ‘I am going to describe myself’ but: ‘I am writing a text, and I call it R.B.’ I shift from imitation (from description) and entrust myself to nomination (56).

Following the abolition of commentary found in music, the passage offers an abolition of truth in the medium of writing. In the self-writing practice, the author ceases to express the previous truth of the self, which is the cornerstone of the conceptual framework from which Foucault tries to unmoor our thinking. The familiar self-writing practice which manifests the truth of oneself, and deciphers the self of the author, runs from the Christian invention of

self-hermeneutics into a proliferation of confession across modern practices. In modern self-writing, the function of writing would be, as Barthes notes, “description”, its “effort” would be “authentic”, its product would be a “monument”, and its author would be “restored”. What is the truth if not redemptive?

In the passage, the author turns away from this expectation and models the practice of self-writing on the coincidence instead. The author “abandons the exhausting pursuit” and “does not try to restore myself”. No longer described or imitated, the writer ceases to be positioned prior to, untouched by, or discerned through the text. Instead, the writer “writes a text”, “calls it R.B.” and “entrust[s the] self to nomination.” In the practice of writing, the self does not express its truth and generate a text which captures it. The writing practice wades into the insecurity of a space that is not governed by or aimed at a hermeneutics of the self. Adopting the coincidence found in the experience of listening to music, in which commentary is abolished, the author illustrates a practice of self-writing which follows the surprise of the coincidence and abandons the expectation, commentary, and restoration offered through the hermeneutic operation. A far cry from the excavation of the *arcana conscientiae*, this practice illustrates a non-hermeneutical relation to the self, “freewheeling in language [with] nothing to compare myself to” (56).

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