MICHEL FOUCAULT ON WRITING AND THE SELF IN THE *MEDITATIONS* OF MARCUS AURELIUS AND *CONFESSIONS* OF ST. AUGUSTINE

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We have heard it said that the decline of the familiar and traditional in the formerly local societies of Classical Greece gave way to a pan-Hellenistic world wherein customary values and structures were problematized. Major shifts in the cultural and ethical orientations of Greco-Roman society focused upon issues of anxiety and individualism. Here lies the legacy, or perhaps hegemony, of E. R. Dodds' *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety*: a culture caught up in "contempt for the human condition and hatred for the body," a culture in which happiness is no longer bound to the development of culture and society but to the asceticism of the individual.[1]

Certainly as we cut across the Hellenistic and Greco-Roman worlds we notice a surge toward individualism and asceticism. Yet despite the many and current socio-historical analyses that appear to break with the history of ideas and address both discursive and social practices, Foucault is

1 Dodds 1965.35. Another classic presentation of the surge of individualism and renunciation of public life in the Christian era remains Gilbert Murray's lectures on the stages of Greek religion: "Anyone who turns from the great writers of classical Athens, say Sophocles or Aristotle, to those of the Christian era must be conscious of a great difference in tone. There is a change in the whole relation of the writer to the world about him. The new quality is not specifically Christian: it is just as marked in the Gnostics and Mithras-worshippers as in the Gospels and the Apocalypse, in Julian and Plotinus as in Gregory and Jerome. It is hard to describe. It is a rise of asceticism, of mysticism, in a sense, of pessimism; a loss of confidence, of hope in this life and of faith in normal human effort; a despair of patient enquiry, a cry for infallible revelation, an indifference to the welfare of the state" (Murray 1925.155). See also Sabine 1973.143, MacMullen 1966.49–94, Peters 1970.410–20, 614–46, Brown 1980.1–17.

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the first to draw our attention to the fact that "there can be no specific moral action that does not refer to a unified moral conduct; no moral conduct that does not call for the forming of oneself as an ethical subject; and no forming of the ethical subject without 'modes of subjectivation' and an 'ascetics' or 'practices of the self' that support them."[2]

In *The Care of the Self*, Foucault considers the various technologies of the cultivation of the self in the Hellenistic and Greco-Roman worlds where, in addition to the numerous physical and mental regimens designed to take care of the body and mind, "there developed around the care of the self an entire activity of speaking and writing in which the work of oneself on oneself and communication with others were linked together" (Foucault 1986.51). Foucault is, of course, speaking of the practice of meditation (i.e., retreat into oneself through writing) and the practice of spoken and written correspondence (i.e., the giving and receiving of advice from family, friends, and teachers).

The present study will concentrate upon the act of writing as a practical strategy in the constitution of the self. Specifically, it will consider the disparity between the practice of self-cultivation and the practice of self-disclosure represented in the shift from a Stoic to a Christian ethos, or, stated more precisely, from the self-affirming cultivation of oneself in the "writing-retreats" of Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* to the self-effacing cultivation of oneself in the writing of the *Confessions* of St. Augustine.

WRITING AND MEDITATION IN MARCUS AURELIUS

The best established title for what we now call the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius is simply *To Himself* (τὰ εἰς ἑαυτόν). Though there is much in the work that lends itself to the ethical and philosophical treatise, it is predominantly a collection of concise and memorable sayings recalled and reactivated through the act of writing: they are therapeutic *logoi* written by oneself for oneself. As Rutherford observes, the *Meditations* "are not predominately reflections, *pensées*, or miniature essays; Marcus tends to be talking to and at himself. The aim of the *Meditations* is therapeutic: to revive and bring home to himself, in suitably striking and memorable form,

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2 Foucault 1985.28. See as well Dumont, who suggests that we cannot account for this turn to the solitary life—the lone *wise man* (σοφὸς ἀνήρ)—by reference to socio-political upheavals alone; we must also consider the impetus of a long history of "philosophical activity" (Dumont 1986.28).

the moral truths that the author has accepted in the past" (Rutherford 1989.13).

Cicero has a phrase for describing the usefulness of philosophy: it is *animi medicina*, or "medicine for the soul" (*Tusc*. 3.1). Marcus also finds the metaphor appropriate for his collection of sayings: "Just as physicians always keep their equipment and instruments ready at hand in case they are suddenly called upon to treat a patient, so do you keep ready your doctrines (δόγματα) in order to understand things both divine and human and to perform every action" (3.13).[3] "The medicine for this end is words" (λόγοι, δόγματα): "precepts," "quotations," and "*exempla*" are the instruments of the physician.[4] For this task the physician prescribes a retreat; not the retreat customarily taken in "country places, on beaches and mountains," but a retreat within the self where the *logoi* are organized, memorized, and rehearsed for that moment of confrontation. "Grant yourself this withdrawal continually, and refresh yourself," says Marcus Aurelius. "Let these be brief and elemental doctrines which when present will suffice to overwhelm all sorrows and to send you back no longer resentful of the things to which you return" (4.3).

Foucault correctly notes that the training here described is what the Greeks called *meletê* (μελ°τη) and the Romans *meditatio* (Foucault 1988.36). They are technical terms applied originally to the training of students in rhetoric: mental exercises designed to anticipate and prepare one for discourse and argumentation through the memorization, organization, and reactivation of "precepts," "quotations," "*exempla*," "maxims" (γνῶμαι), "anecdotes or aphorisms" (χρεῖαι), and various elaboration exercises (ἐργασία) that make for an effective presentation. In the Stoic philosophical tradition especially, though variously practiced elsewhere, *meletê/meditatio* also functions as a reflective exercise whose principle objective is the training and cultivation of the soul. In the same way that the rhetorician will employ the exercise in anticipation of the argument of an opponent, the Stoic philosopher will make use of meditation as a means to anticipate and resist the dangers of everyday life. Here, of course, we are speaking specifically of the *praemeditatio malorum*; the exercise designed to train the patient's mind in the acceptance and accommodation of

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3 Unless otherwise stated, all translations of the *Meditations* are derived from Grube 1983.

4 Rutherford 1989.19, who cites as well Plutarch *Garr*. 502b, *Tranq*. 476c, and especially *Tranq*. 465b: "They [words] need to be repeatedly used and applied in the task of training the reason (λόγος εἰθισμ°νος καὶ μεμελετηκΔς)."

humanity's transience, the training of the passions that allows one to remain unaffected by every conceivable circumstance, including death. Thus, according to one of Marcus' written precepts (2.12):

> How swiftly all things vanish; in the universe the bodies themselves, and in time the memories of them. Of what kind are all the objects of sense, especially those which entice us by means of pleasure, frighten us by means of pain, or are shouted about in vainglory; how cheap they are, how contemptible, sordid, corruptible and dead—upon this our intellectual faculty should fix its attention.

This practice of *meditatio* or retreat into oneself constitutes a "mnemotechnical formula" (Foucault 1988.34). The philosopher who is genuinely concerned with the health of the soul will retire into the self constantly, not in order to expose the self as happens in the confessional literature, but to remember (ἀπομνημονεύω) the *logoi*, to recall rules of action and laws of behavior, to consider how one conducted oneself today and how one should conduct oneself tomorrow. Writing is a practical strategy in the act of *meditatio*; to write down is to "have ready at hand" (προχείρειν) a list of precepts that the philosopher uses to assist the memory. Surprisingly, Socrates serves as an example for Epictetus. When discussing the importance of writing for philosophers, Epictetus asks his pupils (2.1.32–33):

> Did not Socrates write?—Of course, who wrote as much as Socrates? And in what way did he write? Well, since he could not always have at hand someone to test his judgements, or to be tested by him in turn, he was in the habit of testing and examining himself, and was always in a practical way trying out some particular primary conception; that is what a philosopher writes.[5]

Foucault recognizes the significance of writing in the culture of taking care of oneself, of "taking notes on oneself to be reread" and "keeping notebooks in order to reactivate for oneself the truths one needed" (Foucault 1988.27). There is an old understanding among the Greeks that

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5 Translation is from Oldfather 1929.

style and ethics are intimately related; that one's style in writing (or speaking), for example, should reflect one's ethical orientation. For the Stoics the activity of writing as an end in itself is deplored; one must write not for mere enjoyment or aesthetic appreciation, but for moral and ethical application. Unlike the Sophist who—though unfairly characterized—seeks profit rather than truth, persuasion rather than meaning, obfuscation rather than simplicity, the Stoic philosopher writes according to the moral simplicity of Stoic principle, i.e., to cultivate the self in the clearest and most effective way possible.[6]

The written style of Marcus' *Meditations* exemplifies the Stoic principle of simplicity and applicability. In the *Meditations* he seeks to lay down a set of axioms that are "brief and fundamental" (βραχ°α δὲ ἔστω καὶ στοιχει≈δη); they should be memorable and capable of taking effect immediately in the aid and support of one's life (4.1).[7] "Once a man has been bitten by the true doctrines," Marcus says, "even the shortest well-known saying will remind him to feel neither pain nor fear" (10.34). Thus, for example, regarding the immobilizing fear of death, "Remember that each person lives only this present moment; as for the rest, either it has been lived in the past or it is but an uncertain future" (3.10). Nevertheless, Marcus did not learn to employ such useful sayings with the acquisition of Stoic philosophy alone. The importance of using simple and applicable sayings was already present at the earliest stages of his education.

As a student, at the primary level of education where one learns to read and write, Marcus would have been introduced to many concise and memorable sayings. In Antiquity many collections of such sayings by poets and philosophers existed for use in the instruction of school children. As part of his education, Marcus would have been instructed to memorize and elaborate upon such sayings following a set pattern designed to develop his skills in writing, composition, and rhetoric, and to prepare him for the higher levels of education.[8]

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6 According to Rutherford 1989.31: "In a famous passage of the *Protagoras* Socrates had referred to the laconic quality of the sayings of the Seven Sages, the wise men of archaic Greece—ῥήματα βραχ°α ἀξιομνημόνευτα ἑκάστῳ εἰρημ°να ('brief and memorable words uttered by each of them')—sayings such as 'know thyself' and 'nothing in excess'; Socrates declared this brevity to be the ancient style of philosophy (Pl. *Prt.* 343ab and context; cf. *Hipparchus* 228de; Plut. *Garr.* 510e ff.)."

7 See Rutherford 1989.30–31 and 39.

8 See, in particular, the discussions and translations of the sections on the *chreiai* and *elaboration* patterns in the rhetorical handbooks (*Progymnasmata*) by Hock and O'Neil 1986. See as well the excellent study by Bonner on primary education in Rome (1977.165–88).

But these memorable sayings were employed not only because they afforded the acquisition of practical writing and rhetorical skills, they were also employed for their effectiveness in the development of moral and ethical character in this culture of *paideia*. They were useful for living. Thus, as Rutherford observes, "the most seriously inclined students would continue this practice [the collection, memorization, and elaboration of sayings] in later life" (Rutherford 1989.28). The *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius form a collection of sayings intended especially for the cultivation of one's soul. It is a practice that one learns as a student, and which one carries with oneself throughout life.

Perhaps what is most important, however, is that this constant practice of collection and writing will necessarily advance and intensify the very process of self-cultivation itself. New sayings can be added to the list constantly; one continually discovers new ways to observe, regulate, and cultivate oneself in greater and greater detail. For Marcus, this writing practice or writing-retreat becomes fundamental to his lifestyle: it is to have nearby a memory technique that not only accommodates itself to the ever expanding collection of sayings, that is, a kind of open-ended book to which one can turn at any given moment in the cultivation of oneself, but that also, at the same time, incites an ever increasing vigilance over oneself. We see this effect manifested quite clearly in Marcus' correspondence with his beloved Fronto: attention is paid to the nuances and unimportant details of daily living.

In discussing the ethical practices recommended by Seneca, Foucault notes that self-examination in the Stoic context does not constitute a juridical procedure by which one judges oneself according to the Law, but rather an administrative procedure whereby one takes stock of oneself according to rules and regulations. Errors lie not in transgression or in the failure to discover one's sins, but in strategy, in the failure to remember rules of conduct. According to Foucault, "the subject is not the operating ground for the process of deciphering, but is the point where rules of conduct come together in memory . . . It is not the deciphering of the self, not the means to disclose secrecy, which is important; it is the memory of what you have done and what you have to do" (Foucault 1988.33–34, 35). This is true of the *Meditations*; it is an example of a practical strategy in the aid of memory, the writing down of concise and memorable therapeutic *logoi* in order to prevent forgetfulness and thus assist in the administration of the self.

WRITING AND CONFESSION IN ST. AUGUSTINE

In early Christianity, writing also plays a significant role in the relationship between memory and the self—though for completely different reasons. The confessing self writes in order to procure the self from the depths of its memory, and the Bishop writes in order to induce the confession of others. "Christianity is a confessional religion," states Foucault, in which "each person has the duty to know . . . what is happening inside him, to acknowledge faults, to recognize temptations, to locate desires; and everyone is obliged to disclose these things either to God or to others in the community and hence to bear public or private witness against oneself" (Foucault 1988.40). Like the martyr whose confession means the death of the self, there is at the heart of this confessional practice, this *exomologêsis* or *publicatio sui*, "a rupture with self and world," a "break with one's past identity: Ego non sum ego" (Foucault 1988.43). Herein lies the curious paradox that marks the fundamental characteristic of the Christian confessional: the disclosure of the self necessitates the renunciation of the self; self-revelation is simultaneously self-effacement. Therefore, Augustine's confession is given only in the unrelenting encounter and decipherment of his past identity. He cannot denounce himself without constantly remembering and producing a profoundly intimate and present—though infinitely fleeting—knowledge of his past self.

Marcus presents us with the Stoic image of a man who refuses to live life according to nature (ὁμολογουμ°νως τῇ φύσει ζ∞ν) (8.34):

> If you ever saw a severed hand or foot, or a severed head lying somewhere apart from the rest of the body—that is what a man makes himself like, as far as he can, when he refuses to accept his lot and sets himself apart, or performs an unsocial act. . . . Yet here is the remarkable thing: that you can make yourself one again with nature.

Augustine likewise imagines the nonconfessing self as a dismembered body, a body scattered and neglected. But here the self is dispersed into the past, into the depths of memory, into that "great storehouse" of countless and disparate images; it is the task of the confessing self to "collect out of dispersion" and to "place ready at hand" the pieces of its body left unheeded and scattered in the infinite depths of its memory (10.8).[9]

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9 Unless otherwise stated, all translations from the *Confessions* derive from Pine-Coffin 1961.

To confess is to stand face to face with oneself, to become a question unto oneself as both subject and object; yet this can never occur in the pure present moment of the confession since the present disperses infinitely: "how can we say that even the present is," asks Augustine, "when the reason why it is is that it is not to be?" (11.14). The self must know itself in its duration, in its temporal extension, "for although the self continually ceases to be in the present moment because the present moment continually ceases to be, the self that was present does not cease to exist altogether"; the self is dispersed in its past, and the past can be made present in the very act of remembering (Coles 1992.34). Hence, "to be set before its own eyes" the confessing self becomes a remembering self and, for Augustine, this does not simply mean that the self can be remembered, but that the remembering self is the self: "the memory . . . is awe-inspiring in its profound and incalculable complexity. . . . Yet this thing I am," says Augustine (10.17). Thus, according to Coles, "to confess—to remember—one's thoughts and desires is not simply to collect them out of dispersion, but to collect the self out of dispersion, to draw the self together" (Coles 1992.37). Because the "memory and its innumerable caverns and hollows are full beyond compute of countless things of all kinds" (10.17), the self is a confessing self that looks to itself and collects itself endlessly.

This process of the collection or confession of the self is a derivation of the Latin word *cogitare* which, according to Augustine, means "to think or to collect one's thoughts." "In Latin the word *cogo*, meaning I assemble or I collect, is related to *cogito*, which means I think" (10.11). Thus thinking constitutes the simultaneous process of collecting, but also organizing and redistributing one's thoughts; or, in this case, confession becomes that form of thinking in which the self collects the self from the depths of its memory. The problem, however, is that one finds it difficult to maintain this constant vigilance; the mind will always wander, will always find itself distracted from the task at hand. The collected bits of the self will then "sink back and recede again into the more remote cells of the memory" (10.11).

But Augustine does more than collect his memories; Augustine writes his memories. Apparently, *cogitare* is also *scribere*; the confession of the self is also the writing of the self, and thus a practical and strategic response to the fleeting moments of the present. If, as Augustine believes, the confession of the self is at the same time a remembering of the self and thus also a making of the self present to itself, then the writing of the self sustains the freedom of a periodic forgetfulness. As with Marcus' *Meditations*, where the written text ensures immediate access to the rules of

conduct, written confessions ensure the presence of the self unto itself despite its memory lapses. And so, because the confessing self is transferred to the written text and thereby given a semblance of stability and permanency, the self can in its moments of forgetfulness turn to the text and re-engage itself.

Yet here also this freedom from momentary forgetfulness permits greater vigilance and incites further writing. We write with a certain freedom that allows continued reflection; we can turn the text over in our minds indefinitely, adding bits of detail here, a little more precision there, rearranging blocks of material, even deleting material if we wish, all this without the worry of forgetting what we previously remembered. The self becomes its own permanent copy editor, so to speak. Furthermore, the infinite depths of memory likewise demand an endless act of writing. We are driven constantly to write the future as it passes over into the past, always striving to keep pace with this ever deepening and expanding memory. Yet it is the case that Augustine has something more in mind when he writes.

There is in Athanasius' *Life of St. Anthony* an interesting observation regarding the possibilities the act of writing may have for the cultivation of the soul. When asked how one might lay siege to the demons or temptations of the mind, St. Anthony offers the following strategy (55):

> As a safeguard against sin, let the following be observed: let us note and write down our deeds and the movements of our soul as if we were to tell them to each other. If we are utterly ashamed to have them known, be assured that we shall cease sinning and even cease thinking anything evil. For who wishes to be seen sinning, or, when he has sinned, does not pretend otherwise because he wishes to escape notice? Therefore, just as we would not commit fornication in the sight of each other, so if we write our thoughts as if to tell them to one another, we shall guard ourselves the better from foul thoughts through shame of having them known. Let the written account serve us instead of the eyes of our fellow monks, so that, blushing at the writing as at being seen, we may not even think an evil thought, and, moulding ourselves in this way, we shall be able to bring the body into subjection.[10]

10 Translation is from Keenan 1952.185.

In some ways, St. Anthony's solution is reminiscent of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon and Foucault's discussion of it: it is a self-regulating technology where instead of the uncertain gaze of the watchtower—or here the gaze of the monks—the notes that one writes about oneself serve to maintain the feeling of continuous exposure.[11] Writing as unrestrained confession, the writing of one's thoughts to be seen by others, this will help bring the body into subjection.

It is not the case, however, that Augustine should have this activity of self-regulation strictly in mind when he writes his own thoughts. Yet clearly he wishes to incite others to the same confessional activity, not merely because it will help them regulate their own thoughts and thereby control the body, but because it will lay them bare to the gaze of others. As Augustine says, "I need not tell this to you, my God, but in your presence I tell it to my own kind, to those other men . . . who may perhaps pick up this book. And I tell it so that I and all who read my words may realize the depths from which we are to cry to you" (2.3). Perhaps in addition to being a practical tool for the enhancement of one's own ability to confess effectively, writing serves more importantly as a form of correspondence in which others are induced to expose themselves similarly. Not only does the writing of one's confessions incite an ever increasing and penetrating gaze into the self by the self, it also effects a proliferation of confession among others. Confession is a "public declaration" and, "in this sense . . . multiplies its effects through a politics of exemplarity. Augustine's *Confessions* provides an exemplary model toward which others might strive" (Coles 1992.50). This function is, of course, in keeping with the intent of other such written texts as the *Martyrologies* and the *Lives of the Saints*, as seen, for example, in Augustine's own positive response to Athanasius' *Life of St. Anthony*.

Yet, in this context, where confession occurs within the circle of one's fellow confessors, not only is the *publicatio sui* given in view of others, it is also received from others. As with the correspondence between Marcus and Fronto where comfort and advice are freely exchanged between master and pupil, confession incites not only the proliferation of the act, but also the proliferation of advice given in response to the act. As we will see later, there develops a need for those who can listen and offer advice effectively, those trained in the art of the inducement and decipher-

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11 See Foucault 1979.

ment of the soul's confession. This is what Foucault refers to as *exagoreusis*. The confessor must place the self into the trustworthy hands of the master (Foucault 1988.48). And this is in keeping with the office of the Bishop, whose very title, *episkopos* (overseer), implies one who will not only induce confession but respond to and examine the confession of others. Thus, as with the care of the self, so also with the confession of the self, there arises an "intensification of social relations"; the writing activity itself facilitates an even greater intensification of social relations or, perhaps more appropriately, power relations (Foucault 1986.53). Yet, at the same time, we observe a significant shift in the deployment of the writing technique in accordance with the intensification of these power relations.

The Stoic practice of writing the personal handbook of self-cultivation ends with the death of the author; but the Christian will stop writing in favor of another kind of death (i.e., the passivity of the subject) that comes with the face to face *verbalization* of confession. The activity of writing will become the strict province of those who would induce and decipher the confession of another, and it is for this reason that we see a proliferation, not in written confessions, but in the writing of confessional handbooks intended to aid the priest in the procurement of confession and in the prescription of cures for the soul. The priest will displace the practice of written confession; he will become the writing tablet upon which the sinner writes his/her confession. To be sure, the priestly function constitutes a superior writing technique that not only records but penetrates, responds, and prescribes. The penitent is passive to himself/herself, but open to the confessional. From the Medieval handbook on penance by Burchard of Worms (ca. 1008–12), I cite the following written recommendation designed to procure confession:

> The priest ought affectionately to address the penitent in these words: "Brother, do not blush to confess thy sins, for I also am a sinner, and perchance I have done worse deeds than thou hast. Wherefore I warn thee in these things, since it is a habitual fault of the human race . . . both in falling to commit sin and not to bring out by confessing what has been committed, but to defend in denying and in defending to multiply that which had been disproved. . . ." But if the priest sees that he is bashful, let him again proceed. And then he shall question him in order thus: "Perchance, beloved, not all things that thou

> hast done quite come to memory. I will question thee: take care lest at the persuasion of the devil we conceal anything."[12]

CONCLUSION

It is characteristic of discursive practices, and especially the critical disciplines that support them, to pay more attention to the history of ideas than to the history of real practices. The simple question is rarely asked: What does it mean to write? What effect does writing have on the development and constitution of the human self? As Foucault notes, the connection between writing and the self "is not a modern trait born of the Reformation or of romanticism; it is one of the most ancient Western traditions. It was well established and deeply rooted when Augustine started his *Confessions"* (Foucault 1988.27).

Writing represents a practical strategy; this is evident in both Marcus' *Meditations* and Augustine's *Confessions*, where the distinction resides not in the act of writing itself but in what is written. Marcus collects and inscribes codes of behavior in order to take care of the self in everyday life. The Delphic injunction, "know thyself" (γνῶθι σαυτόν), is of little concern for the Stoic philosopher who, like the Gnostic, already knows the self. This writing-practice becomes a form of *paideia* designed for self-cultivation, not self-disclosure. For Augustine, on the other hand, the self remains hidden, dispersed in the infinite depths of the memory. One must search, collect, and organize these disparate bits of memory in order to render the self present unto itself. Furthermore, this activity is no longer a private matter; writing becomes *publicatio sui*, a confessional strategy by which the self draws itself out of amnestic solitude and lays itself bare to the public gaze.

Perhaps Marcus' *Meditations* represent a superb model of Stoic vigilance in the culture of self-cultivation, though clearly the culture of *paideia* introduced every school child to the ethical value obtained in the collection and inscription of these therapeutic *logoi*. Augustine's *Confessions* also serve as a model for the Christian who would come to know the self in its sinful though equally divine status. Yet the *Confessions* mark that strategic moment whereby the Bishop not only encourages others to use the

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12 Translation is from McNeill and Gamer 1938.324–25.

medium of writing in the practice of confession, but to make public the self-disclosing *logoi* themselves. Moreover, it was only a matter of time before the penitent's text should give way to the insightful gaze of the Bishop's watchtower, and the practice of writing one's confessions should occasion the pervading technologies of the Confessional Handbooks.

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