ONESELF AS OTHERS: AURELIUS AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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οἷα ἂν πολλάκις φαντασθῇς, τοιαύτη σοι ἔσται ἡ διάνοια· βάπτεται γὰρ ὑπὸ τῶν φαντασιῶν ἡ ψυχή.

Your mind will be just like the representations you have repeatedly, for the soul is dyed by its representations.
(*Meditations* 5.16)

1. INTRODUCTION

Trends over the last several decades have irreparably changed the face of autobiography.[1] From near marginalization as a kind of "paraliterary" genre, at best a species of belletrism, it has now come to be emblematic of issues with which modern criticism finds itself deeply engaged and sometimes even sorely vexed. This has much to do with problems of definition. What complicates efforts to describe generic boundaries for autobiography on strictly formal grounds is the correlation that holds between its form and the highly variable concept of "self" that implicitly guides its composition. On the one hand, and like the faithful reflection it claims to be, autobiography always moves along with its subject, changing shape and position in accordance with the latter's own shifts. Yet unlike a "passive" mirror that simply reflects what is already "out there," the tropes and structures of

1 The bibliography is large. See, for example, Beaujour 1991, Bruss 1976, Eakin 1999, Folkenflik 1993, Lejeune 1975 and 1989, Olney 1972, Rubin 1986, and Smith 2001. For a brief history of modern critical discussions of autobiography, see Watson 1993.

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autobiography themselves affect the position and shape of what the subject sees, and so, too, what gets said and understood about it. Just what the self is, whence it comes, how it is configured, even "where" and in what kind of space and time it might properly reside, and also what exactly it "does" there, are some of the many legitimate questions whose answers will influence how any history of oneself gets written. These questions asked and answers given will naturally also differ with time and cultural setting. Is Zen Buddhist autobiography *stricto sensu* possible at all, to pick an extreme example? Or could such a thing be said to exist within its metaphysical frame of reference only by a kind of sleight of hand, as a history of the sheerest illusion, mere shadow play flung across the surface of a mirror that properly "intercepts only other mirrors," therefore actually reflecting only "emptiness itself" (Barthes 1982.78f.)?

The different and even conflicting ways in which one's self gets narrativized—the varying gestures and genres in which one age or one culture or even one community finds it proper to conduct its discourse on the self—will, in turn, help formulate what pass for correct answers to these questions of essence, origin, constitution, "residence," and function—including answers that reject some of those questions as illegitimate. Most striking about autobiographical discourse is the apparent fact that, despite its name, it is never really autarchic. What the self is understood to be will certainly control how it speaks of itself, but that understanding will generally be shaped by collective motives that issue in the prior speech of *others*.[2]

If "conventional autobiographical genres . . . reflect idealized cultural patterns," as Jerome Bruner notes (1993.40), we should expect discourse about oneself to be a rhetorically configured and thus a highly *tropological* kind of speech.[3] Within any given community, autobiographical narrative structures have already been institutionalized long before an individual sub-

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2 See, in particular, Lejeune 1980, along with Ricoeur's sustained examination (1992) of the constitution of selfhood through interaction with others.

3 Bruner continues (1993.40): "The 'rightness' of any autobiographical version is relative to the intentions and conventions that govern its construction or its interpretation . . . By 'intentions and conventions' I mean something roughly corresponding to a genre in fiction because it is authorial intentions embodied in a conventional form and style that constitute a genre. In autobiography these provide more or less canonical ways of organizing the account of a life . . . Each contains a conception of human agency, a view of the vicissitudes that beset it, an account of the protagonist's location in a 'virtual' culture, and a theory or a story of how the narrator's protagonist managed to get from there and then to here and now."

ject ever begins her or his "own" narration. The extent to which communal expectations tend to become concretized in specific actions, behaviors, and ways of thinking for the individual confirms how much the introjection of these expectations comes largely to prescribe the terms in which a legitimate understanding of oneself will occur.[4] The consistent postures struck in early Christian hagiography, for instance, suggest how such expectations influence self-expression, thereby prompting the "intimate" process of self-understanding along one path or another by projecting onto that process templates derived from previously valorized social roles.[5] These provide, at least, for instances of direct, conscious emulation—the Stoic of a lionized Sokrates or Cato,[6] the Christian of some blessed predecessor along the arduous path of *imitatio Christi*. They also undoubtedly influence deeper, subconscious ways in which members of the group will think and speak about themselves.

Autobiography, then, paradoxically seems to be a kind of private speech in which *others* have already had quite a say and in which *others* perhaps continue speaking in and through what is ostensibly a solitary act of locution. These and similar considerations help strengthen William Spengemann's pronouncement nearly three decades ago that the "movement away from representational discourse toward self-enacting, self-reflexive verbal structures . . . make[s] the very idea of literary modernism synonymous with that of autobiography" (1980.xiii). In this view, the centrality of autobiography to literary theory is a function of how much narrative object and narrative form are seen as complicit—and how much this situation is further complicated when the *narrative object* also claims to be the *subject who narrates*. Like the famous Escher lithograph of two hands, each sketched in the act of sketching the other, autobiographical narrative offers a picture of the circularity of self and self-discourse. But what seems a closed, hermetic circle is actually large enough to encompass the words and actions of everyone else in this process of developing an understanding of oneself. Given such considerations, it becomes difficult—even when looking at the (perhaps) less methodologically complicated past—to maintain that autobiography is simply the record of a solitary, unmediated communion with

4 See Bourdieu 1977 on the notion of *habitus* and Gee 1992 on "social practices."

5 See Cox 1983.17–44 on literary (especially biographical) templates for the holy man in late antiquity.

6 On Stoic hagiography, see Rutherford 1989.59–80, MacMullen 1966.70–93.

the inward modalities of one's "own" time and space. Rather than "the soul's silent dialogue with itself," then, autobiography looks instead to be a genre that, in a sense, might be among the most *intimately public* kinds of discourse.[7] If nothing else, this recognition should free us up to examine as autobiography texts that may not at first sight look anything like what we might accept for inclusion in that category.

2. AURELIUS AS AUTOBIOGRAPHY

The issue of how autobiographical subjects are shaped by the narrative forms of autobiography, as well as vice versa, offers a good point of entry into the expression of self embodied in Book 1 of Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations*.[8] That the first book is autobiographical at least in part (and certainly in spirit) has rarely been doubted, as we shall see, even if formal peculiarities, along with its relation to the rest of the work, have sometimes made its classification unsure.[9]

The name *Meditations* itself, of course, provides little aid in helping us get our bearings here and does nothing to confirm or disconfirm expectations about genre.[10] That title, under which the text now generally (but not universally) circulates, seems to have been Meric Casaubon's coinage, appearing as *Meditations concerning himselfe* in his 1632 English translation. His later Latin edition (1643) bears the title *De seipso et ad seipsum*—clumsier, but perhaps closer in sense to the Greek phrase τὰ εἰς ἑαυτὸν ("writing to himself") used by the ninth-century Arethas, as well as to the heading τὰ καθ' ἑαυτὸν ("writing about himself") that appears in some manuscripts. Nor does modern consensus that the work as a whole falls into the category of ὑπομνήματα (*hupomnêmata*), private and personal

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7 Cf. Bruner 1993.55: "Autobiography is life construction through 'text' construction . . . it is the culture in a more loosely defined sense that provides the formulae for the construction of lives. The principal instruments by which culture does so are its narrative forms, its genres, its modes of 'packaging' forms of life."

8 For the Greek text, see Farquharson 1944 and (for *Meditations* 1) Hadot 1998b; for an English translation, see Farquharson 1989.

9 On *Meditations* 1 as "autobiographical," see, e.g., Hadot 1998a.29 and 1998b.lvii–lvix. Rutherford 1989.104 characterizes it as "autobiography cast in a literary and philosophic mould"; see also 1989.51 and 90. Bowerstock 1991.29 speaks of "spiritual autobiography."

10 See Hadot 1998a.23–34 for a concise account of the history of the title and early attempts at classifying the work.

"notes to oneself" (Hadot 1998a.30–34), necessarily preclude thinking about it as in some sense autobiographical. This is certainly truest with respect to Book 1, which scholarship has often approached differently from the other books, and with sufficient reason. Its "undeniable unity" (29) and roughly chronological order (1998b.xli–xlvi) contrast with what many have taken to be the more random organization of Books 2–12, leading to the conclusion that it was probably the last book written (Hadot 1998a.34); and it seems to differ from them also in terms of both its rhetorical structure and its specific content. While the remainder of *Meditations* takes the form of the author's injunctions to himself (*ad seipsum*), the presentation of biographical material in Book 1, especially insofar as it seems directed towards a kind of tabulation of formative influences, strongly suggests an autobiographical aim (*de seipso*). This essay proposes to map that aim's trajectory.

The best place to begin will be with a definition that probably voices most conventional expectations of the genre, with the objective in what follows being to isolate those respects in which the form of *Meditations* 1 might make it look like something *other* than what is expected. I adopt as normative the definition of Philippe Lejeune, not only for its apparent simplicity, but also because that simplicity is the result of a sustained meditation on the issues of personhood and identity. For Lejeune, then, autobiography is "a retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality" (1989.4). The ideology of selfhood implicit in this definition needs some unpacking.[11] It will be convenient to do so by way of a brief survey of how the first book of *Meditations* has generally been read.

Pierre Hadot, whose work is the most recent study to date, discerns in the seventeen chapters of *Meditations* 1 the contours of an autobiography along much the same lines set forth by Lejeune, albeit in the highly truncated form of a (more or less) chronological "inventory" rather than a continuous narrative. It is more like a "catalogue of virtues and of teachings," a bare "outline of Marcus' life itself" (1998a.281f.).[12] Along with the absence of narrative, the kind of full, literary realism found in most proper autobiographies—especially in the characterization of others—is

11 Cf. Bruner 1993.41–43, who sees in Lejeune's proposal less a generic definition than a statement of all-too-restrictive "'felicity conditions' imposed on acts of self-revelation generally." On the influential notion of the "autobiographical pact," see Lejeune 1989.3–30.

12 Cf. Hadot 1998b.xxvii–xl.

also singled out as lacking. Yet even though it is "not a collection of recollections in which the Emperor causes those he has known *to live again just as they were*" (280f.; emphasis added), Book 1 nonetheless "presents an undeniable unity in its evocation of all those, gods and men, to whom Marcus is expressing his gratitude" (29). However, even this statement cannot pass without reservation, since Hadot must also acknowledge that in the case of many of the objects of the emperor's appreciation, "their personality disappears completely behind the advice they have given" (281). While it is true, as Hadot and others note, that each successive chapter in Book 1 presents a somewhat fuller sketch of the traits Aurelius associates with each individual—starting from a bare line in Chapter 1 in reference to his grandfather Verus and culminating in the "portrait" of Antoninus Pius in Chapter 17—this is still autobiography from which much of the *bios* ("those he has known . . . just as they were") seems to have been subtracted. On the whole, even in that fullest of character sketches, and especially within the much wider context of spiritual accounting in which Hadot situates Book 1, the text reads less like conventional autobiography and more like a "balance sheet" (281).[13]

While recognizing Book 1 as a *kind* of autobiography, R. B. Rutherford's earlier and excellent study of *Meditations* is also compelled to acknowledge the degree to which that designation does not quite fit, inasmuch as the work "cannot be said to belong to any of the regular categories of ancient writing" (1989.48). One of Rutherford's accomplishments is, in fact, his meticulous history of the rich network of literary and cultural influences—ranging over biography and portraiture, panegyric and diatribe, encomium and soliloquy—that may have contributed to the form that *Meditations* takes. Notwithstanding that account, the seventeen chapters of Book 1 are identified as autobiographical only in a peculiar, exceptional sense. The simple attribution cannot stand alone but needs to be qualified each time it is made, and for Rutherford that qualification each time has recourse to the language of indirection and concealment. The "ambiguous status" (90) of Book 1 consists in the fact that it is "in a sense a piece of autobiography, but of a very oblique and reserved kind" (51), "not straight-

13 Cf. Hadot 1998b.lviif.: "À première lecture, c'est un recueil de souvenirs, une brève autobiographie. Mais, en fait, il ne s'agit pas d'une véritable autobiographie . . . [L]e livre premier . . . est rédigé dans un style dépouillé, elliptique, avec la sécheresse voulue d'un inventaire." On the language and style of *Meditations* 1, see Martinazzoli 1951, Rutherford 1989.90–96, Hadot 1998b.lx–lxiii, and, especially, Magnano 1990.

forwardly autobiographical" (90) at all. This is most clearly due to what it does *not* offer (90):

> . . . striking is the allusiveness of Marcus' references to himself and his life: no continuous narration of any episode, no clear location of events in place or time, no account of experiences we might assume were influential or painful—the loss of his real father, for example, or of children.

Along with Hadot, Rutherford thus identifies the absence from *Meditations* 1 of precisely those characteristics in whose terms Lejeune's definition is constructed. Although not structureless,[14] there is nonetheless no consistent narrative flow, not even at the episodic level; no attempt even to situate (much less to describe) important places and times; no history of the impact of events to shape or simply just to register some memorable emotion. For both, what chiefly defines the genre, and what Aurelius clearly fails to provide, is the narrative continuity of a subject's retrospective view directed towards specific and significant influences of which he was the object. Book 1 somehow *should be* and yet somehow falls far short of that.

Some twenty years earlier, Arnaldo Momigliano (1971.18) makes only *obiter* reference to the work in the text of his lectures on the development of Greek biography, despite his attention to other authors' accounts of themselves.[15] He acknowledges in passing that Book 1 is "autobiographical," while identifying the rest of the work as belonging instead to "the literary genre of the *soliloquia*." His comments on the subject, in fact, concern Aurelius and his work less than the "pride of place" he feels has been erroneously given them by Georg Misch, the third edition of whose *History of Ancient Autobiography* appeared some ten years before Momigliano's lectures. He finds Misch's study "of considerable interest in so far as it clarifies what the ancients felt about themselves, but . . . confusing as a history

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14 Cf. *Med.* 9.21 for a rough sketch of an autobiographical chronology. See Farquharson 1989. xv–xvi, Rutherford 1989.90f., Hadot 1998a.278–80 and 1998b.xli–xlvi on the chronological framework of Book 1. After acknowledging its "approximately chronological order," Farquharson (1989.xvi) comments: "But even in these longer chapters [e.g., 1.16 and 1.17], there is no rational order to what he records: he seems to be writing things down as they come into his head, and some references are completely opaque to us."

15 Cf. also Momigliano 1985.91, Bowerstock 1991.

of autobiography." This is especially the case insofar as Misch chooses not "to decide whether we are entitled to draw a line between true autobiographies, memoirs of one's own times, diaries, etc.," and is guided instead by the expression of "self-awareness" as the benchmark for determining what is or is not autobiographical.

For Misch, student and later son-in-law of the hermeneutician Wilhelm Dilthey, *Meditations* in its entirety represents a significant stage in the development of the literary "self-awareness" that would not long afterwards culminate in the ancient world in Augustine's *Confessions*.[16] This is not simply due to the "rare immediacy" Aurelius manages to achieve (1951.450), but especially because Misch sees that immediacy as the result of a major generic innovation. *Meditations* as a whole forces a critical breach between rhetoric and philosophy that takes the form of a stripping away of the element of second-person diatribe from the genre of philosophical (including satirical) soliloquy. Misch identifies the result of this divestiture as "the regularized moral practice of self-communion" (446)—whose roots he sees as already evident in Horatian satire, Senecan address, and the Epictetan monologue—now for virtually the first time unfolding in the absence of an external audience, whether real or pretended (446):

> With [Seneca] it was plain that the literary form of address to the self was not rooted purely in inwardness, and if we compare it with the way Epictetus in his monologues makes the moral of particular incidents stand out, and just after or before doing so addresses another person, it is reasonable to suppose that the literary form [sc. of soliloquy] belonged to the many artistic resources of the Hellenistic diatribe. This brings the originality of Marcus Aurelius's "Meditations" into proper perspective: in them the matter of the soliloquy is entirely removed from the rhetorical pursuit of philosophy.

Its "immediacy," therefore, derives from its sheer "inwardness"—though an inwardness that, while coming to expression in highly allusive style, still manages somehow to be intelligible to us as eavesdropping read-

16 For representative comparisons between Aurelius and Augustine, see, e.g., Hadot 1998a.33, 287 and 1998b.lxviif. For Momigliano (1971.18), the *Confessions* is "the first work which combines autobiographical information and self-awareness perfectly."

ers. From what Misch takes to be Aurelius's viewpoint throughout *Meditations*, this is soliloquy in the authentic, etymological sense of the word:[17] speech without even the hint of a glance to one side or the other in the direction of what Misch calls the "Thou," which might only serve to distract it from its actual, intended audience. If the second-person pronoun is deployed—as it is throughout all but the first book—this is merely a literary tactic, a discursive trope pressed into service to create a new space for genuine reflexivity to unfold. That space is virtual, however, not real. "The relation of an I to a Thou should not be exaggerated into a separation; for the conversation is a method of representing spiritual happenings, and the advantage of that method is that it can dispense with divisions existing only in the abstract" (461). Aurelius's "conversation" with himself—explicitly throughout the "soliloquizing" books, and perhaps implicitly in Book 1 as well—in fact only "makes plain the unified content of his inner life," since the Thou thus addressed has no reference other than or independent from that of the "I" that is speaking.

We should note that, on this argument, *two* kinds of stripping have actually taken place: one rhetorical, the other phenomenological (for lack of a better word); each, moreover, exerts influence on the other. Soliloquy as a generic form has first been stripped away from the literature of Hellenistic diatribe, thus interrupting a conventional discourse between a speaker in a text and his second-person addressee, real or fictional. The lines of communication are then reinstated only after a second and far more significant divestiture has occurred, namely the stripping from this Thou of all reference to anything that falls outside the proper sphere of the first-person self. A door has been opened, and thereupon closed. The Thou that has been granted entry is no longer one whose discursive place the reader is intended to assume, as was presumably the case in diatribe and satire. Aurelius speaks only to and for himself and not with others. Only thus denatured, as it were, and emptied of "external" content, can the Thou be allowed back "inside," where it is thenceforth used as a counter in a kind of language game, now enjoying what Emile Benveniste, for instance, calls "solely a reality of discourse" (1977.218).[18]

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17 I am ventriloquizing Misch here. The term "soliloquy" (*soliloquium*) is, of course, an Augustinian coinage (*Conf*. 2.7), thus post-dating Aurelius.

18 On the "emptiness" of personal pronouns, see Benveniste 1977.217: "What then is the reality to which *I* or *you* refers? It is solely 'a reality of discourse,' and this is a very strange thing. *I* cannot be defined except in terms of 'locution,' not in terms of objects as a

Whatever the validity of Misch's claims about the evolution of Aurelian discourse out of the genres of diatribe and soliloquy,[19] his remarks about the Aurelian Thou as a "divested" entity are intriguing. If Aurelius falls short of a normative definition of autobiography, *Meditations* nonetheless preserves at its core the discursive, formal relation between an "I" and a "Thou." This relation is obvious in Books 2–12, where the second-person pronoun is regularly used to designate the addressee of precepts the author delivers to himself. This is not exactly a conversation, however, since it unfolds "only in the abstract" (Misch 1951.461). The interaction is one-sided and oblique because only the Thou expressly appears in the text, namely at the level of semantic markers of person, whether pronominal or in the morphology of verbal endings. The first-person subject, on the other hand, always occupies an inexplicit background as a voice that enjoins on the Thou one moral consideration or another. It speaks to itself as "Thou" without ever revealing itself overtly as "I"; and because the Thou by definition has no voice of its own with which to respond, the first person remains oddly central in the text and yet at the same time also just as oddly effaced and peripheral. Or so it would seem. The discourse is, in fact, guided by its reflexivity. The practices and values that the unexpressed first-person subject singles out as worth the attention of the Thou always bend back, as it were, to characterize that subject in terms of its own needs and deficiencies. The "I" emerges in and through the Thou.

If a divested Thou has been incorporated into *Meditations* 2–12 so as to provide a structure to facilitate self-conscious soliloquy, a similar but possibly more radical kind of divestiture seems to have stripped virtually all the personal pronouns from the "autobiographical" Book 1, where there would presumably be some anticipation of encountering them—especially that of the first person. Yet apart from a few instances of the first-person pronoun in the genitive and dative cases in passages in which it is used to mark possession and "interest" where its absence might otherwise cause

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nominal sign is. *I* signifies 'the person who is uttering the present instance of the discourse containing *I*.'" On the first-person pronoun as a "shifter," Ricoeur 1992.45f. comments: "'I' so little designates the referent of an identifying reference that what appears to be its definition—namely, 'any person who, in speaking, designates himself or herself'—cannot be substituted for the occurrences of the word 'I' . . . The failure to pass the test of substitution is decisive here; it confirms the fact that the expression does not belong to the order of entities capable of being identified by the path of reference."

19 For a more studied and comprehensive history of generic influences, see Rutherford 1989.48–89.

ambiguity,[20] the lexical marker for "I" in all its inflections—both nominal and verbal—is missing from all but the final chapter of the book, where Aurelius expresses thanks for what the gods have bestowed on "me." This is certainly the most striking feature of the work, especially in terms of Lejeune's definition. The latter understandably expects from autobiography the enunciation of an autobiographical subject, and this in two senses. The subject normatively comes to expression both as the narrator and also in and as what gets narrated—namely, both as speaker and also through the reflexive claim the speaker exerts over "his own existence," "his individual life," and "his personality." What Rutherford (1989.51) identifies as the text's "oblique and reserved" character speaks precisely to this absence, making *Meditations* 1 at best a kind of *autobiographie indirecte* (Hadot 1998b.lviii), autobiography without the direct enunciation of a self.

This is not its only peculiarity, however, and the phenomenon of "selfless" autobiographical narrative in fact becomes easier to appreciate in terms of these other apparent anomalies. First, and in the absence of a first-person subject who expressly narrates the continuity of "his own life" up to the point where the story begins to be told, Book 1 focuses instead on narrative descriptions of *others*.[21] Each of the first sixteen chapters identifies one person, either a family member or teacher, of whom Aurelius either had direct experience or else—as with such exemplary figures from the past as the Stoic martyrs Helvidius, Brutus, and Cato (*Med.* 1.14)—about whom he learned through writings to which others had introduced him.[22] What ensues, on the one hand, is a sort of literary portraiture whose antecedents can be traced back to such traditional genres as character sketches, biographies, testimonia, eulogies, and funeral speeches.[23] On the other, these others about whom Aurelius writes also curiously reflect the same "obliqueness" and "reserve" that characterize the writing subject's own self-presentation.

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20 Note genitives at *Med.* 1.7, 1.14, 1.17.3, 1.17.4, and datives at 1.17.4, 1.17.6, 1.17.7. The accusative appears at 1.17.1, 1.17.4 and inflected verbal forms at 1.17.1 (προσέπεσον, ἔπραξα) and 1.17.4 (κατεσχέθην). See further Magnano 1990.

21 See Hadot 1998b.lviii: "Cet examen de conscience . . . est pour lui un effort pour prendre conscience de lui-même, de soi moi inséré dans le tissu social, des influences qu'il a subies, de la manière dont il a accueilli les bienfaits venus des hommes et des dieux . . . Marc Aurèle parle de lui-même en parlant des autres."

22 Cf. the case of Iunius Rusticus (1.7), the account of whose loan (or gift?) of a copy of Epictetus's *Enchiridion* initially has the look of a conversion narrative; see Rutherford 1989.92, 105, Hadot 1998b.lxxxvii–lxxxix.

23 See Rutherford 1989.21–26 and 49–55.

This is because their portraits have themselves all been subjected to drastic truncation. They are far from being embedded "life histories" or even character sketches, as would have been the case in their literary precursors; and here we recall Hadot's comment that, in these recollections, the author makes no attempt to "cause those he has known to live again just as they were" (1998a.280f.). With respect both to the narrating subject and also the objects of narration, the specific contours of individual lives instead seem quite "irrelevant." As Rutherford (1989.95f.) notes:

> We find neither a list of abstract virtues to which the *proficiens* should aspire nor a series of life histories or irrelevant descriptions of the people he names. Their physical appearance, for example, is almost never alluded to. Much more important than this is the impression which the man conveys to others, his exemplary influence.

The opening chapters of Book 1 illustrate the stylistic pattern adopted throughout this section of the work and also suggest the manner in which the autobiographical subject positions himself in relation to the others he opts to focalize in his narrative (*Med.* 1.1–4):[24]

> α′. παρὰ τοῦ πάππου Οὐήρου, τὸ καλόηθες καὶ ἀόργητον.
> β′. παρὰ τῆς δόξης καὶ μνήμης τῆς περὶ τοῦ γεννήσαντος, τὸ αἰδῆμον καὶ ἀρρενικόν.
> γ′. παρὰ τῆς μητρός, τὸ θεοσεβὲς καὶ μεταδοτικόν· καὶ ἀφεκτικὸν οὐ μόνον τοῦ κακοποιεῖν, ἀλλὰ καὶ τοῦ ἐπὶ ἐννοίας γίνεσθαι τοιαύτης· ἔτι δὲ τὸ λιτὸν κατὰ τὴν δίαιταν καὶ πόρρω τῆς πλουσιακῆς διαγωγῆς.
> δ′. παρὰ τοῦ προπάππου, τὸ μὴ εἰς δημοσίας διστριβὰς φοιτῆσαι, καὶ τὸ ἀγαθοῖς διδασκάλοις κατ᾽ οἰκίαν χρήσασθαι, καὶ τὸ γνῶναι, ὅτι εἰς τὰ τοιαῦτα δεῖ ἐκτενῶς ἀναλίσκειν.
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> 1. From grandfather Verus: a kind disposition and even temper.
> 2. From father's reputation and memory: humility and manliness.
> 3. From mother: fear of god, and generosity; and abstention

24 All translations are my own.

not just from doing wrong but even from the mere intent; further, simplicity of lifestyle, remote from the habits of the wealthy.

4. From grandfather's father: not to attend public schools and to make use of good teachers at home; and to recognize that on such things money should be freely spent.

More like a checklist—"le bilan de ce qu'il a recu" (Hadot 1998b. lviii)—than a story, these "portraits" of others unfold in an abstracted narrative space that resembles the artificial, dispossessed, and often awkwardly redisposed space of museums. We move through the pages of Book 1 as if through a gallery filled with pictures torn from the environments in and for which they were originally meant.[25] As a result of their displacement, they confront us with a heaviness of meaning that is simultaneously counterbalanced by a strange feeling of weightlessness. Their density is, for the most part, anaphoric and suggestive; it reaches back deep into the lived experiences of which they were once a part. Aurelius has chosen these individuals rather than others apparently because their "exemplary influence" on him has been the most profound.

Their weightlessness, on the other hand, results from the extreme abbreviation with which they are presented. The truncated character of the references to others is, of course, partly due to the fact that we as readers are excluded from precisely those lived experiences on which the choice to mention these individuals is founded. This speaks to the purpose of *Meditations* as a whole and the style that follows from that aim, as has often been noted. Never intended for an audience, the work instead takes the form of *hupomnêmata*, occasional reminders or "notes to oneself,"[26] and can therefore get by quite well with mere mnemonic "tags" in place of explicit narrations. For the reader, this frequently gives rise to an impenetrable allusiveness, as when (*Med.* 1.7) the author mentions a letter written by his tutor Iunius Rusticus to Aurelius's mother. This is a rare detail in a landscape otherwise almost entirely devoid of real things, a concrete object emerging from the

25 This suggests a superficial but intriguing parallel to the architecture of the classical orator's House of Memory, the mnemonic construction of "places" (*loci*) and "images" (*formae, simulacra*) through which to organize a speech for later, "extemporaneous" delivery. See Yates 1966.1–49 and Carruthers 1990.16–45.

26 See Momigliano 1971.90, Rutherford 1989.26–39, Hadot 1998a.30–34 and 1998b.lxxx–viii, Sellars 2003.147f.

subject's own past, and from a past marked by the intimacies of personal correspondence to which biographical scholarship is always irresistibly drawn.[27] Its allure is heightened by mention of specific points of origin and destination, as if making a genuine reference to a real time and place—the letter from Sinuessa, the letter written by Iunius Rusticus, the letter sent to Faustina. But for all that, its density is only a mirage; the letter itself falls apart in our hands before we can read more than the name of the writer, the addressee, and the place of composition. This is first because we learn no more about it than what has just been said, since it was never really meant to be shared with us at all. For the author, its bare mention suffices as a reminder; for us, it amounts to a tantalizingly blind reference at best. More important, however, is the fact that even for Aurelius the letter as such turns out, in a sense, to have no significant content. Its weight as an artifact has been displaced by its value as an *example* of something *else*. However suggestive it might be of memorable interactions among real people in the subject's lived experience, the letter turns out to be quite literally immaterial; all that counts is that it offers an instance that prompts an endorsement of the plain style of rhetoric (τὸ . . . ἀφελῶς γράφειν), and perhaps too—at a more abstract level—of "artlessness" or *apheleia* as a general virtue.[28]

Just as in the case of the letter from Rusticus, the individuals whom Aurelius cites have also undergone a radical divestiture of *bios*. This is what Hadot intends by his observation (1998a.281), quoted earlier, about the "disappearance of personality," and also what Rutherford aims at in his remark (1989.95)—presumably meant to reflect Aurelius's own judgment—that equates "life histories" with "irrelevant descriptions." We

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27 Cf. Hadot's extensive doxography of the personages of Book 1, which Aurelius himself (cf. *Med*. 9.32) would no doubt consider "irrelevant." In his introduction to Farquharson 1989, Rutherford comments (xvii): "There is a strong tendency to cut out everyday events and trivial incidents: though individual reflections were no doubt often prompted by a specific encounter or some upsetting development, Marcus does not think it necessary to dwell on the events of the day, and outside book I we cannot trace his views on particular contemporaries."

28 See Hadot 1998a.8–11, Rutherford 1989.40f. With the iconic character of the letter from Sinuessa might be compared Aurelius's mention some lines earlier in the same chapter that from Rusticus he learned "not to go about the house in robes" (καὶ τὸ μὴ ἐν στολίῳ [or στολῇ] κατ' οἶκον περιπατεῖν). While more than likely a quote of something Rusticus actually said, the phrase chiefly has analogical status. The detail, as such, is visually striking but, in fact, quite abstract, a figure of myriad affectations of complaisancy, sanctimoniousness, precious behavior, exaggerated self-worth, and inflated dignity.

recall that, on Misch's account, the Thou of Hellenistic diatribe was emptied of its referential content before being allowed back inside the structure of soliloquy in order to create there a new generic space for "self-awareness." Similarly, the individuals of *Meditations* 1 seem to have found a place in this "oblique" autobiographical narrative only after having been drained of nearly all their particularities. They are no longer the unique others whose actions and words at specific moments and in specific places Aurelius experienced in the intimate density of his life—to say nothing of the richness of each's own life outside the places and times when they happened to intersect the author's. They have been stripped of their historical weight and, for the most part, reinvested instead with the status of mere signs. Grandfather Verus "disappears" behind his "kind disposition" and "even temper" (*Med.* 1.1); Aurelius's father, behind "humility and manliness" (*Med.* 1.2). Personality has been supplanted by iconicity.

In certain respects, this transformation goes some way towards fulfilling what Lejeune (1975.16) claims to be "le projet secret de toute autobiographie (trouver l'*ordre* de la vie)" (emphasis in original). He identifies its achievement as the privileging of thematic over diachronic order—"inversant l'importance et le rôle de la chronologie et de la signification"—and continues by arguing:

> Construire une autobiographie autour de thèmes et d'images, c'est privilégier dans chaque élément du récit la signification, c'est vouloir aboutir à un système de signification. Pourtant ce n'est pas un système qui nous est proposé, ni une constellation fixe, mais la *découverte* et l'*exploration* d'un système. (emphasis in original)

The content of *Meditations* 1 is clearly organized less in terms of temporal than thematic structure. For despite the fact that a rough chronology governs the sequence in which the individuals are presented, their extreme divestiture of "life history" and "personality" constructs each in accordance with an order that is essentially achronic, strictly focusing instead on these individuals as in some respect the emblems of virtues Aurelius considers worth recollection. Times are just as illusory or irrelevant as places and things. There is no significant sense, for instance, in which M. Annius Verus's "kind disposition" and "even temper" (*Med.* 1.1) temporally (or even logically) precede the "humility and manliness" (*Med.* 1.2) of his son, in turn the father of Aurelius. *Qua* virtues, in fact, they all

exist outside of time.[29] If grandfather and father are presented in an order that follows their biological sequence, then, this is little more than a narrative concession and intends nothing at all about the virtues they exemplify. Disappearing "behind the advice they have given," the others in Book 1 live entirely in the denatured and timeless form of *exempla*. In this respect, moreover, *Meditations* 1 seems to approximate the autobiographical goal of "finding *order* in life" in nearly as extravagant a form as Lejeune conceives it, namely that of decomposing a life in order to compose the account of a life whose diachronicity is completely effaced by its meaning—in short, "a story without narrative" (1989.240).[30]

The rationale behind Aurelius's divestment of personal history from the others he selects becomes clearer when those others are put in relation to the subject of the narrative. What is most striking about Book 1, as we noted, is the absence of the first-person pronoun. This, of course, does not mean that the autobiography lacks a subject, but instead that its subject comes to expression through means other than by asserting an "I." Its real presence is, in fact, implicit and oblique—a history of *oneself* through the mediation of *others*—and its contours are discernible mainly in the choices that control which others are seen in its stead and precisely what is seen of them. With the exception only of the final section of Book 1, the explicit textual space Aurelius chooses to occupy is mapped out exclusively in relational terms, namely by the preposition παρά ("from") that introduces each of the seventeen chapters. This is autobiography, then, in which the self is discovered and explored by a kind of dead reckoning. In each "from," that is to say, there is implied a "to," in each point of departure an assumed destination, namely at the terminus of the lines traced from the prepositional objects of παρά back to where Aurelius seeks to find himself. It is, in fact, its situation at or as their convergence—in the vanishing point that registers the influence of others—that makes this construction of self so intriguing. Autobiography is not soliloquy, after all. Whereas *Meditations* 2–11 are structured audially in the form of self-referential address—as words spoken to be heard by oneself alone—Book 1 chiefly deploys the sense of sight—far more distanced and distancing, and apparently less intimate. Yet while

29 See Hadot 1998a.232–42 and Long 1996.210–12.

30 On the limits of this claim, especially in light of Ricoeur's study (1983–85) of the connection between time and narrativity, see Eaken's comments (xi–xv) in his introduction to Lejeune 1989.

they differ from each other much as an echo differs from the image cast by a mirror, both modes have markedly similar aims: to construct some means by which to return something of oneself to the subject that produces that sound and image. Just as the *Thou* in the later books is emptied to make room for reflexive discourse between the subject and itself, the *others* in the opening book "disappear" into specular representations all verging on identity with the subject that views them.

3. REPRESENTATIONS AND THE SELF

A passage from *Meditations* 3 helps situate this autobiographical strategy within the larger context of the philosophical program that might be said to govern Aurelius's work as a whole (*Med.* 3.11):

> τὸ ὅρον ἢ ὑπογραφὴν ποιεῖσθαι τοῦ ὑποπίπτοντος φανταστοῦ, ὥστε αὐτὸ ὁποῖόν ἐστι κατ᾽ οὐσίαν γυμνὸν ὅλον δι᾽ ὅλων διῃρημένως βλέπειν, καὶ τὸ ἴδιον ὄνομα αὐτοῦ καὶ τὰ ὀνόματα ἐκείνων, ἐξ ὧν συνεκρίθη καὶ εἰς ἃ ἀναλυθήσεται, λέγειν παρ᾽ ἑαυτῷ.
>
> Produce a definition or description of the representation that presents itself so as to see it as it is essentially, naked, whole, and in all of its articulations; and say to oneself both its proper name and the names of those things out of which it is constituted and into which it will be dissolved.

As procedural instructions for a specifically Stoic course of action, a "spiritual exercise" that rests on the assumption that "an ethically good life is equivalent to making correct or proper use of representations" (Long 1996.275), this passage identifies the method of "divestiture" deployed in *Meditations* 1 as an instance of deliberate and rigorous self-cultivation. This makes better sense as a way of understanding the book's peculiar style and form than to opt for a more conventionally biographical and psychologizing explanation, such as the one Rutherford (1989.96) proposes:[31]

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31 On psychological approaches to the work, and their limits, see Hadot 1998a.244–57.

> Perhaps Marcus found it embarrassing, even in his private writing, to commit his feelings and memories to paper with complete openness or at length. He may even have thought it somehow demeaning or undignified for a professed Stoic to spend long dwelling on the past or on individuals, rather than in contemplating the task before him at that moment, or the larger horizon of the divine order.

Rather than seeing this unwillingness entirely as a reflex of embarrassment in one's own eyes, secret shame over attachment to "feelings," "memories," and "individuals," more productive insights follow from considering whether Book 1 might serve at least roughly the same agenda as does the rest of *Meditations*. That Books 2–11 take the form of "spiritual exercises" in the Epictetan mode is not open to reasonable doubt, thanks largely to the sensitive work of Pierre Hadot.[32] That Book 1 operates similarly is therefore just as likely. This is especially the case if scholarly consensus is correct in assuming that the book was probably written last and appended to the others as a kind of preface, perhaps even a thematically proleptic one.[33]

This likelihood becomes stronger when we consider the fundamental role "representations" (*phantasiai*) play in the conception of the self in Stoicism, as well as in Stoic practice.[34] Anthony Long characterizes Stoic *phantasiai* as not limited simply to objects of sense perception (*aisthêsis*) whose sources are external to the self that experiences them. Instead, they also arise from within, and thus far more comprehensively include "all occurrent sensations and feelings, recollections, imaginations, and all transient thoughts" (1996.271). The term "representation" therefore covers the full range of "mental states"; none, in fact, "fall[s] outside its scope." This understanding of *phantasiai* as "thought contents" in the widest acceptation lies at the center of the Stoic notion of the self as unitary and thus as fundamentally different from the divided and factionalized self envisioned by both Plato and Aristotle. This is because at the center of that self as the subject of representations, and precisely in relation to them, lies, in turn, the faculty

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32 See Hadot 1995.179–215 and 2002. Foucault 2005 is devoted principally to a history of the "exercise" of philosophy directed towards disclosure of the self.

33 Hadot 1998a.34, 262ff. and 1998b.2; also Rutherford 1989.96–103.

34 On Stoic "representations" (*phantasiai*), see Long 1996, on whom the paragraph that follows relies heavily; also Sellars 2003, Hadot 1998a.101f., and Taylor 1989.136–38.

of assent (*sunkatathesis*). Charles Taylor (1989.137) identifies "assent" as nothing less than "one source of the developing notion of the will" in the history of Western thought. For whereas the production of *phantasiai* occurs mostly outside the range of individual will, the individual whose experience has those *phantasiai* as its content is nonetheless always compelled to pass judgment on them. It is through assent (deliberate or else merely habitual) that the self exercises its power to accept or reject representations. "Any representation is part of my experience, but I can make it *mine*—my outlook, or belief, or commitment—or *not mine*, by giving or withholding assent" (Long 1996.274; emphasis in original). While opting for slightly different and perhaps less preferable translations of the terms *phantasia* (here "impulse") and *sunkatathesis* ("rational intention"), Taylor summarizes the history and importance of these ideas as follows (1989.137):

> Humans will have the same sensuous impulses (*hormêtikai phantasiai*) as animals, Chrysippus [ca. 280–07 B.C.E.] argues, but they are not forced to act on them. They are capable of giving or withholding assent from what impulses urge them to. The wise man will know what pain is to be borne and will not be rushed into seeking relief at all costs. We are not masters of our *phantasiai*, but we do control our . . . rational intention (*synkatathesis*). Much later on, Epictetus [ca. 55–135 C.E.] developed a similar doctrine using the Aristotelian term '*prohairesis*,' which one might translate 'moral choice.' What impulses may impinge is beyond our power, but my *prohairesis* is utterly under my control . . . What is morally crucial about us is not just the universal nature or rational principle which we share with others . . . but now also this power of assent, which is essentially in each case mine.

Careful examination of one's representations—seeing each as it is essentially (ὁποῖόν ἐστι κατ' οὐσίαν, *Med.* 3.11)—is the necessary condition for their correct use, namely for rational assent or rejection, commitment or refusal to act on their basis. Correct use is, in turn, critical for an ethical life because use, strictly speaking, is what defines the self whose life it is—what defines me through my acts of *sunkatathesis* or *prohairesis* as the rational and moral agent that I am, what defines myself as "I." It is through deliberate acts of assent that I accept and thus assimilate—or, by

withholding assent, that I reject and thus refuse to assimilate—representations into my moral character. In so doing, I make them mine through my assent, and this in a sense that not only reflects but also helps constitute who I am. In this respect, the act that makes them *mine* also concurrently makes them *me*.

At the same time, representations are never merely neutral and, so to speak, public property. This is because they already belong to each subject simply by virtue of being that subject's own *phantasiai* rather than part of another's experience. While it is true, as Long (1996.274) notes, that all representations have "generic" along with "particular elements" and are therefore capable of being generalized and publicly expressed, they also retain what he calls "an irreducible particularity" specific to the individual who has them. That I tend to have *these* and not different representations will help to indicate, among other things, the kind of person I am and therefore to distinguish me from others. This results from the fact that my *phantasiai* are to some degree the products of my own habits, values, and desires. They are "already a blend of perception and judgement" (Sellars 2003.156).[35] This gives rise to a kind of circularity that resembles Escher's sketch of paired hands that was invoked at the beginning of this essay to illustrate the self-enacting nature of autobiography. Long (1996.274; 277) comments as follows:

> The representations that we receive as individuals from external and internal stimuli are powerfully determined by a wide range of factors—our natures as human beings, our experience as particular persons, our beliefs, desires, foibles, education, and so forth . . . But since any representation is what appears to me or to you, is it not the way you and I take things—a full manifestation of the self, in other words? . . . If my beliefs and desires, which make me the kind of person I am, are an influence on the kind of representations to which I am subject, it is also the case

35 Cf. Sellars 2003.156f., who observes that "impressions" (*phantasiai*) "are already composite, the product of both the external object and the mind of the individual . . . As such, impressions are not a straightforwardly accurate perception of an external object, but rather how such an object or event seems to be from the perspective of a particular individual. As such, they reflect that individual's own presuppositions and beliefs."

> . . . that representations have helped to generate my beliefs and desires. The causal relation works both ways.

According to Epictetus, a rigorous examination of *phantasiai* is required for both real happiness and also genuine self-knowledge.[36] This is what Aurelius, too, enjoins in the passage from *Meditations* 3 quoted earlier, in which he recommends that we "produce a definition or description of the representation that presents itself" (τὸ ὅρον ἢ ὑπογραφὴν ποιεῖσθαι τοῦ ὑποπίπτοντος φανταστοῦ). To this advice he adds the claim that "nothing is as productive of greatness of mind as the ability to test methodically and truthfully each thing encountered in life" (οὐδὲν γὰρ οὕτως μεγαλοφροσύνης ποιητικόν, ὡς τὸ ἐλέγχειν ὁδῷ καὶ ἀλειθείᾳ ἕκαστων τῶν ἐν τῷ βίῳ ὑποπιπτόντων). As we saw, the phrase "each thing" is broadly comprehensive, including objects and others, ideas and feelings, memories, fleeting impulses, and even the judgments passed upon them. What Long identifies as the causal circularity that characterizes all representations, however, means that such an examination of *phantasiai*, even when directed toward representations whose source is clearly external to oneself—as in the case of the objects of sense perception—is always implicitly reflexive. If my *phantasiai* are determined as much by who I am as by whatever chance might bring into my field of experience, then *all* my representations are in some degree specular. In striving to see each thing that comes to mind "as it is essentially, naked, whole, and in all of its articulations," then, the subject always remains squarely in its own line of sight.

Scholars agree that in Book 1 of *Meditations*, Aurelius does not present a catalogue of the virtues he claims to have actually received from the individuals he names, but instead the παρά ("from") introducing each chapter in fact designates an aim as much as, if not even more than, a source.[37] On the one hand, as has been suggested, the first sixteen chapters amount to an *autobiography of oneself as others*, namely, an attempt to map the contours of the subject in the "vanishing point" at which the prior influences of others intersect. The abstract and abbreviated form they take resembles, at least in its intent, the "système de signification" to which Lejeune (1975.16) proposes all autobiographies secretly aspire. Aurelius strips the virtues of

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36 Cf. Epictetus (Gill 1995) 1.1.7, 2.1.4, 4, 6.34. On representations in Epictetus, see Rist 1972.88–99, Long 1996.275–85, and Foucault 2005.503f.

37 Cf. Farquharson 1944.435 and Rutherford 1989.95f.

others from their personalities through the course of a "spiritual exercise" that lays each individual bare of all but what is essential; there are no "life histories or irrelevant descriptions" (Rutherford 1989.95) here, in short. In so doing, he undergoes the same divestiture himself, and this is precisely his purpose. As Hadot notes (1998.lviii), Book 1 is an instance of *autobiographie indirecte*—or better, of autobiography as *reflexive*. The portraits of others are the media of an implicit self-portraiture.

What is reflected in the others of *Meditations* 1 is not the self as it is, however, but as it aims to be. At the junction of lines of influence drawn from the others in Aurelius's life is the self delineated by its desires. Strictly speaking, he is not these things at all—the "kind disposition" of Verus, the "humility and manliness" of his father—except in two senses. First, insofar as these are the representations he encounters when reflecting on his past, they are *his* instead of another person's and thus imply much about his own particularity as the subject who selects precisely these traits to recall. This is because the selection itself implies assent in the form of an endorsement of these traits and a commitment to incorporate them into the fiber of his own moral agency. Second, and insofar as he entertains *these* representations rather than others, they serve both more intimately and also more universally to "make an outline" (ὑπογραφὴν ποιεῖσθαι) of himself as the aspirant to such virtues.

The outline is intimate because it reveals the self in its fragility. By limning his desires, Aurelius brings himself to expression not as some fixed, permanent thing but instead as a kind of project or trajectory. Its tentative nature becomes clearer by contrast with the self as it appears in the writings of Seneca. Foucault (2005.306f.) compares the point of view from which Senecan meditation takes place—"looking down from the summit of the world"—with that of Aurelius by contrasting the former's detached and distant vantage from on high with the decidedly embedded viewpoint of the latter. In *Meditations*,

> We look precisely from the point where we happen to be, and the problem is to descend, as it were, beneath this point in order to plunge into the heart of things so as to penetrate them thoroughly . . . On the one hand, in penetrating to the heart of things and grasping them in their most singular elements we demonstrate our freedom with regard to them. However, at the same time, it also involves showing the extent to which our own identity—that little

> totality we constitute in our own eyes: continuity in time and space—is in reality only made up of singular, distinct elements, which are separate from each other.

This follows from the reflexive nature of every examination of *phantasiai*. What emerges from the "spiritual exercise" applied to whatever might present itself to the mind's eye (τοῦ ὑποπίπτοντος φανταστοῦ) additionally always provides the opportunity for a specular view of oneself "as it is essentially, naked, whole, and in all of its articulations" (*Med.* 3.11). The aim of that examination is analytic; its purpose is to dissolve its object into constituent parts. Insofar as its object is itself, then, the self, too, thereby comes into view in its divestiture. It is stripped of its own apparent unity as the putative subject and master of vision directed at others and reduced instead (just like its objects) to an inventory of "things out of which it is constituted and into which it will be dissolved" (ἐξ ὧν συνεκρίθη καὶ εἰς ἃ ἀναλυθήσεται). Misch (1951.474) makes essentially the same point when he identifies the aim of Stoic self-examination as an attempt "to dispose of the common conception of the unity and constancy of the individual." Hardly a stable thing at all—hardly an entity, in fact—it reveals itself at best as an assembly of "distinct elements," precious bits of this and that, bright shards and aspirations, *disiecta membra* in search of a body.

The similarity between the verbal portraits in *Meditations* 1 and the disjointedness of pictures hung in a gallery is a function of dissolved unities in a number of registers—the unity of paintings with their original homes in the world, of individuals with their intimate "life histories," of the autobiographical subject with its "own" presumed selfhood, and also of virtue itself, which, in Stoic thought, can be properly conceived only as undivided and uniform. The abiding impression in Book 1 of reading a spreadsheet, a "catalogue" or "checklist" of virtues instead of a continuous narrative, likewise speaks to that fragmentation. Notwithstanding the mirage of a unitary personal subject before whose gaze the *phantasiai* pass, the image of self that emerges there—like the images of others by whose influence the image of oneself is shaped—is not single but rather plural and discontinuous. The best that can be said in its defense is that, despite its status as a mere collocation of elements, "just flesh and a little bit of breath" (*Med.* 2.2), it nonetheless sustains an avocation towards unity. A bundle of vectors—"sensations and feelings, recollections, imaginations, and . . . transient thoughts" (Long 1996.271), fleeting impulses, and even the judgments passed upon them—it intends a trajectory towards a single,

universal goal. This is the end towards which Aurelius aims throughout the course of his work through an arduous dissolution of the subject. For the list of virtues and of pieces of advice, the recollections of a life, the self and others, are all refractions of an indivisible singularity.

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