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**Reading Selves/Writing Selves:  
Tracing the Intellectual History of Writing as a Technology of the Self**

by Olivia Hopewell

2023

Submitted to the Faculty of Bryn Mawr College  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
in the Department of Greek, Latin, and Classical Studies

Doctoral Committee:

Catherine Conybeare, Advisor  
Radcliffe Edmonds  
Asya Sigelman  
Ava Shirazi

## **Abstract**

From the advent of writing in the ancient Mediterranean world, people have found ways to forge a connection between their selves and the text. Whether by means and for purposes of representation, translation, or presentation of the self, writing as a technology has long functioned as a method of enacting selfhood. This dissertation constructs an intellectual history of writing as a technology of the self in the ancient Greek and Latin imaginary, considering the works of Plato, Augustine, Ausonius, and Dhuoda. This history and these textual case studies then serve as a point-of-departure for a discussion of the ramifications of this supremely personal literary project for the ethical encounter, arguing for the framing of reading as an inherently political and ethical activity. Throughout history, people have been utilizing writing as a technology of the self—what does that mean for the reader?

## Acknowledgements

Thanks are owed first to my brilliant advisor, Catherine Conybeare, from whom I have learned and grown immeasurably. I'll keep it brief with a huge THANK YOU and this (totally irrelevant) anecdote about Hannah Arendt: "Many scholars struggle with her methodology and it even worried one of her greatest mentors, Karl Jaspers, who complained about the 'intuitive-chaotic-method' of her writings."<sup>1</sup> Massive thanks are also due to the rest of my committee: Radcliffe G. Edmonds III, Asya Sigelman, and Ava Shirazi (who kindly agreed to take this on at the last minute!).

I would also like to acknowledge my friends, my mom and brothers, and my pets, Hera and Phoebe, who are probably even more excited than I am for this project to be wrapping up. I think I managed to delete all the cat-typos, but we'll see. Thanks especially to Shannon Dunn and Zach Silvia, who have been a constant source of comfort and support over the years.

Finally, I need to acknowledge my partner, Emily. I couldn't have done this without you, so thanks for sticking around and making me stick around. I love you always, all ways.

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<sup>1</sup> Robaszkiewicz 2018.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

In his autobiographical *Circumfessions*, written as a long-running footnote, amidst a cacophony of lamentations and impossibilities, Jacques Derrida comes to an arresting realization: “...seeking a sentence, I have been seeking myself in a sentence...”<sup>2</sup> Through all this time, through all these texts, across all these intensive intellectual discourses and dissections of abstract concepts, he realizes that the thing he has been seeking is his own self—nothing more and nothing less (and indeed, for Derrida, what could be more than the self? what less?). This self-seeking may be variously conceived of as a will-to-self-write or the autobiographical drive, and no matter the phrasing one thing is clear: humans feel compelled to understand ourselves and relate that self to others. Humans desire to know and to be known, to communicate and to be recognized. When the in-person, face-to-face encounter is impossible or otherwise unsuitable, perhaps due to temporal distance or as required by social-distancing standards, how do we satisfy this human desire? We write. We write emails, send letters, bombard our loved ones with texts and personal messages, document personal musings and forward relatable content. Among other methods of sustaining communication with those distant from us, we mobilize the technology of writing through whatever medium or shape it might take. We write to connect (to) ourselves and others.

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<sup>2</sup> Bennington and Derrida 1999, 13.

How is it that the tangible technology of writing is able to disclose something as intangible, slippery, complex as the self? What is the relationship between a text of self-writing and the self who wrote it? Between that self and the reader's? What is the mechanism of this connection? Why does reading a text marked as autobiographical *feel* different for the reader than reading a fictional work? What is at stake in this conversation? In short, how does writing work as a technology of the self, and why does this matter for the reader?

These are the questions taken on in this dissertation as I construct an intellectual history of writing as a technology of the self in order to establish reading as an activity bound by interpersonal ethics. The bulk of this study will examine ancient Greek and Latin texts, ranging in time and locale from Plato's 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE Athens to Dhuoda's 9<sup>th</sup> century CE France. Each text will be treated as a case study offering a different rendering of the self-text link and establishing nuanced degrees of separation between selves. It is important to note at the outset that, although I will consider each author's explicit claims about writing when available, the most important aspect of our primary sources is what the author actually does with and through writing. Since I am attempting to understand the place of this technology within the imaginary of our writers, what they *do* is more informative than a theoretical stance they might claim to hold. If you tell me you hate tomatoes, but I've witnessed that your favorite foods are salsa, bruschetta, and Bolognese, your practiced habits will be much more useful when I am tasked with making you dinner. Theory does little for us when divorced from practice and context, hence the worth of our close-readings in constructing our theory.

After examining our primary texts, I will consider how these various (though non-exhaustive!) methods of linking the self and the text might inform the appropriate scene of reading. As the distance between selves—writing, written, and reading—is reduced by the

triangulation of self-text-other, the need to seriously evaluate the very concept of reading becomes increasingly dire. People keep writing (about) themselves for us to read. What are we supposed to do with that fact?

### **Organizing Principles**

The reader perhaps will notice that the primary sources appear in chronological order throughout the chapters, starting in 5th century BCE Athens, then 4th century CE Roman North Africa, and finally 9th century France. The chapters' themes also progress from simpler to more complex pictures of the ways a self can relate to and through a text. Additionally, one cannot help noticing that the author of chapter 2 (Plato) heavily influenced that of chapter 3 (Augustine), who in turn interacted with or was read by those of chapter 4 (Ausonius and Dhuoda). As a result, one might fairly surmise that I am presenting a teleological narrative of the development of writing: first people thought only representation was possible, then they started to translate the self through writing, and finally they figured out how to present the self, which is the most valuable! But this is not at all a narrative I want to push. While it is true that a technology's usages and capabilities will multiply over time (think of the first phone versus the current iPhone generation), I do not want to paint a picture of selfhood as in any way teleological and therefore would be remiss to present technologies of the self as such. It would be at least unsubstantiable and at most demonstrably harmful to perpetuate such an interpretation, because it would appeal to the same logic that undergirds cultural supremacist and primitivist ideologies. For example, scholars have historically framed the development of writing as allowing for humans to develop personhood and an "I," the inverse implication then being that pretextual or differently-literate peoples lack interior lives, intellect, and humanity. This is entirely antithetical to my project. So, while my case studies do trend toward growing complexity, this is not a qualitative assessment. I



do not offer an exhaustive list of possible references from all literate communities, nor do I establish a causal relationship between technologies and personhood. The chapters appear in this order largely out of convenience, and because Plato is the logical starting point as someone writing around the advent of writing in the ancient Mediterranean world, not least because he is one of our earliest sources for someone considering the concept of “writing” itself.

### **Working Definitions**

Further, it will be helpful to discuss our terminology to limit our generic scope. The process of categorization in general is a political statement, and the categorization of texts is no exception. Which genre any given work is assigned to is a reflection of sociocultural norms and is therefore always an artificial decision, always a value judgment. The genre of “autobiography” was first coined in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, though it will become apparent that autobiographical texts have been around since the dawn of writing. Before the invention of the term “autobiography,” works that might now fall into that genre were considered memoirs, commentaries, life-writings, confessions, epistles, treatises, etc. In his seminal work *A History of Autobiography in Late Antiquity*, Georg Misch works to legitimize autobiography as a stand-alone genre that is somehow distinct from, though not unrelated to, those alternative labels. Misch’s work represents the first study devoted entirely to “autobiographies,” and it remains authoritative to this day, due in part to the genre’s persistent undertheorization—from all sides of the writer-written-reader relationship. Throughout his tome, Misch outlines the following: “This genre of literature defies classification even more stubbornly than do the ordinary forms of writing. It can be defined only by summarizing what the term ‘autobiography’ implies—the description (*graphia*) of an individual human life (*bios*) by the individual himself (*auto-*).”<sup>3</sup> According to

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<sup>3</sup> Misch 1907, 1:5.

this, an autobiography would be a person's (written) description of their own life. Shortly thereafter Misch adds: "The term 'autobiography'... conveys nothing in regard to literary form of the standing of this sort of work in relation to great literature; its main implication is that the person whose life is described is himself the author of the work."<sup>4</sup> Misch considers the gamut of writings that might fall into his genre, beginning with autobiographical tomb-inscriptions and culminating in the "flowering" of autobiography in Late Antique Latin texts. Importantly, he considers writings like those tomb-inscriptions merely *autobiographical*, rather than properly autobiography. The adjectival framing represents a subtle but critical difference, entirely rooted in that political value judgement: not everybody is capable of writing something worthy of the genre of "autobiography."

For Misch, and therefore for much of the subsequent literary theory that adopts his terms, although the will-to-autobiography is a universal impulse, not everyone is able to participate. While Misch begins with the inclusive idea that autobiographies are simply texts written about a self by that self, he proceeds to slip in several exclusionary rules, such as the idea that an autobiography must be representative of the time in which it was written and must cover the entirety of the writer's life, birth to death. One scholar working under this paradigm elaborates on the current state of autobiography studies: "[Autobiographies] must center exclusively or mostly on their authors, not on others; otherwise, it becomes a memoir or reminiscence. It should be representative of its times, a mirror of the predominant zeitgeist."<sup>5</sup> As tends to happen, the problems become apparent when unpacking these seemingly objective claims, because what do these foreclosures mean for disenfranchised folks? for minorities? for those on the margins,

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<sup>4</sup> Misch 1907, 1:7.

<sup>5</sup> Jelinek 1986, 25.

excluded from the enjoyment of selfhood and the activities thereof? In order to write an autobiography-as-traditionally-conceived, the writer must be a privileged, well-educated, non-disabled, cis-gender, white man. In support of this claim one need look no further than Misch's index, where of the 175 figures named, fewer than 10 are women—and not all of these women are mentioned for their having written a text deserving this generic title.

This dissertation will tend toward the phrasing of “self-writing,” a term with ample scholarly basis, though if I do happen to use “autobiography” it is markedly without Mischean baggage.<sup>6</sup> I do this for three reasons. First, “self-writing” allows us to shed that exclusionary baggage, not only resulting in a broader array of texts up for consideration here, but also to recover some literary justice to self-writers of all identities and intersections. Second, this phrasing constantly calls to our minds (for English-readers) the thematically and ethically relevant aspect of the works: the self. And third, the verbal aspect of “writing” positions this genre as fundamentally an activity or process, which, in turn, further recalls us the self doing the writing. Further complicating matters is that when speaking of ancient texts, our generic determinations are often acts of retrofitting old material into new boxes. This dissertation will pull from texts that are associated with varying genres: philosophical dialogue, theological treatise, mother's manual, etc. However, each text has one foundational aspect in common: a deliberate connection of self and text, whether because of a synonymy of writing- and written-self, or because of some theorization of the mechanism of forging that connection.

### **Chapter Overview**

The following dissertation is divided into two thematic sections: “Writing Selves” and “Reading Selves.” These phrases deliberately play on the ambiguous connotations of “reading”

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example: Foucault 1994; Castelli 2004; Zak 2012.

and “writing” as either verbal nouns or adjectives. As such, the phrase “writing selves” signifies simultaneously the type of self who is writing and the process of writing a self. This ambiguity of actor and acting will become programmatic in our discussion, too, of “the self written,” which signifies both the self that is constructed by/in/through the writing of a text and the text that has been written by the same self as that contained therein (though this ambiguity is more readily dealt with by adding a hyphen to indicate that latter possibility). The “Writing Selves” section comprises 4 chapters, and “Reading Selves” just one conclusory chapter.

Chapter One is this introduction.

Chapter Two offers a brief historical survey of the invention of writing. If we are interested in reconstructing the intellectual history of writing as a technology—specifically a technology of the self—it is incumbent upon us to rethink the long-held assumptions we as a reading community hold about writing itself. For the student of ancient Greek and Latin texts, that means acknowledging the non-Greek and -Roman precursors for the Mediterranean classical tradition, as well as refamiliarizing ourselves with what the texts within our own canon *actually* have to say about writing.

The remaining three chapters of this thematic section each take on a different aspect of writing as a technology of the self for a) self representation, b) self translation, and c) self presentation. Each chapter will consider the relevant texts as case studies in which the authors attribute to the technology of writing the ability to interact with the self in each specific way.

Chapter Three on “Self Representation,” considers Plato’s *Phaedrus* and *Theaetetus* dialogues, mining them for clues as to Plato’s conception of writing’s ability to represent the self of the author as an example of at least one common attitude toward the technology in the contemporary Greek imaginary. Since the conclusions of this chapters are largely in

disagreement with the predominant scholarly assessment of Plato's attitude toward writing, this chapters also describes the ramifications of this challenge to the status quo, and how rejecting the famous assumption that Plato absolutely disavows writing can aid our attempt to reconstruct an intellectual history for writing as a technology of the self.

Chapter Four on "Self Translation" looks at Augustine's *Confessions*, arguing that Augustine utilizes the written form of this self-writing not only to establish a theory of self, but to share that theory with an audience in the unique and necessarily literary language of confession. I argue here that for Augustine, the material text is a necessary component in the process of translating the self to the other, publicizing (or, indeed, publishing) the interior realm to the audience in the most true-to-self way allowed by human communication.

Chapter Five on "Self Presentation," our final textually-based chapter, turns to missive writing as exemplified by Ausonius' epistolary correspondence with Paulinus and Dhuoda's *Liber Manualis*. These writers seek both to send the self to the other through a text that is, at least, a proxy for the self, and to reconstitute the encounter with the other, impossible on the standard corporeal plane, onto a literary plane, wherein the text functions as a meeting spot for the writer and reader. For her part, Dhuoda pushes the limits of textual self-presentation further still by moving from characterizing her text as a proxy for herself, to characterizing it as literally her self, such that to look upon Dhuoda's text is to look upon Dhuoda. This extreme formulation of the writer's ability to present their self textually leads to our final chapter.

Chapter Six shifts our focus from the various constructions of writing as a technology of the self for the writer, to a discussion of the reader's interaction with writing as such in that second "Reading Selves" section. If a written text can signify a self, or even be the self signified, what does that mean for the reading self? Do these types of writings elicit a certain hermeneutic,

a particular method of engagement? By virtue of what and of what kind? I pull in various theories from modern philosophers and critics, most of whom happen to be Heideggerean and Hegelian acolytes, to explore these questions. I then argue for this framework's relevance to the classicist, or any reader professional or otherwise, because as we shall see, sometimes a text is more than a text. The question of ethical *writing* an autobiography has received ample attention, but, perhaps due to the specter of poststructuralism, the ethics of *reading* are traditionally overlooked. This is precisely the gap bridged by this dissertation.

## **Chapter Two: Writing as a Technology of the Self**

### **Writing as a Technological Innovation**

Volumes dedicated to the study of writing as a technology almost universally begin with the sentiment that writing is one of the greatest human achievements of all time. They might be biased, as scholars are wont to frame our interests as paramount, but the fact is that writing truly has been one of the most significant technological achievements in human history, both on its own accord and in the technologies for which it lays ground. While discoveries like fire and the wheel enable humans to control their external environments and physical space, writing helps humans navigate those internal and metaphysical.<sup>7</sup> Particularly for the student of antiquity, ancient writing allows us to encounter long-departed faces with profound immediacy: “[Ancient] voices come to us through momentous steps in representation that implicate, in structured fashion, sound, meaning, and sight.”<sup>8</sup> Those reading this dissertation likely need little convincing of writing’s value as a technology, but nevertheless it will be helpful for our ensuing chapters to begin with a brief history of the activity. In this chapter, I will narrow down what is referred to by the term “writing,” summarize some key scholarly concerns, and briefly consider the circumstances and nature of the entrance of writing into Greece and, subsequently, Italy.

Schmandt-Besserat and Erard define writing as “a system of graphic marks that represent the units of a specific language. The units to be represented (whether individual sounds,

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<sup>7</sup> See McCutchen et al. for a nuanced cognitive-neuroscientific review of the impact of writing’s role as “cognitive architecture.”

<sup>8</sup> Houston 2004, 3.

syllables, parts of words, or some combination of all three) are a function of the structure of the language, the needs and traditions of the society that uses that system, and the capabilities of the human brain.”<sup>9</sup> This definition does well to remind us that as a public technology, writing is not only a system of making marks, but also itself a function of larger social systems. Of course, this is not the only attempt to define this slippery term, and scholars have debated the topic since the technology arose. There are two main schools of thought on the topic, which offer a broad and a narrow lens: a broad definition maintains that writing is “a system of intercommunication by means of conventional visible marks;”<sup>10</sup> and a narrower definition that restricts the purview of writing to “a system of more or less permanent marks used to represent an utterance in such a way that it can be recovered more or less exactly without the intervention of the utterer.”<sup>11</sup> The permanency, reality, relation to speech, and so forth matter little for a study of the impact of the creation of a self-text connection, and strict standards on what counts as writing lead us to discount activities that in all meaningful ways fall into the category of writing such as typing, imprinting, or texting. A broad definition serves our purposes.

While some view writing as a necessary condition for “the development of consciousness and intellect, self-comprehension, and critical investigation,” others warn against the potentially “evolutionary” interpretation of writing as a “civilizing instrument.”<sup>12</sup> It might be true that writing as an external memory device frees up some mental space from “the arduous task of memorization necessary to store knowledge gained through natural speech,” but we do well to avoid the potential implications of such a claim. It is entirely possible to speak of innovation and

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<sup>9</sup> Schmandt-Besserat and Erard 2008, 7.

<sup>10</sup> Gelb 1963, 253.

<sup>11</sup> Daniels 1996, 3.

<sup>12</sup> Senner 1989, 4–5; Stroud 1989, 103. It is possible that Stroud did not employ the term “civilizing” in a cultural supremacist way, but the possible connotation certainly raises eyebrows. See Trigger 2004, especially pp. 40ff, on the logical fallacy of associating lack of writing with cultural barbarism, or non-syllabary language with low levels of literacy and intelligence.



process without value judgement, to speak of technological development without gatekeeping personhood. The assertion that writing “[changed] the very nature of human consciousness itself” has no bearing on our survey, so while we should be wary of the potential implications of this long-held view, the most I need to say here is that the development of this technology, with its blend of aesthetic and pragmatic functionality, has since its inception “helped build societies and collaborative organisations, economies, and literary and conceptual structures that an oral tradition might not have achieved.”<sup>13</sup> Our purposes would not be served by my non-expert attempt at a linguistic theoretical interlude, nor am I comfortable commenting upon the debate regarding the exact details of the transmission of writing to Greece. Since our concern throughout this dissertation is the *intellectual* history of writing (i.e., its role in the Greek and Latin imaginary, especially as pertains to its use for selfhood) a basic historical outline will suit our needs well enough in locating this technology in its social context.

One area in which experts tend to agree is that writing comes to Greece from contact with the Phoenicians, who were already engaged in the activity.<sup>14</sup> The Latin letters we use to write English are an adaptation of the ancient Greek alphabet, itself an adaptation of the Phoenician consonantary. According to current analysis, an abbreviated genealogy of Greek and Latin writing and its Afroasiatic roots looks something like this:<sup>15</sup>

- Proto-hieroglyphic (Egypt, circa 32<sup>nd</sup> century BCE)
  - Proto-Sinaitic (aka Proto-Semitic, the Levant, ca. 19<sup>th</sup> cent. BCE)
    - Northern Linear (Levant ca. 15<sup>th</sup> cent. BCE)
  - Phoenician (Phoenicia ca. 11<sup>th</sup> cent. BCE)
    - Greek alphabet (Greece, ca. 9<sup>th</sup> cent. BCE)
      - Etruscan (Etruria/Italy, ca. 8<sup>th</sup> cent. BCE)
      - Latin (Italy, ca. 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE)

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<sup>13</sup> Clayton 2019, 9.

<sup>14</sup> See for example: Stroud 1989, Woods et al. 2010, Schmandt-Besserat 2014; for a problematizing survey see Waal 2018.

<sup>15</sup> For a fuller delineation, see Trigger p. 62, fig. 3.1.

Archaeological evidence dates the earliest Egyptian hieroglyphic system as roughly contemporary with the advent of Sumerian script in Mesopotamia. Popularly considered “the inventors of true writing,” many attempts have been made to credit Sumerian influence for the creation of Egypt’s own system, and while there is some evidence of contact between Egypt and Mesopotamia, none points to a direct and incontrovertible influence on this account.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, scholars are increasingly arguing that the four predominant writing systems emerged independently of each other, in rather geographically and temporally diverse cultures: “The first evidence is from Mesopotamia around 3300 [BCE], then from Egypt a little over a century later. In China a fully formed system was already in existence from 1300 [BCE], and in Meso-America from about 900 [BCE].”<sup>17</sup> This view is bolstered by the material evidence of prewriting artefacts, namely cave drawings and carvings of the Upper Paleolithic era (35,000-15,000 BCE), as well as a move to read the plain and complex tokens, which appear in the 8<sup>th</sup> millennium BCE, as writing’s precursors.<sup>18</sup> Cultural and archaeological context overwhelmingly indicates that writing as a technology did not develop gradually through time, igniting at a single point of origin (such as Mesopotamia) and then slowly spreading across the globe (to distant lands such as Meso-America), changing form and evolving from a common ancestor. Rather, writing “developed step-wise, in rapid bursts— at our scale of analysis, we can see this in terms of a single human lifetime, albeit with subsequent modifications that extend over centuries.”<sup>19</sup> In the case of ancient Greek, those first bursts can be seen around the turn of the first millennium BCE.

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<sup>16</sup> Senner 1989, 1ff. See Bromiley 1995 for the argument that it is “probable that the general idea of writing was brought to Egypt from Sumerian Mesopotamia” (1150); see Krebs and Krebs 2003 and Trigger 2004 for the opposing argument.

<sup>17</sup> Clayton 2019, 3.

<sup>18</sup> See Schmandt-Besserat 1986 and 1989.

<sup>19</sup> Houston 2004, 6.

Prior to the Greek alphabet we know and love today, various scripts were used to write the Greek language, including other Proto-Semitic scripts such as the as-yet-undeciphered Linear A of the Minoans, Linear B of the Myceneans, and Phoenician. Current evidence shows that the Greek script is the world's earliest "true alphabet," meaning that it comprises a set of graphemes (or letters) representing both vowels *and* consonants, in contrast with, for example, an abjad system that utilizes only consonants.<sup>20</sup> One such abjad is Phoenician, which seems to have served as the main source for the Greek alphabet around 800-775 BCE: "Close similarities in forms, names, and values of letters confirm that the Greek alphabet was derived from the Phoenician consonantary..."<sup>21</sup> The exact motivation for the Greek alphabetic innovation is unclear, and we know very few details of Archaic Greeks' contact with Phoenicians. Some have pointed to the roughly parallel dates of the advent of the Greek alphabet and the completion of the Homeric epics, inferring that Greek alphabetic writing was developed out of extant Phoenician for the primary purposes of recording Homer, but more cautious historians avoid such claims: "Alphabetic writing emerged in Greece (so far as we can tell) at virtually the same time that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* reached completion. Some have seen a connection between the two events [such as Powell 1991], but nothing in the creation of Homeric poems requires writing... Greek life and society were indeed developing, but they did so, as they had previously, primarily without writing, relying on oral communication. Writing's heyday in Greece lay in the [post-

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<sup>20</sup> On the novelty of the Greek alphabet see Cross' claim that the "invention of the alphabet was a singular event in human history, occurring probably in the late eighteenth century B.C... All alphabetic writing derives ultimately from an Old Canaanite alphabet and its immediate descendant, the Early Linear Phoenician alphabet" (77), *contra* later arguments that "[although] it is frequently claimed that the alphabet was only invented once, this is not the case. Alphabets have been created as a result of the systematic addition of vowels to the Arabic script used to write the Kurdish, Kashmiri, and Uyghur languages" (Trigger, 59).

<sup>21</sup> Trigger 2004, 57.

Homeric] future.”<sup>22</sup> The congruence of the Greek alphabet and the completion of Homeric epic seems to have been correlative, not causal.

In truth, scholars cannot say definitively why the Greek script was invented, but whatever the circumstances, it remains apparent that the Greek alphabet is “a piece of explosive technology, revolutionary in its effects on human culture, in a way not precisely shared by any other invention” that “constituted the terminus of the process. Once invented, it supplied the complete answer to a problem, and there has never been need to reinvent it.”<sup>23</sup> While later variants exist, such as the Latin alphabet, the modern Greek alphabetic script is largely the same today as that of antiquity. Scholars might not know the motivation behind its creation, but it is clear that the written Greek script is a monumental linguistic innovation.

What can be discussed with a level of certainty are the subjects treated by the earliest Greek writing; such evidence sheds additional light on the intellectual history of writing for the literary cultures of our study, as it indicates the perceived need compelling the would-be-writer to write in the first place. The earliest extent Greek writings were discovered in Knossos, the seat of Minoan Crete’s power, and date to a time before the invention of the Greek alphabet. The Minoan writing was etched with a sharp instrument into soft clay tablets, which were then dried in the sun rather than fired in a kiln. These texts feature Minoan pictographic writing, which present various quasi-hieroglyphic naturalistic signs, and sealstones bearing images such as a man’s head in profile, which some argue functioned as a person’s signature in a claim to ownership of the object.<sup>24</sup> This pictographic writing seems to have given way to the more linguistic Linear A, and subsequently the even more efficient and uniform Linear B script, all of

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<sup>22</sup> Yunis 2003, 3–4.

<sup>23</sup> Havelock 1982, 6.

<sup>24</sup> Stroud 1989, 104.

which seem to have met the needs of palatial bookkeeping.<sup>25</sup> The introduction of an alphabetic system into pictographic ones seems to “[usher] in a uniquely personalized and individualized means of written communication.”<sup>26</sup> The earliest known alphabetic Greek inscription is the Dipylon wine jug, dated to 740 BCE Athens, upon which is incised the fragmented “whoever performs most nimbly of all present dancers...” indicating that the jug (probably filled with wine) would be a prize to the winner of a competition.<sup>27</sup> A contemporaneous object, known as Nestor’s Cup, bears the inscription: “I am the delicious drinking cup of Nestor. Whoever drinks from this cup swiftly will be seized by the desire of fair-crowned Aphrodite.”<sup>28</sup> It is unlikely that this cup was truly owned by someone named Nestor, given its close correspondence to the cup of Nestor in *Iliad* II, but the inscription nevertheless indicates that writing was utilized by those around this time to claim ownership of objects, communicate with or refer to the gods (thereby rendering the textual objective a religious votive), and communicate purpose to a reader. In its communication of purposivity, allusion, and identity, Greek writing quickly develops for purposes more philosophically fertile than straightforward economic record-keeping.

So, what can be learned from this brief account of the history of Greek writing? In the time between its advent in the 9<sup>th</sup> century and Plato’s consideration of the topic in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, it is clear that the Greek imaginary conceives of writing as able in some way to relate a written-upon object to a person (whether to the writer or to the owner of the object) and situate a person in a cultural tradition (in the case of written religious dedications). The activity of writing essentially signifies the physical recording of semantic information, a form of material

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<sup>25</sup> There is disagreement as to whether Linear B developed from Linear A, as has long been postulated. See Trigger, 55.

<sup>26</sup> Senner 1989, 9.

<sup>27</sup> Coldstream 1968, 358.

<sup>28</sup> Stroud 1989, 112. Translation adapted from Shroud’s.

communication comprising standardized visible marks, and externalized memory as committed from the mind by “the hand” to “the page.” In its early days, writing was typically performed by carving or imprinting on clay tablets with a metal stylus, though other more expensive materials included wax-coated wooden or stone tablets. Subject matters ranged from economic and documentary purposes to gestures toward the identity of the writer and assertions of the writer’s ownership of the inscribed object. I cannot overstate the importance of this last function. Such a move depends on the ability for the reader’s mind to be drawn from the written to the identity of the writer, and results in the creation of cognitive relationship between the person of the writer and the written word, as well as the textual object. In many ways, this critical literary capability prefigures our discussion of writing as a technology of the self.

### **Technologies of the Self**

Speaking with *Vanity Fair* magazine in late 1983, Foucault references his plan to publish on a new concept he had been toying with during the early 1980’s: “technologies of the self.” According to Foucault, the coterminous concepts of *technologies of the self* and *self-care* pertain to questions “about the role of reading and writing in constituting the self, maybe the problem of the medical experience of the self, and so on...”<sup>29</sup> As he explains to the interviewers, this forthcoming treatment of technologies of the self would provide a “genealogy of problems” concerning selfhood and ethics, rather than a “history of solutions” that humans have devised through time to address these problems.<sup>30</sup> Examples include the aforementioned reading and writing, as well as other activities that would fall under the contemplative or dialogic umbrella.<sup>31</sup> Unfortunately, Foucault would die the year following this interview, without finishing the

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<sup>29</sup> Foucault, Rabinow, and Dreyfus 1983.

<sup>30</sup> Foucault, Rabinow, and Dreyfus 1983.

<sup>31</sup> Foucault 1988, 60–61.

revisions of the seminars upon which this book, to which he gave the working title *Le Souci du Soi* or *Self-Care*, was to be based. Very fortunately, though, his drafted manuscript, as well as others' transcripts of his public lectures, are published posthumously in a volume that serves as "a prolegomenon to that unfinished task."<sup>32</sup> This volume exhibits Foucault's slight redirection from critiquing sign systems and technologies of social production, to an increasing interest in the individual: how do humans navigate and enact subjecthood? how does the self constitute *itself* as a subject? how does the production of meaning work on an individual level that is directed outward to a community, rather than a more macro societal level? His working definition of *technology of the self*, then, seems to have been "those practices whereby individuals, by their own means or with the help of others, acted on their own bodies, souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being in order to transform themselves and attain a certain state of perfection or happiness, or to become a sage or immortal, and so on."<sup>33</sup> And in Foucault's own estimation, writing is one such technology. He describes three types of self writing: ethopoietic (a type of ascetic writing that would result in spiritual guidebooks, the writing of which functions as ethical self-training), hupomnemeta ("notebooks" in which the writer might document things seen and hear, as well as offer advice for navigating such situations—how to meditate, how to read, etc.), and correspondence (a text meant for others). Obviously, these categories are not mutually exclusive, as Foucault points out: "Notebooks, which in themselves constitute personal writing exercises, can serve as raw material for texts that one sends to others. In return, the missive, by definition a text meant for others, also provides occasion for a personal exercise."<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Foucault 1988, 3. Martin's introduction.

<sup>33</sup> Foucault 1988, 4.

<sup>34</sup> Foucault 1994, 214.

Essentially, “self writing” for Foucault constitutes writings that are done for the writer’s own self or that in some way aid in the fluorescence of the writer’s self.

The conception of “technologies of the self” as developed in this dissertation do not map precisely on Foucault’s formulation thereof. My working definitions and conclusions might not line up with his, and I do not share, for example, in his dissection of epistemological and ontological methods of self construction.<sup>35</sup> In fact, one result of my study has been that these two categories as pertain to writing-, written-, and reading-selves seem to be always nearing convergence, as borne out in my preference for a phenomenological framework in the final chapter. Nevertheless, it seems important both to reference Foucault’s ideas and to acknowledge that I share his working definition of “technology of the self,” if for no other reason than to use his already-written work as a short-cut for my own writing process and to establish this as an ongoing conversation. As such, throughout this dissertation, as I use the phrase “writing as a technology of the self,” I am not tying myself to Foucault’s framework, and am referring to writing as a human activity by which those engaging in it seek to convey or explore something of their innermost reality, that is their experience of selfhood.

Turning now to my textual case studies, it becomes clear that since its inception, humans have utilized the technology of writing for purposes of self-representation, self-translation, and self-presentation to the other, and it is for this reason that self-writing is the prime genre for a reconsideration of ethics.

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<sup>35</sup> Foucault 1988, 60–61.



## **Chapter Three: Writing as a Technology of Self-Representation**

### **Platonic Writing**

Plato wrote at a time described as a “razor’s edge... the turning point between two civilizations, one founded on orality and the other on writing.”<sup>36</sup> This period between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE was a methodological and intellectual tipping point between the oral tradition and the burgeoning textualization of the Ancient Mediterranean world, particularly Greece. As discussed in chapter 2, many opinions exist as to the cause of this shift from mouth to page, and certainly the answers differ depending on the geographical location. Unlike previous alphabets, the absolute earliest evidence of writing in ancient Greek are not economic or transactional documentation, but pottery inscriptions describing either the vessel itself (as with the 8<sup>th</sup> century Dipylon wine jug) or even reference to the vessel’s user, potential mythic allusion, and religious worship (as with the contemporaneous Nestor’s Cup).<sup>37</sup> Of course written mercantile documentation does exist contemporaneous to these objects, but my point is that it is striking that at the earliest possible point during that shift from oral to textual, Greeks were already seeing this as a technology for metaphysical and abstract information. Selfhood and identity are not being explored through writing at this point, but religion and ownership are; the gods are pretty important, so for an ancient Greek to look at this new technology and imagine it might be utilized for religious purposes is pretty big.

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<sup>36</sup> Brisson 1998, 38.

<sup>37</sup> Stroud 1989, 111–12.

While poetry and literature proper do not immediately receive the textual treatment in the sense that oral poems were instantly transcribed, oral recitation instantly abandoned, the move to integrate poetic and literary topics into a textual tradition was indeed happening early in the development of the ancient Greek alphabet—which should not surprise us, as modern humans utilize both technologies in tandem, to some extent, still today. Nonetheless, textualization certainly was the source of much anxiety and skepticism at the time of its introduction and expansion into varying genres. As with any technology, the more powerful writing became in the social imaginary, the more distrust it garnered, as shall presently be seen. It therefore makes sense that, even though they are more complex than their non-Greek alphabetic predecessors, these earliest examples of ancient Greek writing of the Dipylon jug and Nestor’s cup treat subject-matters that would have been relatively more palatable to 8<sup>th</sup>-century Greeks than the variety of genres for which writing would come to be utilized.

Not immune from this anxiety about writing’s effect on its human operators was one of the most prominent thinkers of this transitional period: Plato. Living and thinking in fifth century BCE Athens, Plato offers us a fascinating account of the ways in which contemporary thinkers experienced this “razor’s edge” and navigated the potential uses for and ramifications of this new textual technology. The goal of this chapter is to explore how writing goes from this thing capable of broadly gesturing toward religious and indential themes in the pre-8<sup>th</sup> century imaginary, to a thing that can aid in something as complex and important as philosophical investigation and identity itself. This exploration will analyze Plato’s thoughts on writing, as well as the traditional scholarly interpretation of those thoughts, in order to show that as early as Plato’s fifth century dialogues, as anxious-making as it will come to be seen, writing was already conceived of as possessing the philosophically significant ability to communicate interiority,

identity, and even the self to an audience. If the gods are big for the Greeks, the self is huge for Plato, and thus I argue that for Plato to treat writing as he does speaks volumes to this technology's valuation in the Greek imaginary. This chapter will first look at Plato's *Phaedrus* to locate examples of the self-text connection, analyze Plato's usage of tracking imagery and mimesis, and comment upon Plato's overall thematization of ambiguity and non-essentialism throughout his oeuvre. Then, I will move to the *Theaetetus* to discuss the textual metaphor for the soul as "wax tablet" beginning at 191a. Overall, this chapter will show that Plato's philosophy is remarkably text-positive (or at least text-neutral) in his attribution to writing of the ability to retain and convey something of the writer.

### **Plato and the Art of Writing in the *Phaedrus***

In Plato's *Phaedrus* dialogue, Socrates makes several interesting claims about the value of writing. Traditionally, these claims have been taken by scholars to prove Socrates' (and indeed Plato's) absolute, outright disparagement of writing in preference for orality. Such readings understand writing as incompatible with the philosophical life. However, the issue is more complicated than this, and attending closely to certain textual details reveals that this is not, in fact, a text-negative text. It is at least text-neutral, and perhaps even text-positive. But before offering this alternative reading, it is necessary to address the widely-accepted assumption that Socrates and Plato view writing as both inappropriate for philosophical investigation and true understanding of reality. Such scholars as Lebeck, McCoy, Nussbaum, Ferrari, and Griswold argue for or assume this interpretation as given. Most focus on the latter half of the dialogue, particularly the Theuth and Thamus myth, to support this reading (e.g. Nussbaum 1986). While there are certainly scholars reading through a more text-positive lens, such as Burger and Sheffield, the acceptance of Plato's ostensible disdain for writing is so engrained in secondary

scholarship that it often goes unarticulated and is therefore difficult to identify. The fact is that an anti-textual angle is simply more in keeping with the Vlastosian paradigm, which has had a stronghold over Platonic scholarship since at least the 1980's. Vlastos' investment in a complete Platonic-Socratic disavowal of corporeality and interpersonal relationships—of others as a category— necessarily creates a logic system in which those in the Vlastosian school must read erotics and philosophy as unequivocally self-driven, self-conducted, and self-interested.<sup>38</sup> There is little room for the “betweenness” that Plato so frequently thematizes, and the stakes are high. If we as a scholarly community lose this assumption of Plato's hard stance against the body and all it entails, including writing, do we risk our lofty valuation of the philosophical life and of philosophers themselves? Vlastos might think so, but I am not so sure.<sup>39</sup> I contend that Plato provides a moderate or positive attitude toward writing as a process and tool for philosophical documentation. The relationship he depicts between the self as a philosophical concept and the activity of writing is key and has been traditionally overlooked. This relationship is the focus of this chapter.

Thought the *Phaedrus*, the intimacy between textuality and the self is striking. Socrates attributes to writing the ability to serve as a reminder for or container of the writer's self through the process of mimesis. This self-text relationship reveals that there are philosophically beneficial ways in which (a work of) writing may function. Before delving into textual examples of this relationship, it is important to establish that Plato thinks the self matters in the first place.

The self-centered maneuvers of this dialogue are programmatically significant. Griswold observes that the major themes of this dialogue are self-knowledge and self-discovery, citing

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<sup>38</sup> Vlastos 1994.

<sup>39</sup> Vlastos 1981.

229c as especially illustrative of this point.<sup>40</sup> In these lines, Socrates claims that he has no spare time for idle investigations and chatter because he continues to be plagued by his most important goal, i.e. self-knowledge:

ἐμοὶ δὲ πρὸς αὐτὰ οὐδαμῶς ἐστὶ σχολή: τὸ δὲ αἴτιον, ὦ φίλε, τούτου τόδε. οὐ δύναμαί πω κατὰ τὸ Δελφικὸν γράμμα γινῶναι ἑμαυτόν: γελοῖον δὴ μοι φαίνεται τοῦτο ἔτι ἀγνοοῦντα τὰ ἀλλότρια σκοπεῖν. ὅθεν δὴ χαίρειν ἐάσας ταῦτα, πειθόμενος δὲ τῷ νομιζομένῳ περὶ αὐτῶν, ὃ νυνδὴ ἔλεγον, σκοπῶ οὐ ταῦτα ἀλλ' ἑμαυτόν...<sup>41</sup>

There is no leisure for me for such pursuits. And this, friend, is this reason for that: I am not yet able to know myself, as according to the Delphic inscription. So it seems ridiculous to me, *still* not knowing that, to investigate irrelevant things. For this reason I bid farewell to these matters, trusting in the customary view about them, which I said just now, I seek not these things but myself...

Understanding the self is Socrates' primary concern, and he refuses to engage in any activity that does not further this agenda. This is stated quite early in the dialogue. Therefore, the reader may understand that the ensuing dialogue, in which Socrates happily partakes, clearly is not one focused on mere "irrelevant things." The dialogue must be about the self, or at least serves Socrates' self-centered endeavor, or else Socrates would not have participated. One might argue that Socrates is adopting an ironic pose in claiming a singular interest in the self, but this does not fit his typical ironic tone and subject.<sup>42</sup> Socrates returns to this focal point in the dialogue's closing lines in his prayer to Pan:

ὦ φίλε Πάν τε καὶ ἄλλοι ὅσοι τῇδε θεοί, δοίητέ μοι καλῶ γενέσθαι τᾶνδοθεν: ἔξωθεν δὲ ὅσα ἔχω, τοῖς ἐντὸς εἶναί μοι φίλια.<sup>43</sup>

Dear Pan and all other gods in this place, grant to me to become beautiful within, and that all which I hold without be friendly to those within me.

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<sup>40</sup> Griswold 1986, 2.

<sup>41</sup> *Phdr.* 229e. Greek taken from Ryan 2012 and all translations my own.

<sup>42</sup> See Burger 1978, Roochnik 1995, and Moore 2014.

<sup>43</sup> 279bc.

Again, the focus here is on Socrates' self in particular. He is not asking that all people be led toward harmony with their selves or a World Self or some other such thing, but he personally be in harmony with himself. Certainly, Socrates' exact conception of the self is fraught, but any definitional work is not the crux of the current discussion. The important thing for our discussion is that whatever the self is, it is philosophically privileged.

Remember that these two scenes arguably introduce and conclude this dialogue. Philosophical prioritization of the self bookends the written dialogue. Notions that this dialogue is preoccupied with questions of the self are incompatible with notions that this dialogue disparages the text. If writing and textuality were inherently bad, and this dialogue were anti-text as a result, Socrates would not establish such an articulated relationship between text and self, and Plato would not draw formal attention to the fact. For someone such as Socrates, who is so vastly concerned with the self as a philosophical end, the conflation of text and identity is a thematically massive revelation.

This first example of such a conflation takes place as Plato sets the scene for the dialogue's main speeches around 227. Socrates and Phaedrus begin their walk, and Phaedrus explains that he has just left the home of Lysias, a man notoriously fond of making speeches; after asking what Phaedrus did at Lysias', Socrates muses that *ἡ δ᾽ ἤλον ὅτι τῶν λόγων ὑμᾶς Λυσίας εἰστία;* ("it is obvious that Lysias entertained you with speeches").<sup>44</sup> Phaedrus confirms this assumption and indicates that he himself was just about to go for a walk so that he might practice reciting a speech that Lysias had recently delivered to him. Socrates joins Phaedrus' sojourn, but before Phaedrus can attempt to recite Lysias' speech from memory, Socrates stops

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<sup>44</sup> 227b

him and demands to be shown what is hidden under Lysias' cloak.<sup>45</sup> He suspects that Phaedrus is hiding a written transcript of Lysias' speech; he is correct. In light of this, Socrates instructs Phaedrus to read directly from the transcript rather than attempt to recite it from memory. Phaedrus begrudgingly obeys, having been excited to practice his oral recitation skills.

There are two points of particular interest in these introductory sections. The most striking details are found in the following exchange:

Σωκράτης: δείξας γε πρῶτον, ὦ φιλότης, τί ἄρα ἐν τῇ ἀριστερᾷ ἔχεις ὑπὸ τῷ ἱματίῳ: τοπάζω γάρ σε ἔχειν τὸν λόγον αὐτόν. εἰ δὲ τοῦτό ἐστιν, οὕτωςι διανοοῦ περὶ ἐμοῦ, ὥς ἐγὼ σε πάνυ μὲν φιλῶ, παρόντος δὲ καὶ Λυσίου, ἐμαυτὸν σοι ἐμμελετᾶν παρέχειν οὐ πάνυ δέδοκται. ἀλλ' ἴθι, δείκνυε.

Φαῖδρος: παῦε. ἐκκέκρουκάς με ἐλπίδος, ὦ Σώκρατες, ἣν εἶχον ἐν σοὶ ὥς ἐγγυμνασόμενος. ἀλλὰ ποῦ δὴ βούλει καθιζόμενοι ἀναγνῶμεν;<sup>46</sup>

Socrates: First show me, dear boy, what you hold in your left hand under your cloak. For I am guessing that you hold the actual speech. But if this is true, know the following about me, that while I am very fond of you, with Lysias actually here (*παρόντος Λυσίου*), it doesn't make any sense that I lend myself to you to practice on. Go on then, show me.

Phaedrus: Stop it! You have knocked out my hope, Socrates, which I had for practicing on you. But where do you want to sit so that we might read?

It is very subtle, but Socrates has just said something fascinating. *Lysias is actually here*.

Obviously, Lysias has not physically joined Socrates and Phaedrus on their walk, and yet he is somehow present with them. How can this be? I argue that, coupled with Socrates' clear reference to the written document containing Lysias' speech, this unassuming genitive absolute *παρόντος Λυσίου* confirms that the Lysias who is actually here is a textual one. As Ryan explains, Lysias is there "in the person of the manuscript."<sup>47</sup> The textual copy of Lysias' speech serves as his representative, a proxy, and it does so to such a degree as to render their identities synonymous. Or rather, the text and Lysias are so interconnected that the text becomes shorthand

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<sup>45</sup> δείξας γε πρῶτον, ὦ φιλότης, τί ἄρα ἐν τῇ ἀριστερᾷ ἔχεις ὑπὸ τῷ ἱματίῳ (228d). I like to think this is a cheeky "is that a scroll in your cloak, or are you just happy to see me?" joke. But that is outside the scope of this dissertation.

<sup>46</sup> 228de.

<sup>47</sup> Ryan 2012, 92.

for the person. Socrates easily could have said that “Lysias’ speech is right here” or “It is as though Lysias is here,” both of which phrasings would be in keeping with the Platonic interest in speeches and as-though-ness. But Socrates does not say this. He deliberately creates a logical, cognitive—a mimetic—connection between Lysias’ self and the written documentation of his words. It would also be possible to argue that this is a throwaway line meant as a slight against Lysias: he is such a poor rhetorician that even a medium as worthless as writing is a satisfactory replacement for his person. However, even accepting all of those assumptions, and accepting the controversial idea that Socratic irony contains no kernel of truth, the fact remains that the joke would rely upon a conceptual linkage between a self and a text in order for Plato’s reader to understand the punchline.<sup>48</sup> Shedding Vlastosian baggage, it is simply more likely and more textually-supported that Socrates and Plato actually see this self-text linkage. Further, the fact that Socrates utilizes similar phrasing immediately prior to this section when referring to Phaedrus’ hidden λόγον reveals that this is a habitual connection in Socrates’ mind. This *παρόντος Λυσίου* signals not a mere quirk of Socrates’ speech or personality, but a meaningful and purposeful ontological connection between Lysias’ text and Lysias’ self. When Socrates says *παρόντος Λυσίου* he establishes the potential for an intimate relationship between a writing and its author that is marked by the text’s retention of the author’s identity, so naturally mimetic that it is nearly imperceptible—which might be why this line has received little to no scholarly attention.<sup>49</sup>

It bears noting that Socrates, in preferring the text over memorized recitation, has himself thwarted the mimetic process as traditionally conceived in an oral society. As many scholars

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<sup>48</sup> See Roochnik 1995.

<sup>49</sup> Students of Plato regularly do something similar when we, having a discussion, hold up a copy of Plato’s *Phaedrus* and say “Well, Plato here says xyz...” We are committing an interesting act of conflation of writer and written.



note, memory and mimesis are extremely important topics in this dialogue and in the learning process at the time of Plato's writing.<sup>50</sup> While Lebeck cites 228d-e as a confirmation that textuality is viewed negatively in the *Phaedrus* due to its interference with memory (discussed below), this ignores the qualitative implications of the παρόντος Λυσίου.<sup>51</sup> For his part, Griswold also ignores the importance of this short declaration when he argues that "[it] is the nature of the soul that makes the spoken word preferable to the written."<sup>52</sup> Because the actual text of this dialogue indicates that Plato is saying something else (or at least something *more*). Socrates' claim that Lysias' text is a suitable proxy for the person himself precisely indicates that writing possesses the ability to work toward alleviating the self-knowledge conundrum with which Socrates finds himself to be preoccupied, all while participating in the mimetic process that even these text-negative interpreters find prioritized in the dialogue.

Indeed, Socrates' preference of Lysias' textual representation-of-self over Phaedrus' oral recitation signals that the text more directly and appropriately represents the person than has been recognized in scholarship, as far as I can tell. One might even argue that going straight to the textual source, as it were, eliminates one additional opportunity for the human distortion of ideas. A person reciting a text that is a documentation of an idea, which is itself a reflection of the form of an idea filtered through the corporeal tool of language, is one step further away from the form than just going to the text. It is not perfect, but it is slightly closer to the original, and that means something to a Platonist. In representing Lysias in such a direct way, not only does the text assume its own identity, it actually works to turn the reader's mind back to Lysias himself, which is to say it causes the reader to remember—an absolute boon whether we

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<sup>50</sup> See Lebeck 1972, Edmonds 2017, and Griswold 1986.

<sup>51</sup> Lebeck 1972, 286.

<sup>52</sup> Griswold 1986, 209.

understand the dialogue's interest as self-knowledge or memory (or both). While not all remembering might be for the best (recall that the charioteer's good and bad horses are equally driven by memory! it can go both ways), if the self is positioned as a good, which it is in this dialogue, memory that drives toward the self is memory well-driven. Additionally, as discussed below, this need for qualification (remembering versus remembering *done well*) is not a strike against textual mimesis uniquely, since every human activity in this dialogue and the Socratic worldview requires qualification. The idea that must not be overlooked is that Socrates indicates clearly in this dialogue that, like every other activity, writing is able to participate in this positive manner and therefore can be utilized well for the philosophical journey.

A second example of Socrates' construction of this text-self relationship occurs at 276d, at which point he considers the valuation of writing in his Adonis' garden metaphor. Socrates has just recounted the origins of writing via the Theuth and Thamus myth and proceeds to compare writing to gardening. He says that certain types of people understand the benefit of certain types of writing:

ἀλλὰ τοὺς μὲν ἐν γράμμασι κήπους, ὥς ἔοικε, παιδιᾶς χάριν σπερεῖ τε καὶ γράψει, ὅταν δὲ γράφῃ, ἐαυτῷ τε ὑπομνήματα θησαυρίζόμενος, εἰς τὸ λήθης γῆρας ἐὰν ἵκηται.<sup>53</sup>

But these gardens of letters, it seems, he will plant for the sake of fun and he will write, whenever he does write, storing up *reminders for himself*, when he approaches to the forgetfulness of old age...

The sensible man infuses his text with reminders for himself, so that should he forget (perhaps due to old age and memory loss), he might read the text and remember his previous idea. While it is unclear for what these are reminders, the mere planting of these textual reminders is dependent upon a deep knowledge of the self. The sensible man is able to anticipate what he will forget in the future, an anticipation made possible only by self-knowledge. He intuits in advance

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<sup>53</sup> 276d.

this future lack—this is to say the nature of his future self—and devise a remedy in order to treat that lack. Writing is therefore a technology amenable to addressing obstacles on the road to self-knowledge, inspiring self-improvement and working in tandem with the writer to communicate the present self to the future self. In this way, writing is able to represent the self in its ability to convey information about and to the self itself. And, as Phaedrus tells Socrates, this is a very noble pastime (παγκάλην).<sup>54</sup> Therefore, in the midst of an ostensibly disparaging discussion about writing, Socrates reiterates its mimetic potential—a mimetic for the self, that most privileged of philosophical concepts! After all, who is this “sensible man” in possession of self-knowledge, who utilizes writing well, if not someone who has been living the philosophical life?

Further, this scene problematizes Socrates’ argument against textuality based on its inability to adapt itself to its readers, a detail that scholars frequently point to as creating the dialogue’s supposed denouncement of writing. Socrates phrases this critique as follows:

δεινὸν γάρ που, ὦ Φαῖδρε, τοῦτ’ ἔχει γραφή, καὶ ὡς ἀληθῶς ὅμοιον ζωγραφία. καὶ γὰρ τὰ ἐκείνης ἔκγονα ἔστηκε μὲν ὡς ζῶντα, ἐὰν δ’ ἀνέρη τι, σεμνῶς πάνυ σιγᾷ. ταῦτόν δὲ καὶ οἱ λόγοι: δόξαις μὲν ἂν ὥς τι φρονοῦντας αὐτοὺς λέγειν, ἐὰν δέ τι ἔρη τῶν λεγομένων βουλόμενος μαθεῖν, ἔν τι σημαίνει μόνον ταῦτόν ἀεὶ. ὅταν δὲ ἅπαξ [275ε] γραφῇ, κυλινδεῖται μὲν πανταχοῦ πᾶς λόγος ὁμοίως παρὰ τοῖς ἐπαῖουσιν, ὡς δ’ αὖτως παρ’ οἷς οὐδὲν προσήκει, καὶ οὐκ ἐπίσταται λέγειν οἷς δεῖ γε καὶ μὴ. πλημμελούμενος δὲ καὶ οὐκ ἐν δίκη λαιδορηθεὶς τοῦ πατρὸς ἀεὶ δεῖται βοηθοῦ: αὐτὸς γὰρ οὐτ’ ἀμύνασθαι οὔτε βοηθῆσαι δυνατὸς αὐτῷ.<sup>55</sup>

For writing has this following strange feature, Phaedrus, and is like painting, actually. For the creatures of the painting stand upright like living ones, but if one asks something, [they stand] very reverently in silence. And also words [do] this: you might expect that, as if knowing something, they speak, but if you ask something, wanting to learn of their sayings, they always indicate this one thing alone. But when once it is written, each word is cycled around everywhere, similarly as among those having nothing to do with it, and it does not know to whom it should or should not speak. But when wronged or not reviled in fairness, it always needs its father as helper; for it has no power to either protect or help itself.

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<sup>54</sup> 176e

<sup>55</sup> 275de.

This passage seems to claim that text and writing are unable to adapt to their readers, leaving the written word open to malappropriation (that is, leaving them open to being used in any way other than a soul-bettering one). Further, a text cannot defend itself and “remains silent when questioned, saying the same thing over and over.”<sup>56</sup> In this interpretation, a text is a singular story, providing a singular answer. It is this failure of multiplicity that renders writing an unsatisfying dialectical partner and philosophically bereft. According to Guthrie, texts “cannot answer questions nor defend themselves under attack, and are read equally by the right and the wrong people. Living speech, of which writing is only the image, goes with knowledge, is written in the soul of the learner, and knows to speak or be silent before the appropriate people.”<sup>57</sup> However, something interesting happens when 275de and 276d are juxtaposed. Read together, 276d softens the criticism at 275de. After saying that text cannot be tailored to specific readers, Socrates depicts a noble writer who knows the proper way to utilize writing to suit his particular future needs. Again, the writer anticipates the needs of the reader and tailors the text accordingly. While this might seem a limited case study that says more of the text-self relationship than anything else, it nevertheless proves that 275de is not as simple as traditionally assumed. The noble writer of 276d has figured out how to combat the potential downfalls of writing at 275de. Reading 275de without 276d provides an incomplete story. Furthermore, I offer this: the dialogue form of writing so loved by Plato is in fact extremely dynamic and does seem to answer the reader’s questions and criticisms. Dialogues by nature speak back—but more on this later.

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<sup>56</sup> Griswold 1986, 207–8.

<sup>57</sup> Guthrie 1975, IV:410. Also, I cannot help but wonder how absolved of this monotony is Socrates’ verbal interlocutor. Though he does speak with a bit of variety, many of Phaedrus’ retorts are formulaic. Apart from his delivery of Lysias’ speech, which obviously is not his original content, Phaedrus generally either asks Socrates for clarification, agrees with Socrates, or disagrees with Socrates. If text’s downfall is its habit of “saying the same thing over and over,” then based on this dialogue, orality runs the same risk.

The final example of the self-text relationship to be considered here is the Midas epigram. This example of writing possesses exciting multivalence, as it not only represents a self, as the other examples do, but it even claims to be a self! Here I trace our footsteps back in the dialogue to section 264, Socrates is explaining to Phaedrus logographic necessity, the importance of proper ordering within a speech, which he likens to a anatomical necessity: just as a body's combination of head, torso, and feet is important, so too is the ordering of arguments of a speech (264c). As an example of a text disobeying this rule of organizational necessity, meaning that its lines could be organized in any way with no detriment to the meaning, Socrates cites the epigram that marks Midas' tomb:

ἔστι μὲν τοῦτο τόδε—  
 “χαλκῇ παρθένος εἰμί, Μίδα δ’ ἐπὶ σήματι κεῖμαι.  
 ὄφρ’ ἂν ὕδωρ τε νάη καὶ δένδρεα μακρὰ τεθήλῃ,  
 αὐτοῦ τῇδε μένουσα πολυκλαύτου ἐπὶ τύμβου,  
 ἀγγελέω παριοῦσι Μίδας ὅτι τῇδε τέθαιπται.<sup>58</sup>

Here it is:  
 “I am a bronze Parthenos, I sit on Midas’ grave.  
 So long as water flows and large trees grow,  
 Remaining in this very spot on the tomb of the much-lamented man,  
 I will announce to passersby that Midas was buried here.

This bit of writing characterizes itself as a marker or tomb, a *σημα*. Its function is to point beyond itself to indicate a referent. The linguistic tie to “semantic” is obvious here: this epigram is a signifier pointing to a signified. According to LSJ, a *σημα* is a grave or the sign by which the grave is marked, i.e. either/both signifier or/and signified. So, as this epigram is a token placed on top of Midas’ tomb (*σημα*) it functions as a sign (*σημα*) for said tomb. This “*σημα* for a *σημα*” or “sign for a tomb” phrasing might seem convoluted, but the important part is that the epigram identifies itself as that semantic signifier, an arrow pointing to something its related to, which

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<sup>58</sup> 264d.

also has an essential confluence with the arrow. The epigram is the signifier and Midas' tomb is the signified, and the epigram is part of the tomb. To put this in Platonic language, the epigram as a whole serves therefore as a means by which the reader is caused to remember Midas. In this way, the epigram is a textual referent or representation of Midas' self on the principle of mimetic association, meaning that not only is this writing linked to its human signified by cognitive connection, but it shares in some essential way in the ontological reality of the signified since for the Greek speaker and in the Greek imaginary, there is that doubled semantic range.

On another level, the text also has its own selfhood. By repeatedly utilizing first-person verbs, establishing a sort of physical reality through use of prepositions, and claiming an audience, this text demands recognition of its identity, and its identity as a text. Although on this level the epigram does not participate in the mimetic possibility seen in all the other examples (as well as the first level of this epigram's meaning, above), its weight is that it does more than claim to represent a self, but to *be* a self. In his discussion of logographic necessity, Socrates makes the striking choice to cite a decidedly personified and boisterous bit of text. The citation of a text that claims a self for itself challenged the assumption that "writers or reader of manuals are foolish if they suppose written words can do more than remind those who already know what they are about."<sup>59</sup> The language of the Midas epigram indicates that a text need not indicate anything than itself. On either level of interpretation, the Midas epigram reinforces the ability for textuality to relate extremely closely with both a self and selfhood as a concept.

One might also consider the reference to Sappho at 235c, but there is just less to work with there. In the lead-up to his first discourse on Eros, Socrates references *Σαπφοῦς τῆς καλῆς*, Sappho the beautiful. If Lefkowitz's survey of biographies is to be trusted, and there is ample

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<sup>59</sup> Guthrie 1975, IV:410.

reason for doing so, Sappho was apparently considered physically unattractive. So, what do we make of this *beautiful Sappho* characterization? I would argue that Socrates calls Sappho beautiful because her poetry is beautiful. The beauty of Sappho's poetry is thus able confer its own characteristics upon its author or express an otherwise invisible beauty. Not only is Sappho's name being used as shorthand to refer to her text or the combination of her and her text (as seen with Lysias), but the text is being so closely connected to the author that it is able to express the writer's inner beauty or impart the quality upon her. Either way, it seems that Sappho is beautiful because her text metonymically represents her and makes her beautiful to the reader-viewer.

There is an even further layer to this privileging of the self and its relation to writing. Not only does Socrates offer the self as a thematic priority, but Plato does on the metatextual level. The topic of self-discovery motivates the dialogue's internal movement and bookends the entire work. By nature of logographic necessity, placing the self at the introduction, throughout the body, and as the conclusion of the work, Plato effectively marks the concept's thematic import. He introduces the dialogue with Socrates' declaration to only participate in self-oriented discussion, provides an intervening discussion that by logical necessity must serve this function, frequently redirects the reader's attention back toward themes of the self (of which I have just discussed only a few examples), and recapitulates all of this by returning explicitly to the self in Socrates' closing speech. Again, when Socrates articulates the importance of dialectical organization, Plato's textual organization around the concept of the self cannot be ignored. Plato utilizes the material text as a medium through which to convey to readers the importance of the self. Given that the dialogue is a textual artifact, Plato's *Phaedrus* itself exists as an example of textual representation and reminder of the self, enacting the very theories constructed within. The

self is a deeply important philosophical precept, and Plato both illustrates and explores this point through writing. So in addition to the message within the words of the *Phaedrus*, Plato displays just how capable writing is of espousing philosophical themes.<sup>60</sup>

Indeed, even Griswold, who is largely a member of the anti-text school, acknowledges Plato's utilization of writing—it is not really up for dispute since we have Plato's texts. Under the assumption that Socrates views writing negatively, though, Griswold argues that Plato deliberately distinguishes his own opinions from Socrates':

...Plato's decision to write shows that he does not agree with Socrates' position... on the matter; else he would have followed in [Socrates'] steps in this regard. Plato must think that the criticisms of writing are answerable at least to some extent, that some benefit Socrates did not acknowledge follows from the use of the written words, that the criticisms of writing are just not that powerful, or, finally, that some combination of these alternatives is the case.<sup>61</sup>

Apart from his failure to consider that perhaps Socrates *does* in fact acknowledge the ways in which writing can be valuable, Griswold does not fully flesh out the programmatic weight of the fact of Plato's writing. His critical assumptions also hinder his ability to do so, as signaled by his assessment that “in a certain sense Plato's dialogues do indeed point playfully to their own inferiority,” a statement that downplays the narrative distancing for which Griswold himself argues in the latter half of this very same chapter.<sup>62</sup>

As Cook observes, Plato “could have chosen not to write at all, as Socrates must have chosen to do in the face of so many previous philosophers who chose to express their ideas in writing. Given the preference for the oral in the *Phaedrus* and the *Seventh Letter*, Plato could

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<sup>60</sup> For the similarities and differences of the Platonic and Socratic ideas see Guthrie, though he does not so much analyze Socrates' stance as he challenges the scholarly instinct to conflate Socratic and Platonic philosophies. His treatment of Plato's attitude toward writing in the *Phaedrus* is nevertheless helpful.

<sup>61</sup> Griswold 1986, 219.

<sup>62</sup> Griswold 1986, 210.



have confined himself at his most form to such lectures as the reported ‘On the Good.’”<sup>63</sup>

However, I remind the reader that even Socrates himself is not hardline against textuality, so even these moves to distinguish Socrates’ and Plato’s literary attitudes, which is better than not, sort of miss the trick. A more straightforward philosophical treatise format was available to Plato. Yet, he chose to convey his philosophies through dialogue, a decidedly more literary and responsive type of text than other options. And he chose to situate these formal gestures toward the self so as to render them thematically paramount. Thus, on textual and metatextual levels, the *Phaedrus* acknowledges the potential philosophical fecundity of writing and textuality.

The next way in which preconceived notions of the *Phaedrus*’ stance against textuality can be challenged is by focusing more directly on the aforementioned mimetic potential of writing and the written word. In particular, paying attention to certain memory-related vocabulary reveals implicit textual assessments. The word that will be tracked here is ἵχνος, which occurs in varying forms three times throughout this dialogue.

According to LSJ, ἵχνος can be defined as footstep, track, trace, or a representation thereof. Another way to phrase this is that an ἵχνος is a material phenomenon that is representative a thing itself. Similarly, the related verb ἵχνεύω can mean to hunt after, seek out, or track. In essence, then, an ἵχνος functions not only as a footstep, but a representation or reminder of the having left the footstep, and its verbal form relates to the process of following that footstep in order to get to the original thing. It is a sign. In order to illustrate the link between ἵχνος and memory, it is helpful to look at its first two occurrences in the *Phaedrus*.

First, a participial form of ἵχνεύω is used to describe the ways in which specific gods’ followers pursue them. Socrates explains the activity thus:

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<sup>63</sup> Cook 1992, 112.

ἰχνεύοντες δὲ παρ' ἑαυτῶν ἀνευρίσκουσιν τὴν τοῦ σφετέρου θεοῦ φύσιν εὐποροῦσι διὰ τὸ συντόνως ἠναγκάσθαι πρὸς τὸν θεὸν βλέπειν, καὶ ἐφαπτόμενοι αὐτοῦ τῇ μνήμῃ ἐνθουσιῶντες ἐξ ἐκείνου λαμβάνουσι τὰ ἔθη καὶ τὰ ἐπιτηδεύματα, καθ' ὅσον δυνατόν θεοῦ ἀνθρώπων μετασχεῖν: <sup>64</sup>

...and seeking (ἰχνεύοντες ) to discover for themselves the nature of their god, they make their way because they are compelled to look at the god, and latching onto him by memory, being inspired, they seize from him habits and customs, as much as it is possible for a man to take part in the divine.

These rapt devotees track after their gods in order that they might reach the actual god. There is a substantive link between the god and the trace of the god, which the followers follow—especially given that they seem able to eventually, ideally actually reach the god. Socrates underscores this by claiming that these followers are able to latch onto this god by the use of memory. Thus, Socrates has effectively related this tracking and the process of remembering. One is able to conduct this tracking by means of memory.

Edmonds further interprets this tracking as referring back to the processes of collection and division, concepts of massive philosophical import in this work: “This movement back along the tracks (*ichneuontes*) by memory not only recalls following the gods in the heavens, but also the movement in the recollection process from manifold sense perceptions by reasoning to the unity in 249c. It is also echoed in Socrates’ later comment of the way he behaves when he encounters someone who understands the logical processes of collection and division.”<sup>65</sup> Therefore, the resonances of ἰχνεύοντες are expanded to include not just a literal tracking, but also a cognitive movement by memory from a representation to the thing represented. It can theoretically take one from images to truth.

The second appearance of an ἵχν- word confirms this link to collection and division. Socrates explains his affinity for the topic:

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<sup>64</sup> 253a.

<sup>65</sup> Edmonds 2017, 77.

τούτων δὴ ἔγωγε αὐτός τε ἐραστής, ὃ Φαῖδρε, τῶν διαιρέσεων καὶ συναγωγῶν, ἵνα οἷός τε ὃ λέγειν τε καὶ φρονεῖν: ἐάν τέ τιν' ἄλλον ἡγήσωμαι δυνατὸν εἰς ἓν καὶ ἐπὶ πολλὰ πεφυκόθ' ὄραν, τοῦτον διώκω 'κατόπισθε μετ' ἵχνιον ὥστε θεοῖο.'<sup>66</sup>

Now I myself am a lover of these things, Phaedruss, that is of division and collection, because of which I am able to speak and think. And if I think that another man is able to see how things are naturally into one and from many, I follow him “from behind as after the track of a god.”

For Socrates, the person who understands collection and division is as worthy of tracking for the philosopher as Zeus by the worshipper of Zeus. Ryan notes in his commentary that this line contains a potential Homeric allusion, but Socrates' intratextual reference back to line 253a is more interesting.<sup>67</sup> This is the section anticipated by the second half of the Edmonds quote at footnote 14. In 266b, Socrates compares himself to the person tracking the god by moving through the power of memory from the trace to the god themselves. Edmonds notes that “[t]he repetition of the term for track (*ichnion*) links these passages, as the process of recollection by means of collection and division is given illustration with the image of the ritual procession.”<sup>68</sup> In short, ἵχν- terms are linked to tracking, memory, and collection and division.

The final instance of an ἵχν- term will illuminate its relevance for the discussion of the *Phaedrus* attitude toward textuality. This third example returns us to Adonis' garden. Again, as Socrates is discussing the written word, he likens writing to gardening. Recall the selection discussed above, which I reprint here:

ἀλλὰ τοὺς μὲν ἐν γράμμασι κήπους, ὡς ἔοικε, παιδιᾶς χάριν σπερεῖ τε καὶ γράψει, ὅταν δὲ γράφῃ, ἐαυτῷ τε ὑπομνήματα θησαυρίζόμενος, εἰς τὸ λήθης γῆρας ἐὰν ἵκηται, καὶ παντὶ τῷ ταῦτόν ἵχνος μετιόντι, ἡσθήσεται τε αὐτοὺς θεωρῶν φυομένους ἀπαλούς: ὅταν δὲ ἄλλοι παιδιᾶς ἄλλαις χρῶνται, συμποσίοις τε ἄρδοντες αὐτοὺς ἐτέροις τε ὅσα τούτων ἀδελφά, τότε ἐκεῖνος, ὡς ἔοικεν, ἀντὶ τούτων οἷς λέγω παίζων διάξει.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> 266b.

<sup>67</sup> Ryan 2012, 274–75.

<sup>68</sup> Edmonds 2017, 78.

<sup>69</sup> 276d.

But these gardens of letters, it seems, he will plant for the sake of fun and he will write, whenever he does write, storing up reminders of himself for himself, when he approaches to the forgetfulness of old age, and to all those following *this track*, he will be delighted, observing them growing tender shoots. When others engage with other amusements, refreshing themselves with symposia and other related things such as are kin to them, he, as it seems, instead of these he will spend his time playing with such things as I say.

Whereas this selection was of earlier interest due to its implications for the self (ἐαυτῷ τε ὑπομνήματα), focus is now shifted to the tracks (ἵχνιον) left by the writer in the text. But these two ideas are closely related. The traces left behind by the writer in the text are traces of the self. Such traces serve as reminders (ὑπομνήματα) for the self and, it is now clear, even for others. As has been shown, ἵχν- words thus far in the dialogue have been employed to show the connection between signifier and signified via the road of remembering. As 276d shows, these tracks are able to be imbedded in a text for future recollective purposes. This mimetic potential is not found only in pursuing the gods or philosophical processes, but even in the written word.

Keeping in mind the text-self link and the mimetic potential indicated by those ἵχν- words, it is still necessary to acknowledge that the *Phaedrus* does not have an unequivocally positive view of textuality. The tension between positive and negative attitudes is helpfully illustrated by the παρόντος Λυσίου scene. On the one hand, it is striking that Socrates thwarts Phaedrus' oral recitation in preference of a textual reading. And the entire work is born from that text and Phaedrus' reading thereof. On the other hand, the text is not enough. If it were, again, the entire dialogue would not have been necessary. Griswold articulates the tension thusly: "At the beginning, then, Socrates needs Phaedrus because he needs to hear the logos about eros which is in Phaedrus' possession. Evidently Socrates does not have access to Lysias himself; at least, he treats Phaedrus as the conduit between Lysias and himself. But then Phaedrus would be entirely dispensable once he had delivered the speech; and yet that delivery is only the first step

of the *Phaedrus*.”<sup>70</sup> While Griswold interprets Socrates’ persistence to engage Phaedrus in dialogue after he has delivered Lysias’ speech as indicative of his drive to “turn Phaedrus into his own emissary to Lysias,” I would simply argue that Socrates does not find Lysias’ speech (written or oral) satisfying for his philosophical tastes, as discussed above and below.<sup>71</sup>

The evidence considered thus far has illustrated the positive potential of textuality in the *Phaedrus*, but there is something else to consider: the non-uniqueness of the potential negative aspects of textuality. This is to say, a hard stance on either side fails to consider the importance of betweenness or intermediariness for Platonic philosophy writ large. The point of this discussion is not to gloss over potential inabilities of writing; the point is that it is a more complicated matter than it might seem at first blush and as traditionally conceived, and that good or bad, writing enjoys a connection with the self. Ultimately, Plato says that writing is neither necessarily good nor bad—a qualitative ambiguity writing shares with all other activity. It is the universality of this ambiguity that destabilizes traditional notions that writing is a uniquely problematic activity and text a uniquely volatile medium. After all, this dialogue devotes much time to bad speaking and would-be philosophizing. Griswold nears recognizing this: “Socrates does not in fact endorse the spoken word without qualification... Likewise, Socrates does not banish the written word altogether.”<sup>72</sup> Griswold and many in his interpretive milieu quietly grant that writing, when qualified properly, has potential for beneficial use (particularly when linked to memory, as discussed above). But for Griswold, it is “[clear that Socrates] does not think it a very significant exception to the rule,” and Socrates’ acknowledgement of text’s positive potential is obviously a “weak concession.”<sup>73</sup> But what about this is weak, and why is it obvious?

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<sup>70</sup> Griswold 1986, 27.

<sup>71</sup> Griswold 1986, 27.

<sup>72</sup> Griswold 1986, 209.

<sup>73</sup> Griswold 1986, 209, 210.

We are never told. I argue that such an interpretation ignores the theme of ambiguity throughout this dialogue and Platonic and Socratic philosophies as a whole. Two ways in which the dialogue established this ambiguity are qualification and usage of the term *φαρμακόν*.

Qualification abounds in the *Phaedrus*. The dialogue relies on several verbal habits to achieve this qualification, most obviously verbal qualification through, for example, adverbs. Every activity is done as well or as much as possible, with or without skill, appropriately or inappropriately, and this incessant qualification has an important bearing on the present discussion.

The superlative adverb occurs so frequently throughout this text that it is excessively difficult to track. Not only is the frequency so high, but the ways in which the superlative adverb is conveyed vary wildly. Sometimes a simple *τάχιστα* (237a) or *ἐγγυτάτω* (252a) is enough to convey that “most quickly” or “most near” connotation. Other times, the adverb *ὥς* is combined with a superlative adverb and sometimes a *δυνατόν*-type word to render a translation of “as [adverb] as possible”; sometimes *ὥς+δυνατόν* without another adverb appears, in which case it translates simply as “as much as is possible.” Here are some examples of this formula: *ὥς ἥδιστον* at 238e (the lover wants to make his beloved as pleasing to himself as possible); *ὥς πλεῖστον χρόνον* at 240a (the lover wants to enjoy things as long as possible); *ὥς δυνατόν* at 253a (lovers want to make the beloved like their god as much as possible). It is the potentiality and possibility conveyed by these *ὥς δυνατόν* type adverbial phrases that is most intriguing for the current discussion. They are used for a staggering variety of activities. That is to say that *any* activity has the potential to be done very well or very poorly. This inherent and constantly emphasized verbal potentiality applies to the whole gamut action, as the list above helps portray.

Writing is not alone in its need for qualification, its potential for misuse, as every other technology or human activity is subject to the same.

Along similar lines, Plato relies on general adverbs of manner to qualify activity. Of these, adverbs of skill. Of these, adverbs of skill (τέχνη) and seriousness (σπουδῇ) are the most important, given the dialogue's preoccupation with these concepts.<sup>74</sup> Socrates uses τέχνη, the dative form of the word τέχνη (art, skill, cunning, as per LSJ), twenty times throughout this dialogue, spanning from lines 244c-277c. In several instances, τέχνη is best taken adverbially. When so taken, Socrates applies τέχνη to the whole catalogue of action, ranging from gardening (276b) to speaking and writing (261b). The applications of σπουδῇ are similarly wide ranging, which Socrates tells Phaedrus can describe the teaching of rhetoric (271a), gardening (276b), writing (276c), and even memory in the soul-chariot myth. Perhaps the clearest example of Socrates' qualification of writing is found within his Theuth and Thamus myth—to which most scholars point as proof of his anti-text stance.

At 274, Socrates shifts from his description of ideal types of speaking to focus on writing. It ought to be noted that he introduces this discussion by telling Phaedrus that they must discuss artful and improper writing:

οὐκοῦν τὸ μὲν τέχνης τε καὶ ἀτεχνίας λόγων πέρι ἱκανῶς ἐχέτω... τὸ δ' εὐπρεπείας δὴ γραφῆς πέρι καὶ ἀπρεπείας, πῇ γιγνόμενον καλῶς ἂν ἔχοι καὶ ὅπη ἀπρεπῶς, λοιπόν. ἦ γάρ;<sup>75</sup>

Then I have spoken sufficiently about writing, that which is artful and that which is artless... Then what still remains is propriety and impropriety about writing, how it can be done beautifully and how improperly. Right?

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<sup>74</sup> Griswold 1986 talks about the importance of both play/seriousness and skill/art throughout his book (chapter 1 and chapter 5, respectively, encompass his thoughts rather well.) Ferrari 1990 also provides a nice discussion on τέχνη and τέχνη in his second and third chapters.

<sup>75</sup> 274b.

Having introduced his new subject matter, Socrates proceeds to narrate the Egyptian origins of writing utilizing the Theuth and Thamus myth. We do well to note that at the inception of writing in Egypt, Theuth was particularly associated with *divine* writing, a technology of elevated metaphysical status. Socrates tells Phaedrus that the god Theuth invented numbers, mathematics, geometry, astronomy, draughts, dice, and most importantly letters (καὶ δὴ καὶ γράμματα).<sup>76</sup> When Theuth offered his invention to Thamus, the god who was king of Egypt at the time, Thamus asked him to explain the value of use of each. Arriving at his defense of writing Theuth argued the following:

ἐπειδὴ δὲ ἐπὶ τοῖς γράμμασιν ἦν, ‘τοῦτο δέ, ὦ βασιλεῦ, τὸ μάθημα,’ ἔφη ὁ Θεῦθ, ‘σοφωτέρους Αἰγυπτίους καὶ μνημονικωτέρους παρέξει: μνήμης τε γὰρ καὶ σοφίας φάρμακον ηὔρεθι.’<sup>77</sup>

But when he came to writing Theuth said, “King, this invention will make the Egyptians wiser and better and remembering. For I have discovered an elixir of memory and wisdom.”

But Thamus was a tough sell. He challenged Theuth’s notions of writing’s mimetic and noetic value:

ὁ δ’ εἶπεν:...“σύ, πατήρ ὢν γραμμάτων, δι’ εὐνοίαν τοῦναντίον εἶπες ἢ δύναται. τοῦτο γὰρ τῶν μαθόντων λήθην μὲν ἐν ψυχαῖς παρέξει μνήμης ἀμελετησίᾳ, ἅτε διὰ πίστιν γραφῆς ἔξωθεν ὑπ’ ἀλλοτρίων τύπων, οὐκ ἔνδοθεν αὐτοὺς ὑφ’ αὐτῶν ἀναμιμνησκομένους: οὐκ οὐκ μνήμης ἀλλὰ ὑπομνήσεως φάρμακον ηὔρες. σοφίας δὲ τοῖς μαθηταῖς δόξαν, οὐκ ἀλήθειαν πορίζεις.”<sup>78</sup>

And Thamus said: “You, the father of letters, because of your bias say that they have a power opposite to their actual one. For this will produce forgetfulness in the souls of those learning it by means of carelessness of memory, because of their trust of writing outside from irrelevant characters they do not bother to remember these things from within. So you have not found an elixir of memory but of reminding. To those learners you offer not truth, but an image.”

<sup>76</sup> τοῦτον δὴ πρῶτον ἀριθμὸν τε καὶ λογισμὸν εὔρεῖν καὶ γεωμετρίαν καὶ ἀστρονομίαν, ἔτι δὲ πεττείας τε καὶ κυβείας, καὶ δὴ καὶ γράμματα.

<sup>77</sup> 274e.

<sup>78</sup> 275b.



Thamus' objection is that writing will seduce people away from memory by providing an approximation thereof. Instead of actually remembering an oral speech, these people will merely read a written speech off the page and be content with stopping at that. Lebeck latches onto this passage and reads it alongside the παρόντος Λυσίου at 228e: "The myth of Theuth and Thamus suggests a contrast between the spoken and the written word, stressing the former's real benefits, the latter's illusory power... The prologue gives an object lesson of this tale... Socrates is willing to rely on Phaedrus' memory until he sees a copy of the speech which Phaedrus has hidden in his cloak... The prediction of Thamus holds good: the written copy has not so much aided the exercise of memory as prevented it."<sup>79</sup> Nussbaum echoes this sentiment when she says that "[the] *Phaedrus* reminds us (cf. Interlude 1) that all writing is merely a 'reminder': the real activity of teaching and learning goes on not on the page but in the souls of people."<sup>80</sup> For Lebeck and Nussbaum, the Theuth and Thamus myth solidifies the mere illusory power of textuality.

However, I want to push back on the idea that Plato views writing's power as *merely* illusory, as though illusion and allusion, and therefore mimesis, are trivial topics. Writing might not be perfect (because it does not partake in the realm of forms) but even Thamus points out that it can inspire memory, even if an imperfect fashion. The idea that this illusory power is viewed in a necessarily pejorative sense ignores the bigger picture of the dialogue—is also ignores Socrates' own words. Socrates deliberately and incessantly qualifies every single activity about which he speaks. Writing is not uniquely capricious. In his discussions of myth, rhetoric, flowing, psychagogia, and memory, Socrates sees the need to specify that the activity ought to be done in particular ways to maximize philosophical potential. Writing is no different, and the

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<sup>79</sup> Lebeck 1972, 286.

<sup>80</sup> Nussbaum 1986, 225.

importance of its mimetic potential cannot be overstated. The value of mimesis is strongly articulated throughout this work, so something's ability to participate in that process is no *mere* ability—it is extremely important. All activity is devoid of value in itself; value is determined by the way in which an activity is enacted, to what ends, and by whom.

Another way in which the *Phaedrus* established the qualitative ambiguity of writing is by calling it a *φάρμακόν*. This term is used in the Theuth and Thamus myth, as well as at the beginning of the dialogue to refer to Lysias' speech and its charming effect on Socrates. A *φάρμακόν* is a drug (healing or harmful), a remedy, potion, cure, or poison. In other words, it is of ambiguous nature. Griswold mentions this: "In the wrong hands, Socrates argues, the remedy will become the poison...; the written word cannot be medicinal... Historical examples of this are not difficult to find."<sup>81</sup> This is not incorrect, it just does not tell the full story. Griswold ignores his own recognition of the ability for a *φάρμακόν* to help or hurt, depending on the way it is used—he ignores the ambiguous nature. When Thamus refers to text as a *φάρμακόν*, he gestures toward the ambiguous nature of the activity. When writing and textuality are properly viewed through a non-essentialist lens, it is clear that anti-text interpretations of Plato's philosophy oversimplify the matter by ignoring key textual hints.

In conclusion of our discussion of the *Phaedrus*, I have argued against the traditional scholarly assumption that this dialogue, and therefore Plato and Socrates overall, espouses a negative view of writing and textuality. Such interpretation ignores key textual details of the dialogue itself, resulting in an overly simplified treatment of the dialogue's themes and for the sake of perpetuating a Vlastosian investment in an autonomous and anti-particularity philosopher. The *Phaedrus* tells us that writing can play an important role in the mimetic

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<sup>81</sup> Griswold 1986, 208.

experience of the forms and ideas, and is therefore able to function as a soul-bettering activity. The key, as is typical for Socratic philosophy, is the way in which writing as an activity is performed. Writing's ability to align itself so intimately with the self, specifically its potential to serve as a reminder or proxy for the self, ought to be privileged more highly than it has been when attempting to understand the dialogue's treatment of writing. When read with attention to these details, and when the philosophically privileged concept of the self is foregrounded, it is clear that Plato sees vast potential for self-writing as a process. Writing the self, and a self having been written, are able to draw one to remember not just the self represented by the written word, but through the philosophical pursuit and to the forms themselves. Even at this razor's edge, this time at which thinkers are seriously concerned about and confused by the potential of writing as a new technology, Plato, who so privileges the self, grants to writing the ability to convey and communicate something of the self.

### **Wax Tablets of the Soul in the *Theaetetus***

Let's move now to the *Theaetetus*. Broadly speaking, this dialogue is concerned with the nature of knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) and wisdom (σοφία), truth (ἀληθεία) and opinion (δόξα). This dialogue asks how we know the things we know and what is the nature of that experience. Much scholarship has been devoted to analyzing these epistemological explorations, but I turn our attention instead to one short section occurring around 191c-200b with a different lens. Whereas in the *Phdr.*, Socrates' connection of textuality and the self is a little more subtle, in the *Tht.* the connection is made explicitly. In this selection, Socrates offers two metaphors for the nature of the self as pertains to knowledge acquisition, sense perception, and the relationship between the two experiences. First, he proposes that perhaps the soul is akin to a waxen block, and memory is the act of writing upon that wax. The second metaphor is that of an aviary. Naturally, we'll focus

on the first. It bears noting that neither of these metaphors ultimately satisfies Socrates as a sufficient depiction of what humans and souls are like, so if one were to take this wax-block imagery as evidence of Plato's belief that the human soul is adequately represented by these metaphors, the argument would lack textual basis. But that is not my argument, and this is certainly why scholars have tended to underestimate certain aspects of this metaphor. I am not saying that Plato believed this account of wax-writing to be a satisfactory metaphor for the self—though I do think he believes it is an okay one. What I am saying is the mere fact of the metaphor is important for understanding the role of writing in Plato's, and perhaps the contemporary Greek, imaginary. The fact that writing would be tested out in any capacity as a metaphor for the nature of the self— which is, again, of the utmost philosophical import— lends further evidence to my argument that as early as Plato, textuality was already being linked to selfhood and writing already offered as a method of self construction, in philosophically rigorous ways no less. It does not matter if the metaphor fails; it matters that the metaphor is made at all. So, in order to explore this wax tablet metaphor, I will first summarize the ways in which scholarship tends to treat our selection. Next, I will perform a quick word study, focusing on the words used for wax, tablet, and the verbs that you do on the wax tablet, in order to situate the metaphor in a literary-praxis context. And finally, I will discuss why Plato employed this metaphor in the first place, and what this reveals about his understanding of the self-text relationship.

With so much work focused on the relationship between knowledge and belief, objective truth and opinion, how do scholars treat this wax tablet metaphor? The answer is: not as intensely as one might think! According to Woolf, this section of the text “has often been regarded as an ornamental flourish or a humorous appendage to the model's main explanatory

business.”<sup>82</sup> Woolf notes that while scholars do grant the wax model *some* weight as a depiction of just how it is that we are able to misunderstand our perceptions, how we engage in recollection and division, and how we learn or gain knowledge, they treat it as less intellectually productive and serious than other Platonic attempts to explore these concepts—and almost none consider the fact of the metaphor in itself. Even Woolf’s own revamped reading of this text focuses on the epistemological value of the metaphor as a sort of metatextual model for the dialogue as a whole, reading the forest rather than the tree(s) as it were, so as to attribute the value of the textual metaphor to its signification of a personal Platonic interest, rather than to its very act of signifying whatever it might signify.<sup>83</sup> Except for Kanayama, I have had much difficulty finding an account of the metaphor in and of itself. The singular ancient commentary<sup>84</sup> on this dialogue says nothing of the metaphor.<sup>85</sup> Essentially, for all the scholarly preoccupation surrounding Plato’s attitude toward writing, the fact that this metaphor is about writing does not seem to interest people much. This surprising lacuna is likely due to the fact that the metaphor ultimately fails to offer a satisfying account for the mimetic process, but this instance of

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<sup>82</sup> Woolf 2004, 573.

<sup>83</sup> Woolf 2004, 579. He points out in footnote 5 on this page that Polansky offers a similar reading.

<sup>84</sup> The anonymous commentator, whom Sedley 1993 dubs Anon, has been argued by Diel to have been (at least philosophically linked to) Albinus, whom he in turn links to Alcinous; for his part, Tarrant 1983 identifies Anon with Eudorus. I prefer Sedley’s approach: “For present purposes it is enough to say that he is a Middle Platonist, working some time between 50 BC and 150 AD, when the papyrus itself was written, and that he probably belongs nearer the beginning of that period than to the end of it... [Not unlike Plutarch] he believes in the unity of Plato’s thought, as well as, a little more unusually, in the unity of almost the entire Platonist tradition within the Academy... [He] welcomes Aristotle as Plato’s ally, and is ready to use Aristotelian dialectical tools in the analysis of Plato’s text” (125-126). I mention all of this about Anon because, interestingly, as he comments upon the *Theaetetus* Anon specifically points to literacy as not only a cultural touchstone (unsurprising in the first century BCE) but as a component of personal identity on par with “acculturation” (Anon, 16.41-17.24). Obviously, social attitudes toward textuality and literacy looked very different in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> centuries, so I am not using Anon’s proto-Leibnizian logic about identity creation to say something of Plato’s. But I do think it is relevant that, when reading this dialogue—in which writing appears as a metaphor for identity and which was written by an author acutely concerned with the connection between writing and the self—non would explicitly link textuality and identity in this capacity. I offer this merely as an interesting aside, and I don’t intend to overplay my hand. As Sedley says: “unlike most of us [Anon] is a card-carrying Platonist, reading the text of Plato with a respect and commitment which few of us can hope to match” (149).

<sup>85</sup> Diels and Schubart 2004.

metaphorical failure is non-unique and is arguably a necessary trait of all Platonic metaphors given their function at communicating the unintelligible to an audience bound by the limits of intelligibility. Since a core tenant of Plato's ontology is the inability of any worldly production to completely represent objective truth, meaning that all human understanding is to some extent metaphorical or a shadow of Truth, taking any metaphor's failure to satisfy all stress testing as a reason to discount the thought experiment it invites misses an opportunity to play with ideas for ourselves—this recalls the logic of my reading of the *Phdr.*, in which I argue that the qualification of writing as either dangerous or philosophical is non-unique to writing and is instead a pervasive component of Plato's philosophy.<sup>86</sup> And even more simply, ignoring the peculiarity of Plato's choice to offer writing as a potential analog for the self, in any capacity, even if it fails, misses the opportunity to ask *why offer up writing as a possible metaphor at all?* For these reasons, I want to play with this metaphor and see what happens when it is taken<sup>87</sup> a little more seriously, and answer this very question.

As previously stated, the *Tht.* focuses on the topic of ἐπιστήμη, commonly translated as “knowledge”: what is it, how do we get it, and once we have it how can we make mistakes? The dialogue opens up with an introduction to Terpsion and Eucleides, that latter of which has written down Socrates' account of his own conversation with Theaetetus as they attempt to define knowledge. The narrative framing of the Socratic dialogue immediately reminds the reader of the *Phdr.*'s exposition.<sup>88</sup> Whereas that dialogue depicts Socrates encouraging Phaedrus

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<sup>86</sup> On the inherent imperfection of intelligible experiences and human understanding throughout Plato's corpus, see (among countless others) Edmonds 2017, Bloom 2015, Allen 2010, Gerson 2003, and Guthrie 1975.

<sup>87</sup> When I say “when we take the metaphor seriously” I also mean “when we take its inclusion in the dialogue seriously,” given that Platonic writing is widely taken as extremely deliberate and organized—recall the *Phaedrus*'s thematization of logographic necessity. On reading the unity of Platonic dialogues, see Bloom 2015, Kastely 2002, Stauffer 2006, and Sheffield 2006.

<sup>88</sup> For more on the framing of the *Theaetetus* compared to other dialogues', see Kaklamanou and Pavlou 2016.

to recite from memory the speech he heard from Lysias, only to change his mind when he realizes the *παρόντος Λυσίου* in the form of the transcript of his speech, the *Tht.* has Eucleides spontaneously defer to his written document:

Τερψίων:... ἀτὰρ τίνες ἦσαν οἱ λόγοι; ἔχοις ἂν διηγήσασθαι;  
Εὐκλείδης: οὐ μὰ τὸν Δία, οὐκ οὐτως γε ἀπὸ στόματος: [143a] ἀλλ' ἐγραψάμην μὲν τότε εὐθύς οἵκαδ' ἐλθὼν ὑπομνήματα, ὕστερον δὲ κατὰ σχολὴν ἀναμνησκόμενος ἔγραφον, καὶ ὅσας Ἀθήναζε ἀφικοίμην, ἐπανηρώτων τὸν Σωκράτη ὃ μὴ ἐμεμνήμην, καὶ δεῦρο ἐλθὼν ἐπηνορθούμην: ὥστε μοι σχεδὸν τι πᾶς ὁ λόγος γέγραπται.<sup>89</sup>

Terpsion: ...What was their conversation? Could you relate it?

Eucleides: No, by Zeus! Not from memory anyways. But I did make notes at the time when I got home, and then later at my leisure, when I remembered something, I would write it down. And when I'd go to Athens, I would ask Socrates what I couldn't remember, and then I'd go home and edit my writing; so now I have pretty the whole conversation written down.

As with the *Phdr.*, Plato has immediately and seemingly unnecessarily introduced the idea of writing and its relationship with memory, speech, and conveying information somehow related to “father of the speech.” In light of my previous analysis, I argue that this extraneous bit of narrative is Plato's way of preparing the reader to think about writing, recollection, and the relationship between these processes and the person conducting them. But Plato has gone even further in the present dialogue: in the *Tht.*, in addition to everything else, Plato introduces the idea of revision. Eucleides did not transcribe Socrates' account as he listened to it, but instead heard the account, ran home, tried to remember what he could, and wrote *that* down. Since this is an imperfect human process, he was forced to repeat it some unspecified number of times, re-listening to Socrates recount the conversation, re-remembering it, running back home, and rewriting the information. The description of Eucleides editing his writing is an important amendment to the charge of the *Phdr.* regarding a text's non-responsiveness at 275e, which I include again as a reminder of Socrates' characterization:

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<sup>89</sup> *Tht.* 142d-143a

ὅταν δὲ ἅπαξ γραφῇ, κυλινδεῖται μὲν πανταχοῦ πᾶς λόγος ὁμοίως παρὰ τοῖς ἐπαΐουσιν, ὡς δ' αὐτῶς παρ' οἷς οὐδὲν προσήκει, καὶ οὐκ ἐπίσταται λέγειν οἷς δεῖ γε καὶ μὴ. πλημμελούμενος δὲ καὶ οὐκ ἐν δίκῃ λοιδορηθεὶς τοῦ πατρὸς ἀεὶ δεῖται βοηθοῦ: αὐτὸς γὰρ οὐτ' ἀμύνασθαι οὔτε βοηθῆσαι δυνατὸς αὐτῷ.<sup>90</sup>

But when once it is written, each word is cycled around everywhere, similarly as among those having nothing to do with it, and it does not know to whom it should or should not speak. But when wronged or not reviled in fairness, it always needs its father as helper; for it has no power to either protect or help itself.

Far from the static text of that earlier dialogue, Plato now offers a malleable and dynamic textuality that can be written and rewritten by an active author, providing further argument against the traditional scholarly adherence to a text-negative Plato. Even before getting into the dialogue proper, those interested in Plato's treatment of writing and textuality are given a rather significant update.

Eucleides proceeds to read the manuscript to Terpsion, which I will summarize. Socrates asks first whether learning is indeed the process of becoming wiser about the thing one learns, inviting the familiar “wise people are wise because of wisdom” conclusion (145d), a formula that Sedley stylizes “F things are F because of F-ness.”<sup>91</sup> This allows Socrates to ask the dialogue's primary question at 145e: what is knowledge, really?<sup>92</sup> After trying to answer this query through examples (146a-151d), the pair stress test three potential maxims: “knowledge is perception” (151e-187a); “knowledge is true judgement” (187b-201c); and finally “knowledge is true judgement plus an account” (201d-210a). The dialogue then ends in aporia when Socrates and his interlocutor try and fail to define that “account” (λόγος). The conversation, and Plato's text, end. The subject of interest for me is found within that second proposed definition.

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<sup>90</sup> *Phdr.* 275e.

<sup>91</sup> Sedley and Brown 1993, 129.

<sup>92</sup> Σωκράτης: τοῦτ' αὐτὸ τοίνυν ἐστὶν ὃ ἀπορῶ καὶ οὐ δύναμαι λαβεῖν ἱκανῶς παρ' ἐμαυτοῦ, ἐπιστήμη ὅτι ποτὲ τυγχάνει ὄν.



In examining the possibility that knowledge is nothing more or less than true judgement, Socrates and Theaetetus run up against one obvious problem: if knowledge is true judgement, how do we explain false beliefs, misremembrances, and misunderstandings? This is known as “the puzzle.”<sup>93</sup> In an effort to solve the puzzle, the two interlocutors consider problems of misidentification such as believing what is not (τὰ μὴ ὄντα, 188d) and believing one (thing) to be another (ἀλλοδοξία, 189b), which are summarized by Adalier as follows:

Faced with the Puzzle, Socrates suggests describing false judgement as judging about something things which are not (ta me onta), but the suggestion is rejected on the basis of an argument which equates judging what is not with judging nothing, the latter being considered an impossibility. Socrates now proposes to consider false judgment as being a sort of other-judging (allodoxia); putting something in one's thought as being something else, or judging one thing to be another. But taking thinking and judgment as being essentially "inner speech", the other-judging suggestion too is rejected for implying that someone who other-judges says to himself that one thing is another (e.g. that beautiful is ugly), both Socrates and Theaetetus agreeing that no one does that.<sup>94</sup>

Puzzle of false belief still unsolved after repeated logical attempts, Socrates seeks a metaphorical way to think through this thought experiment.

Enter the Wax Tablet metaphor, which is Socrates' next attempt to explain how we can reasonably produce false judgements: by mistaking one thing for another, if we see the one and have already known the other. Maybe, Socrates says, the soul is like a wax tablet onto which we transcribe our experiences (191c-e):

Σωκράτης: θὲς δὴ μοι λόγου ἔνεκα ἐν ταῖς ψυχαῖς ἡμῶν ἐνὸν κήρινον ἐκμαγεῖον, τῷ μὲν μεῖζον, τῷ δ' ἔλαττον, καὶ τῷ μὲν καθαρωτέρου κηροῦ, τῷ δὲ κοπρωδεστέρου, καὶ σκληροτέρου, ἐνίοις δὲ ὑγροτέρου, ἔστι δ' οἷς μετρίως ἔχοντος.

Θεαίτητος: τίθημι.

Σωκράτης: δῶρον τοίνυν αὐτὸ φῶμεν εἶναι τῆς τῶν Μουσῶν μητρὸς Μνημοσύνης, καὶ εἰς τοῦτο ὅτι ἂν βουλευθῶμεν μνημονεῦσαι ὧν ἂν ἴδωμεν ἢ ἀκούσωμεν ἢ αὐτοὶ

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<sup>93</sup> This is a common phrasing used by Adalier 2001, Bostock 1991, McDowell 1973, et al. Opinions differ as to whether Plato saw this as a genuine puzzle, though. For example, Crombie 1963 argues that Plato is truly stymied because he fails to differentiate between familiarity and acquaintance with an idea; Chappell 2004, on the other hand, argues that Plato utilizes The Puzzle as a thought experiment, demonstrating the basic disadvantage of empiricism in producing false belief.

<sup>94</sup> Adalier 2001, 5.

ἐννοήσωμεν, ὑπέχοντας αὐτὸ ταῖς αἰσθήσεσι καὶ ἐννοίαις, ἀποτυποῦσθαι, ὥσπερ δακτυλίων σημεῖα ἐνσημαινομένους: καὶ ὁ μὲν ἂν ἐκμαγῇ, μνημονεύειν τε καὶ ἐπίστασθαι ἕως ἂν ἐνῇ τὸ εἶδωλον αὐτοῦ: ὁ δ' ἂν ἐξαλειφθῇ ἢ μὴ οἶόν τε γένηται ἐκμαγῆναι, ἐπιλελῆσθαι τε καὶ μὴ ἐπίστασθαι.<sup>95</sup>

Socrates: So then assume for the sake of my argument that in our souls there is a wax tablet-- some wax is larger, some smaller, some wax purer, some dirtier, and some perhaps too malleable, some of a more appropriate consistency.

Theaetetus: That tracks.

Socrates: Let's then say that this is a gift of Memory, mother of the Muses, and whenever we wish to remember something in our minds, which we've seen or heard or thought ourselves, holding this wax for perception and thought, we stamp upon it, just like we're making an impression with a signet ring. And then unless it's wiped away, we remember and know the image for as long as it lasts—but whatever is wiped away or not able to be imprinted, we forget and do not know.

I will attend more closely to the Greek momentarily but let us first understand the narrative of the metaphor. Socrates suggests that the soul is like a wax (κήρινος) block (ἐκμαγεῖον). Some people's wax is well-prepared and clean while others' is ill-fit for a writing medium, whether because it's too hard to imprint upon, too soft to hold an impression, or too dirty for the impression to be legible. When using my wax tablet, first I see X out in the world or in my imagination (αἰσθάνομαι), and then I take the shape of X and imprint it onto my soul (ἀποτυπώω), like making an impression (σημεῖον) with a signet ring (δακτύλιος). This is how we internalize what we have perceived with our senses. Next, Socrates describes how we refer back to the impression we have made in our soul-wax to remember the thing, illustrating the process by which we misalign a new object of our perception Y and the waxen imprint of X, falsely believing Y to be X—like trying to fit a square peg in a round hole:

λείπεται τοίνυν τὰ ψευδῇ δοξάσαι ἐν τῷδε, ὅταν γινώσκων σὲ καὶ Θεόδωρον, καὶ ἔχων ἐν ἐκείνῳ τῷ κηρίῳ [193β] ὥσπερ δακτυλίων σφῶν ἀμφοῖν τὰ σημεῖα, διὰ μακροῦ καὶ

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<sup>95</sup> *Tht.* 191c-e. I've chosen to translate ψυχή here as *soul*, but others (such as Kanayama 2018 and Small 1997) opt for *mind*. For my argument, either translation works, as would *self*. The differences between self, soul, and mind are difficult to track throughout Plato—at times the words are synonymous, at times the soul seems to contain a mind—but the important thing is that however ψυχή is translated, it is understood as the organ that is all-but (or even entirely) synonymous with that most philosophically prized concept of the self. In other words, when something is written on my soul, it's a defining part of my identity.

μη ἱκανῶς ὁρῶν ἄμφω προθυμηθῶ, τὸ οἰκεῖον ἑκατέρου σημεῖον ἀποδοῦς τῇ οἰκείᾳ ὄψει, ἐμβιβάσας προσαρμόσαι εἰς τὸ ἑαυτῆς ἵχνος, ἵνα γένηται ἀναγνώρισις, εἴτα τούτων ἀποτυχῶν καὶ ὥσπερ οἱ ἔμπαλιν ὑποδούμενοι παραλλάξας προσβάλω τὴν ἑκατέρου ὄψιν πρὸς τὸ ἀλλότριον σημεῖον, ἥ καὶ οἶα τὰ ἐν τοῖς κατόπτροις τῆς ὄψεως πάθη, δεξιὰ εἰς ἀριστερὰ μεταρρεούσης, ταὐτὸν παθὼν διαμάρτω: τότε δὴ συμβαίνει ἡ ἑτεροδοξία καὶ τὸ ψευδῇ δοξάζειν.<sup>96</sup>

Then believing false things is still possible in this scenario: since I know you and Theodorus, having in that wax signs of the both of you like with a signet ring, and seeing you both from afar or not clearly I was eager, assigning the proper sign of each of you to the proper vision of each, setting on to connect someone to their own footprint, so as to cause recognition, then mistaking these two as if putting shoes on backwards, I connect the vision of one to the sign of the other, or maybe like the experience of seeing things in a mirror, flipping right for left—experiencing this I made a mistake! This is how heterodoxy and falsity both come to be believed.

The process of memory, then, works by attempting to fit the object of sense perception with an impression in the soul of some thing already perceived. In this metaphor, a person's innermost self is like a wax tablet, and the memory is like the process of writing on the tablet and rereading this later on.

Philologically speaking, Plato's word choice is peculiar.<sup>97</sup> Almost always translated as “writing on a wax tablet,” this metaphor might seem like an undeniable description of the writing process, but this is not actually the case. However, at least one prominent scholar, Burnyeat, rejects outright this translation, and insists upon reading “wax block” instead, which problematizes my argument—and for seemingly good reason! Plato simply does not use the words most typically associated with writing, so in order to firmly establish that this metaphor is indeed about writing, and is therefore pertinent to my argument about Plato's habit of explicitly linking writing with the self, it is helpful to understand his language choices: how does he phrase this metaphor and why? Rather than forms of γράφω for *writing* and δέλτος or πίναξ for *writing tablet* (two of the most common words for this purpose), Plato chooses ἀποτυπῶ and κήρινος

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<sup>96</sup>193b-d.

<sup>97</sup> Liddell et al. 199AD. All lexical work is based on the online LSJ.

ἐκμαγεῖον, *imprint* and *wax tablet/block* respectively. He does not even use the slightly less expected but still standard διφθέραι, ὄστρακα, or σκυτάλαι for *tablet*. In the most literal sense, as is apparent in my translation above, the process described in this dialogue is more like stamping an impression into a wax block than writing something on a tablet with a stylus, at least at first blush. Philologically, Plato has not utilized “scratching” words that are so often (but not always!) associated with writing, but instead a “pressing” verb; and he does not describe something strictly conceived of as a “tablet,” but something much more amorphous. As a result, one could argue that this metaphor does not seem to be about *writing* at all, but about something different and more akin to stamping. However, it is important to remember that for Plato both stamping-in-wax and scratching-into-tablet are methods of representation of idea through material object, and are therefore ontologically equivalent; even if they are equivalent in no other way, this fact justifies considering the two activities as synonymous in practice, status, and Platonic interpretation. Further, when the word choice is more fully analyzed and the context of Plato’s lived experiences (as far as can be recovered) appreciated, the wax-soul metaphor is revealed as revelatory of Plato’s attitude toward writing and that attitude’s import.

First, let us consider the mechanism of the verb ἀποτυπώω. Rather than the explicit *scratching* denotation of γράφω, variations of the (ἀπο)τυπώω have softer and more figurative connotations. Without the directional prefix, τυπώω is linked with cognition, idea formation, modelling, and, most notably, is a metaphorical way to talk about perception.<sup>98</sup> More precisely, ἀπο-τυπώω is used for the acts of impressing (both physically and figuratively), representing, imprinting your style upon, imitating others, and is frequently used when describing constellations and the act of perception, in addition to the obvious wax-seal function. Even more

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<sup>98</sup> cf. Zeno frag. 141; PGM 7.562 (Preizendanz number); and Pl. Soph. 239d7.

than *scratching* (with a two-part circuit implied of scratcher and scratched), ἀποτυπώω has a pronounced and unique social resonance; the representationality invoked by this verb has a distinct meaning-*creation* flavor that γράφω lacks. Beyond scratching onto a surface in order to record words, ἀποτυπώω implies that one is really pushing into the medium, impressing something of the self into it, in an almost mystical manner. Etymologically speaking, this is sublimation and self-assertion rather than mere record keeping. I will dive more into this when discussing the rationale behind Plato's word choice. But less poetically, the absence of expected *writing* verbs would not preclude any passage from addressing the activity of writing as much as the more explicit treatment in the *Phdr.* After all, from a phenomenological standpoint, *scratching* and *pressing* feel similar for the actor. These are not types of actions so different as, say, writing and sculpting. The manual activity required for either pressing or scratching into a medium are therefore epistemologically similar, so when Plato discusses impression-making in the *Tht.* for all intents and purposes he is talking about writing. It is also important to note that γράφω would be the verb used for writing on papyrus (cf. *Phdr.* 274) or other harder media, and would thus be a verb less suitable for a medium soft as wax. Whether each individual part of a letter is being scratched out by a stylus, or the entire message is impressed at once, Plato does not seem to care. Both are reasonably treated as *writing*, for all philosophically relevant purposes.

That this is a passage about writing is further evinced by the fact that Plato describes the product of either verb, the writing or the impression, as a sign (σημα) for the thing represented. For Plato, the important thing is that whether we are talking about writing on papyrus or impressing upon wax, what we see is a symbol for the thing discussed, a visual instantiation of the idea through making some sort of mark on a medium. As in the *Phdr.* this usage of forms of σημ- create an inalienable connection between the thing signified and the vestige of it. In this

way, not only is my soul-wax pertinent to me (in that it creates my identity), but it is pertinent to others with whom I interact (in that it creates a signifier for their identity within my inner world).<sup>99</sup>

Finally, in support of my reading of this metaphor stand Plato's own interactions—physical and social— with wax. It seems that Plato himself favored the medium! Scholars today retain multiple ancient accounts of Plato engaging in writing, some of which specifically depict him as writing on wax. Quintilian, a first century CE Roman scholar of rhetoric, claims that Plato had a habit of editing his own writing, and therefore wrote on wax because of the ease with which one can erase and rewrite on this particular medium:

nec aliud potest sermonem facere numerosum quam opportuna ordinis per mutatio; neque alio ceris Platonis inventa sunt quattuor illa verba, quibus id illo pulcherrimo operum id Piraeum se descendisse significat, plurimis modis scripta, quam quod eum quoque maxime numerosum facere experiretur.<sup>100</sup>

Further, it wouldn't be possible to make one's writing euphonic without editing the word order for artistic purposes. It is because of this that those four words [namely κατέβην χφεῖς εἰς Πειραιᾶ] with which Plato states in his noblest of works that he had “gone down to the Piraeus” were found written in multiple different ways on his wax tablets (*ceris Platonis*). He simply wanted to make the rhythm as perfect as possible.

Not only does Quintilian describe Plato as writing (which comes as no surprise, given the fact that we have his written works), but that he specifically wrote on wax because of its malleability. Earlier in the same work, Quintilian offers the following general advice for choosing the appropriate writing medium:

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<sup>99</sup> This of course recalls the portrait of Simmias at *Phaedo* 73e: τί δέ; ἢ δ' ὅς; ἔστιν ἵππον γεγραμμένον ἰδόντα καὶ λύραν γεγραμμένην ἀνθρώπου ἀναμνησθῆναι, καὶ Σιμμίαν ἰδόντα γεγραμμένον κέβητος ἀναμνησθῆναι; (“Okay then,” Socrates said, “can seeing a depiction of a horse or of a lyre draw one's mind back to a man—can seeing a portrait of Simmias bring Cebes' mind back to Simmias himself?”).

<sup>100</sup> *Institutio Oratoria.*, 8.6.64–65.

scribi optime ceris, in quibus facillima est ratio delendi, nisi forte visus infirmior membranarum potius usum exiget, quae ut iuvant aciem, ita crebra relatione, quoad intinguntur, calami morantur manum et cogitationis impetum frangunt.<sup>101</sup>

It is best to write on wax because it allows you to more easily erase, though weak sight might render parchment preferable, as it's easier to read. The latter, however, while aiding the reading eye, hinders the writing hand by interrupting the flow of thought because of the need to resaturate the pen in ink.

Quintilian is explicit in making “a comparison between the wax tablet and the parchment, [and giving] the former a higher rating for inquiry.”<sup>102</sup> Beyond the utility of being able to easily edit one’s work—a necessity for not only aesthetic purposes, but for working out complex philosophical arguments—pressing in wax is quicker than writing on papyrus or etching in wood. Therefore, the writer is able to more quickly get the idea inside, out. Simply put, wax is a better medium for philosophical writing. It responds more readily to later emendation and re-emendation (further problematizing the scholarly preoccupation with *Phdr.* 275e) and is more responsive to the writer, shortening the time it takes to get one’s ideas on the page (as it were), which in turn shortens the distance between this type of writing and the idea. As Plato is wont to tell us, the shorter the distance between the physical representation and the Formal original, the more philosophically beneficial. As further evidence of Plato’s habit of writing his own works on wax, Kanayama posits Diogenes Laertius: “According to Diogenes Laertius III 37, ‘Some say that Philippus of Opus transcribed his Laws that were in wax’. ‘His’ in ‘his Laws’ may represent Plato or Philippus.”<sup>103</sup> While I cannot make any claim with absolute certainty given the vague wording here, when read along with our other evidence, one can reasonably surmise that this passage refers to Plato again writing on wax.

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<sup>101</sup> *Inst.*, 10.3.31.

<sup>102</sup> Kanayama 2018, section 1.

<sup>103</sup> Kanayama 2018, “Plato’s Wax Tablet.”

In the wider contemporary Greek imaginary, wax blocks and tablets conveyed a distinctly philosophical flavor that the older and more commonplace wooden tablet lacked: “Concerning these writing devices there are two interesting things to note. First, to the Greeks of the classical age the tablet had a dignity that the papyrus scroll lacked: gods are represented as using tablets (δέλτοι, διφθέραι, ὄστρακα, σκυτάλαι), not βίβλοι (papyrus scrolls).”<sup>104</sup> In support of this claim, Kanayama cites contemporaneous texts such as Euripides’ fr. 506, Sophocles’ fr. 144, and Aeschylus’ *Prometheus Bound*, as well as Quintilian (pointing to the selection referenced above). While Quintilian in particular is admittedly temporally and locationally distant from Plato’s 5<sup>th</sup> century Athens, the point nevertheless stands that there was a sense for those of this period that the malleability of wax over wood was a point in the former’s favor, and that Plato would naturally favor the medium for his philosophical explorations.

In addition to these contemporary attestations of Plato’s relationship with wax and writing, consider Platonic ideals. As has been established, wax is softer and more malleable than a sheet of papyrus, the medium of choice in most of Plato’s other writing discussions. Beyond the editing value of wax’s texture, we ought not ignore the fact that this malleability requires hands-on preparation. Recall Socrates’ proposition at 191cd that “in our souls there is a wax tablet-- some wax is larger, some smaller, some wax purer, some dirtier, and some perhaps too malleable, some of a more appropriate consistency.”<sup>105</sup> In order to receive an imprint, wax must be worked just right. This is in keeping with Plato’s preoccupation with *repeated care and constant reinscription of one’s philosophical life* (μελέτη). It is therefore natural that when

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid. See also Roberts and Skeat p. 11 and note 3.

<sup>105</sup> ...ἐν ταῖς ψυχαῖς ἡμῶν ἐνὸν κήρινον ἐκμαγεῖον, τῷ μὲν μεῖζον, τῷ δ’ ἔλαττον, καὶ τῷ μὲν καθαρωτέρου κηροῦ, τῷ δὲ κοπρωδεστέρου, καὶ σκληροτέρου, [191δ] ἐνίοις δὲ ὑγροτέρου, ἔστι δ’ οἷς μετρίως ἔχοντος.



devising a metaphor for the soul Plato would choose the medium that requires more μελέτη in order to receive the idea.

This philological study was important because it solidifies that this wax-as-soul metaphor is undeniably about writing. While establishing this basis took a substantial amount of philological and contextual explication, my main argument is relatively straightforward as a result: the fact that Plato would use writing as a metaphor for the soul *at all* reveals the philosophical value of writing as a technology. That innermost self (whether understood as *self*, *soul*, *psyche*, however we want to translate it) is of the highest philosophical import in Plato's ontology. For him to associate anything with the soul—even in a failed metaphor—is revelatory of his attitude toward that thing. The *Tht.*'s wax metaphor is therefore a crucial piece of evidence when trying to understand Plato's valuation of and traditionally-conceived-anxiety toward writing. Additionally, given the thematization of betweenness, care, and re-care in the Platonic dialogues as a whole (and the *Tht.* and *Phdr.* in particular), the Socratic position is always in the middle ground: moving up and down the ladder, having knowledge of the formal realm but always reenacting the process of one's induction into that class of those who actually know. This is to say that the wax metaphor is not only important because of the fact of it—Socrates uses writing as a metaphor for the soul and therefore acknowledges writing's place within the philosopher's journey— but also because of the plausibility of it to be mobilized within Platonic philosophy in particular. Simply put, if Plato thought writing were worthless or to be avoided as a hindrance to the philosophical process, he would not have made this metaphor.

### **Platonic Writing Revisited**

In conclusion, as early as the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, writing was already being conceived of as a technology of the self. Even Plato, whom scholars have long considered anti-writing, grants

this activity astounding access to the philosophical process toward self-knowledge my means of self-representation to the other. In the *Phaedrus*, he offers writing as a reminder of the writer's self, the all-important Platonic mimetic tool; and in the *Theaetetus* he posits writing as a metaphor for the soul, a person's innermost and most philosophically privileged element. As I track the intellectual history of writing as a technology of the self in the Greek and Roman imaginary, I have to reckon with the long-held assumption that Plato utterly disparages writing and views it as a threat to the soul. The interpretation that Plato absolutely denigrates textuality or disavows the activity of writing as antithetical to the philosopher's journey entirely discombobulates and derails any attempt to understand not only the role of this technology in the ancient Greek imaginary, but the nature of the self itself. The reality is (characteristically of Plato) less black-and-white than modern scholars have long argued. As with any other activity, writing lacks qualitative essence—what matters is how the person uses it. And apparently, one way writing can be used is for self-representation, either as a reminder or an analogy. Plato is explicit in his characterization of writing as able to represent the self to others, and therefore as a philosophically valuable activity for mimesis, identity formation, meaning creation, and, ultimately, the very process of philosophical enlightenment. Someone who privileges the concept of the self as much as Plato does is careful with what they associate the self... and as I have shown, Plato irrefutably establishes a philosophically profound link between self and text that cannot be ignored. While Plato does not offer the reader an all-out example of a self-writing or autobiographical work, the semantic relationship between writer and written he establishes is crucial for understanding the development of writing as a technology that relates in some way whatsoever with the self, at least for the Ancient Mediterranean imaginary. The reconsideration of Plato's stance on writing as a philosophical tool and one that participates in the mimetic

process works to recover Platonic writing as an invaluable and revelatory step in this intellectual history of writing as a technology of the self, which will henceforth play out in the form of self-writing as a distinct activity of the self.

## Chapter Four: Writing as a Technology of Self-Translation

### Augustine's *Confessions*

Eight hundred years after Plato's writing at the razor's edge of orality and textuality, Saint Augustine ushers in the flowering of Late Antique literature. As I have shown, the conception of writing as a tool for self-representation begins almost immediately upon its Mediterranean entrance, and by the time of Augustine's 4<sup>th</sup> century CE Northern Africa, writing has become a fully-fledged technology of communication. Well-versed in Platonic and Neoplatonic texts, Augustine is widely regarded as the inheritor of the Platonic tradition, and his usage of writing as a philosophical and theological tool is one important reason. Despite his likely minimal direct contact with Plato's own works, Augustine encountered them through the lens of Cicero and Plotinus, and is widely understood as Latin's standout recipient of and participant in the Platonic tradition, at least in Late Antiquity.<sup>106</sup> Even he places himself in this milieu, going so far as to argue that, if only for a slight change in phrasing, he would have counted Socrates and Plato among his beloved community of fellow believers.<sup>107</sup> While Plato establishes the self-text connection as a mimetic function, Augustine utilizes the written word to convey himself—his interiority, his life experiences, the nature of his relationships and his conversion—to his audience and encourages them to follow his lead, thereby granting writing the unique ability to translate the inner self to the outer audience.

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<sup>106</sup> This is well-tread ground, but see Van Riel and Brown especially for a discussion on Augustine's interaction with Platonic texts.

<sup>107</sup> *de. ver. rel.* III.3 (*paucis mutatis verbis*).

Augustine was a remarkably social man. He spent much of his time among a tight-knit community of believers and regularly waxed philosophic about the value of Christian friendship. When he was not physically with his fellows, he was writing to them. Indeed, Augustine's letters, which are admittedly not our focus here, represent some of his warmest writing and depict a thoroughgoing desire for connection with distant loved ones. Augustine desperately missed his friends when they were far from him, and even the good Platonist that he was, would readily admit his desire to see them face to face, in the flesh. But even then, he would be left with a nagging dissatisfaction. In his view, interpersonal communication, even among a spiritual community, is necessarily plagued by the limitations of human speech: "even when this [physical] contact occurred, Augustine still despaired of ever being able to communicate all he felt to anyone else: for a conversation, to him meant dragging vivid thoughts 'through the long, twisting lanes of speech.'"<sup>108</sup> Evoking the long-standing anxiety over the language problem, Augustine laments the inability of human speech to translate the inside to the outer audience.

Transition toward a form of communication capable of translating the inner self to the other would require a type of speech incompatible with the human tongue. Too much is lost in translating the idea to the word, the word through the ear to the mind of the listener. This anxiety, this need to share the self with the other, the frustration of a persistent writer's block, the dissatisfaction with human language—this is the backdrop of Augustine's decision to write the *Confessions*. When understood in this way, it becomes clear that not only does this work intend to provide a template for how others might confess to God (an interpretation widely held), but for how others might translate their very selves to their audiences, both human and divine, through the written confessional language. The type of writing modeled by Augustine in and

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<sup>108</sup> Brown 2000, 154. Brown cites *de cat. rud.* X, 15.

through his *Confessions* confers the self a radical legibility otherwise unavailable to it. To explore this idea, I will consider how Augustine espouses a theory of self in which the autobiographical “I” is always also “we,” thus encouraging his readers to map *their* selves onto *his* textual self and engage in their own acts of confession. I will pause on a particularly illustrative analogy Augustine gives, which illustrates the language problem and hints at a possible solution.

### **The Confessional Cure for Writer’s Block**

Augustine, the prolific writer and consummate communicator, was facing a major dilemma: he had writer’s block. Following his ordination in 391, five years after his conversion, Augustine found himself failing again and again to see a literary project to completion. With his recent change in theological and social status, and the new community in which he found himself in Hippo, he seemed to be suffering a culture shock that made writing an almost impossible task. He had been trying for years, apparently unsuccessfully, to write in a way that truly expressed himself, and now in his middle age—a period of “anxious self-examination” for Augustine, as for so many—he had lost the initial optimism of his Milanese conversion and knew he needed to reckon with his past in order to achieve the type of faith that would last him into old age.<sup>109</sup> Augustine describes himself at this pre-confessional time as a man beset by pain from past sins, unsure how to proceed:

Conterritus peccatis meis et mole miseriae meae, agitaveram corde meditatusque fueram fugam in solitudinem, sed prohibuisti me et confortasti me dicens: Ideo Christus pro omnibus mortuus est, ut et qui vivunt iam non sibi vivant, sed ei qui pro omnibus mortuus est.<sup>110</sup>

Terrified at my sins and the sheer weight of my wretchedness, I had considered in my heart and decided to flee into solitude, but You prevented me, comforted me saying:

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<sup>109</sup> Brown 2000, 157.

<sup>110</sup> *Conf.* X.xliii.70.

“Christ died for all so that those who live now should not live for themselves, but for Him who died for them.

Per his own description, Augustine realized that he needed not to give into the shame of his past, collapsing into himself like a dying star, but to stay and continue devoting his life to Christ, the implication being that to do so would mean staying in a community and spreading his faith. It seemed that the only way out of this existential and literary bind was through writing the *Confessions*: “What freed his pen for the prolific career and the masterworks we know was the writing of the *Confessions* themselves. He discovered at length how to make ‘confession’ in his special sense come to life through his writing.”<sup>111</sup> Thus, he wrote his *Confessions* in 397 CE out of a compulsion to “reveal himself” to his community, a desire for the type of self-disclosure that would “betray” the true Augustine to his readers.<sup>112</sup> And it seems to have worked! As O’Donnell points out, the *Confessions* are preceded by a series of failed literary projects and succeeded by a string of successful one.<sup>113</sup> The *Confessions* are for Augustine a form of that Derridean self-seeking that is necessarily textual. The writer’s block hindering his literary output was a symptom of emotional turmoil tantamount to a loss of self. Self-writing was Augustine’s way to find that self, translate it to others, and show them how they might utilize the technology of writing for their own self-seeking.

### **The Nature of Confession**

Confession as a mode of communication is defined by and in pursuit of relationality between writer and reader. In short, Augustine constructs the activity as follows: first, you turn inward toward the self; here you wander the halls of the storehouse of memory, an intellectual

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<sup>111</sup> O’Donnell 1992a, 1:check page number (accessed online without numeration).

<sup>112</sup> Brown 2000, 152, 155.

<sup>113</sup> O’Donnell 1992 points to Augustine’s failure in “the dreadful *util. cred.*—unconvincing, lamely argued, poorly organized” and the “unfinished torso of *de doctrina christiana*.”

landscape uniquely amenable to divine revelation and truth, and you confront the sublime idea you wish to express; rather than taking that idea and turning outward, forcing the idea through standard human communication methods, you stay with the *interior homo* and turn upward to commune with God; having internally contemplated the idea and confessed to God, you then translate from this interior, anointed language to the written word. While he might not write this step-by-step guide explicitly, he utilizes the whole of the *Confessions*—namely his idiosyncratic construction of the autobiographical “I”—to perform confessional language, showing rather than telling.

The word *confession* is a compound of the preposition *con-* (with) and the verb *fateor* (to speak), making the *Confessions* an act of *speaking-with*. After all, there would be “no point in confessing, or acknowledging, or having a conversation unless you are doing it with someone, in someone’s presence.”<sup>114</sup> And yet we cannot ignore the fact that so much of Augustine’s speaking at this time would have felt very one-sided, a preaching-at rather than a speaking-with. As such, “confessional language” to Augustine’s standard is necessarily written. Augustine was a lifelong public speaker. If he thought it possible to translate the self to his audience by spoken word (or by spoken word *alone*) he would have done so. The materiality of the text—its re-readability, its shareability, the temporal aspect of reading through time, the ability to flip to a page and sit with a specific idea—is a necessary condition for the other’s ability to comprehend the written self.

Unlike so much of ancient literature, evidence indicates that the title *Confessions* comes from Augustine himself rather than later editorial interpellation.<sup>115</sup> As he rereads his oeuvre toward the end of his life in the *Retractationes*, or *Reconsiderations*, Augustine refers to the *Confessions* as *confessionum mearum libri tredecim* (“the thirteen books of my

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<sup>114</sup> Conybeare 2016, 2.

<sup>115</sup> Conybeare 2016, 1.



*Confessions/confessions*”).<sup>116</sup> His framing of this work as resolutely *con-* must therefore be understood as illustrative of his authorial intent. He views the *Confessions* as a way to engage with an audience—a reader, listener, interlocutor, however the role is labelled—and a way to communicate *with* an other. Confessional writing is a collaborative linguistic process that is decidedly more personal than other forms of communication at our disposal.

Further in the *Reconsiderations*, Augustine states the intended effect of the *Confessions* on the reader, a level of authorial insight almost never available in the study of antique texts. He muses upon how his reader might receive the texts, and describes how he himself receives it:

Confessionum mearum libri tredecim, et de malis et de bonis meis Deum laudant iustum et bonum, atque in eum excitant humanum intellectum et affectum. Interim quod ad me attinet, hoc in me egerunt cum scriberentur et agunt cum leguntur. Quid de illis alii sentiant, ipsi viderint; multis tamen fratribus eos multum placuisse et placere scio.<sup>117</sup>

The thirteen books of my *Confessions* praise God as just and good, for good and bad alike, and awaken the human [reader's] intellect and affection toward Him. What I know is that they affected me this way when I was writing them, and they affect me this way still when I read them. What others feel is for them to see, but I do know that they have greatly pleased, and continue to please, many of my friends in this way.

It is clear in this formulation that Augustine's aim in writing the *Confessions* is to rouse his readers toward God in mind and spirit. And how might these readers achieve this divine motion? By being so moved by Augustine's written word that they are inspired by a process of affective mimesis to engage in their own confessional writing. O'Donnell states the unique potential for this project: "'Confession' in Augustine's way of understanding it – a special divinely authorized speech that establishes authentic identity for the speaker – is the true and proper end of mortal life. He had struggled to find voice for this speech all his life."<sup>118</sup> It is uniquely through confessional writing that he finds this voice, a textual one capable of translating an authentic

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<sup>116</sup> *Retr.* 2.vi.1.

<sup>117</sup> 2.vi.1ff.

<sup>118</sup> O'Donnell 1992a, 1:accessed online \* need pg number.

identity from the interior to the exterior, unlike any other mode of human communication. Let us know consider the ways in which confessional writing achieves this self-translational mode.

### **“We” Understood**

Augustine immediately signals to the reader of the *Confessions* that they are implicated in this writing project. By means of a misleadingly standard opening prayer,<sup>119</sup> he establishes his audience (both God and human readers) and begins to universalize the autobiographical persona, a rendering appropriable to the authorial role that pervades the entirety of this work. It is clear that this text is intended both to confess Augustine’s particular experiences to God above him and render those experiences appropriable to the people around him, thus providing a template onto which the reader is invited to map their self. The universalization of the confessional “I” is an invitation through the necessarily textual form of the *Confessions*, for the reader to feel their own self represented by and in Augustine’s writing. Moreover, through the unique “grammar of selfhood” he is able to fashion as confessional language (which is rooted in the shared human nature with which he carefully suffuses this text) that provides unique access to the inner world of the one confession. All in addition to providing instructions as to how readers might share their own selves with their own audiences. He begins:

Magnus es, domine, et laudabilis valde. Magna virtus tua et sapientiae tuae non est numerus. et laudare te vult homo, aliqua portio creaturae tuae, et homo circumferens mortalitatem suam, circumferens testimonium peccati sui et testimonium quia superbis resistis; et tamen laudare te vult homo, aliqua portui creaturae tuae. Tu excitas ut laudare te delectet, quia fecisti nos ad te et inquietum est cor nostrum donec requiescat in te.<sup>120</sup>

Great are you God, and much to be praised. Great is your power and incalculable your wisdom. And man desires to praise you, being some part of your creation, and man carries around his mortality, carries around proof of his sin and proof that you oppose the proud; and yet man desires to praise you, being some part of your creation. You have

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<sup>119</sup> O’Donnell observes that the language of this prayer has been “chosen from the words of that God himself,” a reworking of bits of Psalms 47:2 and 146:5 (1992, 8).

<sup>120</sup> *Conf.* I.i.1.

roused him to delight in praising you, because you have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.

Augustine has begun his autobiographical text by first praising God, who appears in the second person as a direct addressee, signaling His role as the text's audience. Our author proceeds with a brief catalogue of God's praiseworthiness, and quickly plants the seeds of universality: the desire to praise God, the thing he is doing here, is a universal desire. All humans (should) want to do as Augustine does here. This desire for praising is a symptom of humankind's imperfection, which we all share as the individual self is one participant in God's created community of selves (*aliqua portio creaturae tuae*). The antidote for humanity's ceaseless lacking, Augustine tells his audience, is turning toward God. This prayer, addressed along a vertical axis to the Divine, thus reveals itself as simultaneously addressed along a horizontal axis to the other parts of God's creation is Augustine's human readers. In other words, the self documented by this act of self-writing is always addressed both "to God, to whom Augustine's words are directed from within; and the reader to whom they are addressed through the written text."<sup>121</sup> Through this initial prayer, Augustine clarifies that he speaks not only to God but to his community, and not just for himself but for the reader as well. Embedded in the grammar of the *Confessions* is a confessional "we" understood. The shared status of *alia portio creaturae tuae* necessitates that the self is innately in some sort of community with other participants in God's creation. Interpersonal relationships are inevitable and created by God. Humanity is a shared type of postlapsarian being for all of God's creations, determined by that shared lowliness in relation to God's greatness and marked by the inevitability of bearing the weight of mortality (*homo circumferens mortalitatem suam*) and the proof of one's imperfection (*cicrumferens testimonium peccati*). It is necessary to accept this common lot in order to properly orient the self toward God.

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<sup>121</sup> Stock 1996, 245.

The fact of this shared human nature is further underscored by Augustine's syntactical choices. When establishing the importance of prayer as a form of self-orientation toward the Divine, rather than a straightforward *verb of praising+accusative direct object of the one praised*, all that Latin syntax would require, Augustine opts for the overwrought *verb of desiring+infinitive of desired action+accusative praised+ablative praiser*. O'Donnell astutely notes that the *laudare vult* construction rather than the simpler verb form befits Augustine's thesis on the inherent imperfection of human action: one *seeks* to praise, and whether or not one actually *does praise* is uncertain.<sup>122</sup> But what happens if the use of *homo* is also prioritized, the unnecessary inclusion of an expressed agent? I take this usage of *homo* as yet another signal to Augustine's reader that they are implicated in this statement. If it were not enough for him to say "God is great and I am low because I am a human mired in sin," he belabors the point by unnecessarily specifying that he describes not just his own experience, but that of humankind: "*We all* desire this communication." The effect is that immediately in his work, couched in the language of traditional prayer, Augustine is directing his readers to see themselves in this writing alongside his own in the authorial grammatical position. This point is further driven by the inclusive 1<sup>st</sup>-person-plural pronouns *fecisti nos* (you have made *us*) and *cor nostrum* (*our* heart), showing that he speaks on behalf of us all. He prays not due to his own idiosyncracies (or at least not *just* due to them), but because humankind is defined by a desire for seeking and communication, such as through prayer. Understanding the opening prayer as a generalization of the confessional "I" and an expansion of the self that makes room for the other—based on his construction of humanity as a natural position with respect to God—leads the reader to conclude that Augustine is making a deliberate programmatic move here. He is thematizing the possibility

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<sup>122</sup> O'Donnell 1992b, 2:11.

not only for a written personal communication, but for that writing to also serve as a model of confession for others. The remainder of section I.i.1 consists of Augustine intensely questioning God on behalf of *homo*, further demonstrating that he speaks for his fellow human.

In I.ii.2, the writing that has begun so clearly and resolutely “immediately tumbles into a bombardment of questions.”<sup>123</sup> Given the established ignorance of humanity in the face of God, these questions (which revolve around God’s and human’s nature) are a logical but important indicator of precisely what Augustine sees himself doing in writing the *Confessions*. Here is a short selection of these questions so that I may further consider their effect on the reader:<sup>124</sup>

Et quomodo invocabo deum meum, deum et dominum meum, quoniam utique in me ipsum eum vocabo, cum invocabo eum? Et quis locus est in me quo veniat in me deus meus, quo deus veniat in me, deus, qui fecit caelum et terram?... quo te invoco, sum in te sim? Aut unde venias in me?<sup>125</sup>

And how shall I call upon my God, my God and my Lord, since, when I am calling on him, I am calling him into myself? What place is there in me into which my God may come into me? How should God come into me, God who made heaven and earth?... So, where can I invite you, I who am in you? Or from what angle could you come into me?

In total, more than ten questions are posited in this section, delivered in rapid succession: who is God? Where is God? Who and where am I in relation to God? How do I communicate with Him? what would it even mean to do so? The reader risks being swept away by the absolute deluge of uncertainty. Augustine knows this. By being so open about his own imperfection, Augustine gives the reader the impression of being drawn into the text, invited into Augustine’s inner circle, and made his confidant with whom he shares his innermost self.<sup>126</sup> It all reads very intimate. Augustine mobilizes this destabilizing series of questions not only to illustrate his relationship to the Divine, but to his audience. Underlying each question is the acknowledgement of innate

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<sup>123</sup> Conybeare 2016, 29.

<sup>124</sup> For a fuller treatment of the whole of these questions, see Conybeare 2016, 28-30.

<sup>125</sup> *Conf.* I.ii.2.

<sup>126</sup> Harmless 2010, 1.

human ignorance and imperfect. This meshes with the aforementioned anxiety and self-ignorance divulged in his contemporaneous letters. This is Augustine describing his emotional state and the core of his human experience, and this is Augustine laying the foundation for textual self-translation to the other through written confession. When Augustine asks God “what am I like?” he invites the reader to ponder the same, and even to write the same.

In these introductory sections alone, Augustine makes significant strides toward establishing this text as a documentation of his personal communication to God, and his invitation to the reader to join in on the project, all based on the psychic necessity of Christian confession in the face of human shortcomings. Some read the relationship that Augustine forges with his reader as “extremely subtle” because he “never addresses his readers,” but this is hardly true, as I have already shown.<sup>127</sup> He does address them, both directly and through a creation of an understood confessional “we,” and he is not subtle. Others find his attitude more conspiratorial, such that the reader feels more like they are eavesdropping or overhearing a conversation not including them—but even so, as Conybeare points out, the human reader is an integral component of Augustine’s textual-confessional ethos.<sup>128</sup> The aesthetic experience of reading Augustine’s writing from the outset supports this reading—as does the fact of the material text. As Stock and other have pointed out: what use has God for a book?

The abruptness with which this text begins— straight into a prayer, ample direct address that (while meant for God) inevitably catches the reader’s attention, immediately pivoting to an intense barrage of questions—is done carefully. Augustine grabs the reader’s attention and drags them into his confessional project. The almost raucous *magnus es* and the immediate choice to speak on behalf of all humans, including the reader coming to this text for the first time, are all

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<sup>127</sup> Keevak 1995, 258.

<sup>128</sup> Conybeare 2016, 9.

tantamount to a direct invitation or indirect invocation of the reader. Augustine introduces his autobiography with a textual elbow to the rib, as if to say “I am confessing; you might want to, too. My *I* is imperfect, and so are we.” Augustine’s prose might be elegant, but it is far from subtle, and that is the point. At its core, the *Confessions* is an explicit invitation to participate in a theological practice and a textual form that draws one toward God and conveys the self in the truest way possible to other humans. Diffidence and timidity would not suit the quasi-evangelical purpose of writing this text and sharing it as a window to his self, and a template for others’.

Perhaps the most arresting example of Augustine’s work to universalize his autobiographical “I” is couched within an early treatment of memory in Book I. Throughout this text Augustine thematizes and questions memory as a human experience, devoting a large portion of Book X to the topic. But I will stay in Book I. In the following section Augustine shows a man who is ruminating upon the activity of memory in infancy... or rather, the failure thereof. Outlining his early educational and familial experiences, he cannot ignore the difficulty with

which he strains to remember anything at all from his earliest days. He vents:

...quid enim est quod volo dicere, domine, nisi quia nescio, unde venerim huc, in istam, dico vitam moralem, an mortem vitalem? Nescio. Et susceperunt me consolationes miserationum tuarum, sicut audivit a parentibus carnis meae, ex quo et in qua me formasti in tempore; non enim ego memini.<sup>129</sup>

...but what is it that I wish to say, God, except that I know not whence I came to this place, this—what should I call it? A living death? A dying life? I don’t know. But the comforts of your mercy have lifted me up, as I have heard from the parents of my flesh, from whom and in whom you created me on Earth; but I myself don’t remember.

Augustine must admit that he cannot remember the events of his birth and has been forced instead to rely on his parents’ testimony of the day. As one might expect from a man so willing

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<sup>129</sup> *Conf.* I.vi.7.

to admit his ignorance, Augustine frequently claims to not know or not remember. Note the tricolon *nescio...nescio...non memini*. O'Donnell points out that *nescio* could be understood as emblematic of Augustine's methodological refusal to take a firm stance on the soul's origin, noting his habitual "willingness to leave such a significant question radically open... and [follow] the teachings of a God who did not always make everything perfectly clear."<sup>130</sup> The radicality of this refusal, again, is the point. Far from incidentally revealing a genuine ignorance about his life's events and nature, Augustine, this man who has devoted his life to big questions, is demonstrating precisely what that nature is: ignorance. In admitting his ignorance of basic biographical facts, Augustine continues the work begun in the opening prayer to establish the self as defined by persistent ignorance, now based on the fallibility of one's own mind and memory. The first things one does upon entering the world are *not know* and *be imperfect*, a universal experience we all face for the entirety of our time in the world. The second thing one does is ask others to pad out their own memory when it fails. This scene is important in solidifying the universality of human nature because we are all fallible with respect to God, and therefore would all benefit from participating in the confessional model Augustine is providing.

Shortly following the above *nescio* section, Augustine posits that sometimes the testimony of witnesses such as parents and caretakers is not enough to relay information about one's experiences. In such instances, how is an unknowing person to understand their self? Well, Augustine tells us, look to others' selves:

...post et ridere coepi, dormiens primo, deinde vigilans. Hoc enim de me mihi indicatum est et credidi, quoniam sic videmus alios infantes ; nam ista mea non memini.<sup>131</sup>

And after this, I began to smile, first while sleeping, then while awake. For this has been described to me and I believe it, because I have seen other infants do this. I do not remember these things of myself.

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<sup>130</sup> O'Donnell 1992b, 2:34.

<sup>131</sup> *Conf.* I.vi.8.



This catalogue of ignorances, which the reader comes to expect given the thematization of human ignorance at the outset of this work, begins with a statement of fact: baby-Augustine first smiled in his sleep, then while awake. He follows this with the revelation that this self-knowledge comes not from recollecting his own experience, but from others' accounts. Since his infant memory fails him, he believes this chain of events based on what his caretakers have told him he do. This is unsurprising. However, he does not stop with the indication that others' stories about us can shape our self-stories, but offers the novel idea that we can also assume things about ourselves because we see them to be true of others. This signals to readers that one need not rely only on the self for autobiographical or self-definitional information, but can and should use others as a source for the self.

### **The Problem of Language and the Confessional Solution**

Augustine continues to meditate upon the other-referentiality of the self, shifting from his memory-based frustrations to his linguistic ones. In the following section, Augustine reflects on the perturbing felling of a communicational breakdown:

Et ecce paulatim sentiebam, ubi essem, et voluntates meas volebam ostendere eis, per quos implerentur, et non poteram, quia illae intus errant, foris autem illi, nec ullo suo sensu valebant introire in animam meam. Tales esse infantes didici, quos discere potui, et me talem fuisse magis mihi ipsi indicaverunt nescientes quam scientes nutrioeres mei... confiteor tibi, domine caeli et terrae, laudem dicens tibi de primordis et infantia mea, quae non memini; et dedisti ea homini ex allis de se conicere et auctoritatibus etiam muliercularum multa de se credere.<sup>132</sup>

But behold, little by little, I began to sense where I was, and I wanted to demonstrate my desires to others through whom they might be satisfied, and I was not successful, because these desires were within and those others without, nor were they able to enter into my mind through any of their senses. I have learned that such are all infants I have been able to meet, and those unknowing ones have taught me more about myself than the nurses who actually knew me... I confess to you, Lord of heaven and earth, saying praise to you for my birth and infancy, which I do not remember, and you have given these experiences

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<sup>132</sup> *Conf.* I.vi.8-10.

to man to learn from others about the self, and on the authority of mere women to believe many things about the self.

First, it must be noted that the ability to learn from others about the self is apparently divinely ordained (*dedisti ea homini ex allis de se conicere*), a gift given by God to humankind to help fill in the places where our own faculties fail us. Further, he describes the pain of impossible expression, of the inability to perfectly convey the inside of the self to the outside world, as typified by the experience of the pre-verbal infant trying desperately to communicate to the parent. He recalls at length the feeling of desiring interpersonal understanding and lacking the tools for securing it, something that plagues him in his adulthood. It is clear that something about human communicational tools and limitations dissatisfies him.

Augustine has a long history of bemoaning the language problem in previous writings, such as *de Magistro*, so this attitude in the *Confessions* comes as not a total surprise, as Burton notes:

Augustine himself is both an important witness to ancient thought on language and the single most important exponent of Christian language theory in the West... In the work which principally concerns us here, the *Confessions* (397–9), he is similarly preoccupied with the importance of language both in human life generally, and in particular in relation to God.<sup>133</sup>

In many ways, the language problem is a staple of Augustinian philosophy. The assessment of language acquisition and the frustration of failed communication in the baby scene might not strike the reader as odd. Augustine writes *a lot* about language. So too have countless scholars written on Augustine's linguistic theories, typically focusing on his grammar, Latinity, and educational philosophies. Ando sets out to go one step further than the grammarian-focused reading by considering Augustine's linguistics as a function of his metaphysics. In his estimation, the status of words, written and spoken, "have a specific place in Augustinian

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<sup>133</sup> Burton 2007, 9.

metaphysics, and it is a lowly one.”<sup>134</sup> But is this true? Is the fact of linguistic and communicational imperfection enough to cast the activities into low metaphysical status? If this is true, why did Augustine so value community, for which interpersonal communication is necessary, and why would he be such a prolific writer? Indeed, why would he write an autobiography, that supremely intimate connection of self and text, at all? It seems to me that words and technologies thereof (such as writing or speech), are like anything else in Augustine’s mundane world: flawed, but useful in the faithful person’s journey toward truth and God. I think reading this baby scene as an analogy helps explain the ostensible tension and the claim being made about (confessional) language. The scene depicted is analogous to the general human experience of wanting desperately to express something and being unable, for whatever reason, to do so. As such, the infant is the self; the parents are God and readers; the lack of a language shared with the parents is the lack of a language for translation of the self to the other; the desperate flailing that conveys *something* but not everything is the standard shared languages in which we communicate with our peers or even in which we pray; and finally the baby’s eventual acquisition of a shared language in order to get the inside out, is analogous to the reader’s eventual acquisition of confessional language. Reading further into this baby analogy reveals Augustine’s construction of confessional language as the truest option for communication.

This brief rumination upon the language problem not only sets up Augustine’s ensuing description of the divine activity of appropriating others experiences to learn about ourselves, as has been discussed, but solidifies the metaphysical value of confessional language and the *Confessions* itself, insofar as it models such language. What seems nothing more than a short anecdote about the quotidian sight of the pre-verbal child essentially throwing a fit, actually tells

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<sup>134</sup> Ando 1994, 45.

the reader all they need to know about Augustine's confessional project: this text is a technology of self-translation to the other and model for replicating the activity. Augustine utilizes this scene as a metaphor for the human's attempt to convey something innate and pure in meaning, something interior such as the self, to an external audience—a seemingly impossible task. This text is a demonstration of how to get around linguistic imperfection, get the inside out, and communicate in a true-to-self manner. Just as the baby eventually learns a common language to communicate their intentions to their parents more accurately than the desperate flailing of limbs, all humans who read the *Confessions* are given an instruction manual for how they might acquire a new language.

Let us consider the context of this analogy within the *Confessions*. Augustine begins his work by identifying ignorance in the face of God as the essential human quality, thereby thematizing human ignorance as unifying and inescapable. Humans by nature are unknowing and incapable of grasping the exact inner truth that all human expression attempts to disclose, whether that is an idea, an image, or a self. In that opening prayer, Augustine describes humans outside of their interactions with God as *inquietum*, a word used to convey a disturbance of the inner self or soul, for which the only respite is God's influence. Then, in the deluge of questions that follows, Augustine repeatedly admits to not-knowing, *nescio*, something so seemingly simple as who he is and what he is like. This, he acknowledges his and our inherent ignorance with relation to God. And finally, here Augustine depicts the pre-verbal baby suffering the pain of failed reception, having an internal desire but being impotent (*non poteram*) with respect to expressing the self to an audience, non-verbal (*infans/infantes*), and ignorant (*nescientes*). The text begins with the claim that all humans are ignorant, and almost immediately offers this depiction of infantile ignorance and the language problem. It reasonably follows that this

depiction is a microcosmic example of what humans are like in the face of God. As the baby struggles to communicate itself to its parents due to lack of verbal language skills, so does the human struggle to communicate with their audiences—divine and mortal—due to lack of metaphysically accurate language.

Proceeding through this analogy, it is important to note that the baby, who is only just forming self-awareness, is able to identify to itself that it has desires of some sort. The baby is aware of the drive to express intentionality and purposivity, the satisfaction of which require an other's help. The dependent baby cannot do anything alone and relies on its parents to meet its needs. When the baby tries to express their inner impulse to the audience, they are met with the stark reminder that they lack the communication skills necessary for conveying themselves. The baby recognizes their internal need or experience, understands the necessity for communicating that need to an other, feels acutely the pain of linguistic impotence, and proceeds to flail around their limbs in a last-ditch attempt to communicate anything at all to their parents. This mirrors the human experience of a language constricted by limited ability for truth-making and self-disclosure, and is therefore an analogy for the impossibility of accurate self-translation to the other when we rely on traditional language alone. If words fail to convey the depth and breadth of physical needs, how can they ever come close to expressing something so complex and fleeting as the self? In a perfect world, others would be able to see into our minds to the core of the idea, but human existence is defined by imperfection, so we rely on attempting to filter the interior idea through the faulty mechanism of language, written or spoken. Something is always lost in translation. Something of the self resists legibility.

### **A Pen That is More Like a Syringe**

And this discussion has come full circle. I am back to Augustine's writer's block and the anxious self-examination that befuddled his every attempt to write what he really means. Enter confessional language. Writing the *Confessions*, itself a how-to guide for the reader's own confession and orientation of the self toward God, is how Augustine finally finds himself and writes himself. Through the written form of speaking-with, he is able to translate the inner man to the other outside himself. It bears remembering that the *Confessions* was devised as Augustine's last-ditch attempt to conquer an inability to write that had plagued him since his ordination, his own change in theological status and recognition—his own understanding of self. Further, confessional language for Augustine is a necessarily written one: the reason for its development, the ailment Augustine hoped to cure by developing it, and its method of dissemination to an audience as the tangible literary object are all bound in textuality. In addition to the anxieties of reaching middle age, he had also reached a point in his career that subjected him and his past to more scrutiny than ever before. Augustine did not fit in with his congregation, feeling that they regarded him with suspicion for his past theological dalliances: "No matter how much Augustine wished to share the ideals of a group he remained irreducibly eccentric. He has a lot to explain about himself."<sup>135</sup> From the accusation of "crypto-Manicheism" to the pagan and Platonic influences so obvious in his writings, Augustine's history was checkered and, potentially, a source of distrust for those he was tasked with leading toward God.<sup>136</sup> This scrutiny and suspicion would have resulted in a sense of the self unmoored, a desire not just for companions who knew the real him but for a way to explain himself to others who did not, to translate the devout man within to the suspicious audience without. For whatever reason, his verbal attempts to explain himself were not working. As such, Augustine's

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<sup>135</sup> Brown 2000, 156.

<sup>136</sup> Brown 2000, 156.

confessional language is necessarily a textual technology, an antidote for the disappointing traditional language he has heretofore utilized. After all, he had been seeking a language, a way of writing, that could communicate truth and disclose the interior man to his community long before the culture shock of ordination. Confessional language is the culmination of a lifetime of textual self- and other-seeking.

It is not just confession of any sort, but specifically written confession by which Augustine is finally able to satisfy his need for self-disclosure, for translation of the inner man. Confessing the self onto the page lets us avoid those long, twisting lanes of speech, allows us to bypass the faulty system of turning inward to the initial idea, taking the idea with us as we turn outward back toward the worldly audience, and forcing the idea through that fallible filter of common language. I again invoke O'Donnell's observation that for Augustine, confessional writing is the solution to the identity crisis and incommunicability of the self with which Augustine had spent his entire life grappling. The *Confessions* is Augustine's creation of a form of writing equipped better than any other to render the self legible to the other, to translate the interior to the outside world. As such, confessional writing is nothing less than a divine technology of self-translation. This self-translation is an extremely intimate iteration of the self-text connection, much more intimate and self-disclosing than Plato's self-representation. In our final chapter, I will consider the logical extreme of this intimacy in the form of missive writing, the text as literal presentation of the self to the other.

## Chapter Five: Writing as a Technology of Self-Presentation

### The Nature of Missive Writing

In this final chapter of textual criticism, I turn from self-representation and -translation, to writing as a technology of self-presentation. The move from *representation* of the self to presentation of the self might seem trivial, but in the context of interpersonal ethics the difference is profound. Texts written for the express purpose of literally presenting the self to the other rather than merely calling the self to the mind of the other or disclosing information about the self or a concept of self, transform the page into an interpersonal encounter in the realest sense. These most intimate self-writings move beyond a metaphorical space of encounter into a literal one by presenting the text as a proxy for the author's self. If the mimetic connection of a self to their text, or the process of disclosing a theory of self through text is significant in our effort to construct an intellectual history of writing as a technology of the self, then instances of writing actually presenting the writer to the reader through the textual *corpus* are absolutely monumental. That one would deign to attribute to writing the ability to stand in for the self establishes the writing process and the written word as warranting the utmost ethical care, because after all—sometimes a text isn't just a text.

Writings that function as proxies of the writers' selves can take any number of generic forms, because although the genre or shape of a text can aid in the writer's attempt to present the self to the other, these are not defining or limiting factors. The most essential element for this chapter is that our current "type" of writing is defined by the intended relationship between writer, written, and reader. As a result, one could feasibly point to a novel or a murder-mystery



and argue for its function as the author's deliberate self-presentation. Form does not determine function or intention, and these are our concerns here. Luckily, when people are trying to present themselves to others through the text, they tend to say so outright, since this level of directness suits the authorial drive. If I want you to understand my writing as a presentation of myself to you, it is typically in the interest of that project for me to explicitly tell you that. As a result, this final and most intimate level of connection between the self and the text is often the easiest to notice. Such authorial intentions tend to, but do not necessarily, take the forms of letters and feature direct address of the reader by the writer.

Naturally, the question "what is a letter?" is ubiquitous in studies of Late Antique letters and letter collections, so while I ultimately place little stock in generic categories as exclusionary mechanisms, it is still important to acknowledge this conversation because of scholars' explorations of the function rather than the form of "letters."<sup>137</sup> The word "letters" generally calls to mind a piece of writing (whether written by hand or typed) that is dispatched from one person or writing-party to a specific recipient, whether that be an individual or group. This means that for all intents and purposes anything from an email to a greeting card sent through the postal service to a handwritten note that reaches the addressee in the form a paper airplane could all reasonably be considered a letter. Letters will convey some sort of message, as language is wont to do, and often solicit a response from the reader, frequently in the form of some manner of returned communication. This definition is most useful when taken broadly and geared toward including rather than excluding: "The letter is thus defined by a matrix of specific material, communicative and formal elements."<sup>138</sup> What matters with letters is the intent of the writer to

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<sup>137</sup> On defining the epistolary genre specifically see Allen & Bronwen 2020, chs. 1 and 4; Altman 1982; Riehle 2020; Gibson 2012. On the effect of generic intersections in general see Papanghelis et alia 2013.

<sup>138</sup> Riehle 2020, 1.

convey a message to a recipient from whom they are at some physical distance. Bruggisser phrases the epistolary function (at least in the case of Symmachus) as follows: missive writings establish a relationship, make the relationship work, and grow the relationship.<sup>139</sup> It less about what a letter is than what a letter does—or rather, a letter is what it does. Gibson argues that as early as the first century BCE, scholars such as ps.-Demetrius were hard-pressed to delimit this genre, leading to frustration and meaningless generic constraints.<sup>140</sup> Literary critics have attempted to preclude texts from the epistolary genre for formal elements such as length, format, lack of heading, lack of salutation, and on and on, until the category of “letter” is left empty save for Cicero and “a few scattered shards from other authors.”<sup>141</sup> The debate rages on still, when theorists such as Derrida have gone to the opposite extreme, arguing that all writing is epistle: “Mixture is the letter, the epistle, which is not a genre but all genres, literature itself.”<sup>142</sup> In short, I present this brief overview of the attempt to define “letters” that is perhaps more a refusal of definition—which I think is useful in that it allows us to focus on the unifying core of texts regardless of generic affiliation: textual self-presentation.

Essentially, if an author says the text is a letter or otherwise signals to the reader that they are attempting to present themselves to an intended audience, the text is fair game for this chapter’s consideration. And as it happens, when the goal is to literally present the self to the other, it is usually fairly obvious. Authors tend to explain or ponder their relationship with the intended reader, give directions as to how to read the text, and may even go so far as to explicitly name the text a proxy for the self. In a time before video chats and selfies, personal letters, missives, and the epistolary tradition are the way for *you* to be there, when you can’t be *there*.

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<sup>139</sup> Bruggisser 1993, 8.

<sup>140</sup> Gibson 2013, 387–88.

<sup>141</sup> Gibson 2013, 388.

<sup>142</sup> Derrida 1987, 48.

This experience has been described as a warm yearning, but the self-writings in this chapter suggest that the experience is even more profound.<sup>143</sup> Dealing with an absent and silent loved one often manifests in an aching need for reconnection—a lack so acutely felt as to impel the letter-writer to attempt to try anything they can to engage their loved one, even if it means reconstituting the distanced relationship on a paracorporeal plane, relocating it to a textual theater of interaction when the face-to-face theater is impossible (or even refused). Writing is a key component in these relocations. This goal of autoteleportation to the other through writing is the unifying authorial drive for texts considered here, and I will refer to this broad category of texts variously as missives, directed writing, and letters, though of course they might also belong to different genres—again, remember the chameleon-like nature of this “genre.”<sup>144</sup>

To explore this supremely intimate form of self-writing, I will first look to the personal letters of Ausonius to Paulinus. This correspondence is widely acknowledged as a remarkable display of the writer’s attempt to prolong or reignite the relationship he once enjoyed in-person with his addressee in a literary landscape, and the lengths to which he will go to render his writing a presentation of the writer’s self. Our second case study will be Dhuoda’s *Liber Manualis*. Widely received as a classic example of the Late Antique mother’s manual, I propose that this text is actually, and primarily, Dhuoda’s attempt to fuse her self with her text for the reader. These two examples have largely synonymous authorial aims, but Dhuoda’s *Liber* represents the logical extreme of the self-text connection, and therefore serves to explicitly illustrate the possibilities for writing to present a writer’s self to the other. This exploration of textual self-proxies will lead to our conclusory chapter and a discussion of the ethical

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<sup>143</sup> Brown 2000, 154.

<sup>144</sup> Gibson 2013, 387–88.

ramifications of the potential for writing to connect the reader to the self of the writer in the most direct way.

### Ausonius Paulino

Magnus Decimus Ausonius was a rhetorician, educator, and the “most eminent poet of the fourth century,” “the interpreter of his age,” whose lifetime spanned roughly 310-395 CE.<sup>145</sup> He lived primarily in Burdigala, or modern-day Bordeaux, but was stationed for a time in Trier by Valentinian I in order to tutor his son Gratian, the future emperor.<sup>146</sup> He would return to Bordeaux upon his retirement. Ausonius wrote mostly in Latin and mostly in verse, though some of his prose does exist, and he frequently peppered Greek into his writing. Ausonius’ striking fluency in Greek has led some to speculate that his father Julius Ausonius (about whom we know surprisingly few facts given the extensive family history Ausonius provides throughout his oeuvre) was perhaps a native Greek speaker not fluent in Latin and of relatively humble origins: “Perhaps he [Julius Ausonius] may have been the son of an eastern Greek-speaking doctor, originally a slave but freed. Such men were common, and the name Ausonius—Westerner—seems a typical slave name. It would explain the poet’s reticence about [disclosing his paternal ancestral history].”<sup>147</sup> Ausonius was prolific and dynamic: he wrote in a vast number of different genres, meters, subject-areas, and “a kaleidoscopic variety of styles,” either of his own creation or “based on a wide variety of classical models.”<sup>148</sup> He wrote prayers, an *epicedion*, epigrams, elegiac biographies, his own *Eclogues* and *Fasti*, amatory poetry, a dramatization of his morning routine, and—of course—letters. In addition to his literary skill, his prestige as a *grammaticus* earned him significant political access and social mobility, leading to his eventual consulship

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<sup>145</sup> Fielding 2017, 22; Edwards 1909, 251.

<sup>146</sup> On Ausonius’ relatively murky early career, see Booth 1982.

<sup>147</sup> Hopkins 1961, 241.

<sup>148</sup> Green 1991, xv.

under Gratian in 379. In fact, these political connections granted him such social mobility that his case has been used to combat the prevailing narrative that later Roman social strata were practically impermeable. In all aspects of his life, personal and professional, Ausonius enjoyed a community of associates who were equally as celebrated as him, if not more than.

To be certain, Ausonius' skills as a writer and educator gained him a social cache that could be exploited for personal gains—even if, as was the case for Ausonius, those gains only took the form of membership to an elite friendship group, something that Ausonius seemed to especially value.<sup>149</sup> It is this combination of high valuation of writing and interpersonal relationships that leads us to consider his letters as intensely personal and self-presentational.

Ausonius was an avid letter-writer who placed immense value in the concept of an epistolary community; the manuscript tradition is complicated and little is known of the manner in which Ausonius' letters were collected, but scholars generally agree upon the existence of about 25 letters attributable to Ausonius' collection.<sup>150</sup> It was not uncommon for Ausonius' group to exchange drafts of their writing, poetic and otherwise, or bounce ideas off each other, soliciting feedback and editorial remarks.<sup>151</sup> They even seemed to operate under the assumption that should the recipient feel so inspired, they might share the letter with further readers in their milieu for comment and appreciation. Comprising this *literati* were men such as his own son, and

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<sup>149</sup> Hopkins 1961, 245.

<sup>150</sup> Green, "The Correspondence of Ausonius," 191. Green's 1991 edition includes 24 letters, some with subsections; for his explanation, see pp. 654-55. Green does not include *quasi* cover-letters, for example. Hardie speculates that these 24/25 letters represent just a fragment of "what will have been a more extensive series of exchanges between the two men" (6). For more on the manuscript tradition, see Green 1991, xli-xlix; for more on the method of creating what can be called "Ausonius' letter collection," see Green 1980, 192ff, as well as Della Corte 1960, who suggests that perhaps Paulinus of Pella was the curator of Ausonius' writing! On the possibility of authorial revision and role in publication (and how these might affect our reading of the collection) see Dolveck 2015 and McGill 2017.

<sup>151</sup> A future iteration of this project might discuss Symmachus' stance on authorial rights and plagiarism as expressed in Ep. 31 to Ausonius, as the existence of this conversation can be taken to support the idea that Ausonius is actively considering the author's relationship to the written word once it has been sent out into the world; for now I direct any interested reader to McGill 2009.

later African proconsul, Hesperius; fellow rhetors and educators, Ursulus and Petronius Probus; and author and eventual *praefectus urbi* Romae, Symmachus. But judging by the vast amount of scholarship devoted to this correspondence in particular, one man stands out from this cadre of learned men: Paulinus of Nola. We have seven letters written by Ausonius to Paulinus, and two responses in the other direction—which is striking given that an extant complete circuit of epistolary conversation is relatively rare.<sup>152</sup> The letters exchanged by Ausonius and Paulinus are widely considered invaluable resources “for anyone interested in those individuals, Gallo-Roman aristocratic society and norms of social behaviour in late antiquity, the relationship between classical culture and Christianity in the period, and late-antique literature.”<sup>153</sup> Witke frames this correspondence as theologically significant, emblematic of a shift from a classical to a Christian understanding of how to properly be, showing “most clearly the lineaments and ground of the conflict between the old way of being a poet, and the new.”<sup>154</sup> I consider the letters here, however, for what they might help us understand about the intellectual history of the self-text connection. In other words, I am trying to ask how Ausonius’ epistolary ethos might contribute to a broader discussion of what writing can do for human relationality and human desire to present the self to the other. In order to answer this question, I will read Ausonius’ letters to Paulinus for indications as to how he values friendship (both conceptually and specifically with Paulinus) and presents letter-writing as a means to engage in this relationality by posting the self to the other.

Given how little we know about the way Ausonius’ letters and letter collection reach modern readers, we should certainly be wary of reading too much into their chronology—

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<sup>152</sup> Green 1991, 606.

<sup>153</sup> McGill 2006, 377.

<sup>154</sup> Witke 1971, 44.

however, Ausonius uses several signal phrases that can aid us in recovering their probable order. As such, scholars tend to bisect this correspondence into “earlier” and “later” letters, whereby the earlier set cover more standard epistolary topics and the later adopts a more desperate tone.<sup>155</sup> This correspondence comprises of *epistula* 17-24 from Ausonius, and *carmina* 10 and 11 from Paulinus.<sup>156</sup> The entirety of the correspondence is helpful in establishing exactly how Ausonius deems this medium useful for enacting relationality, but I will be drawing primarily from the later set, as these letters offer a more concentrated and emotionally heightened example of this authorial ideology. The letters’ chronology is debated and ultimately not a pressing issue for the current study, but for the sake of coherence I take Green’s recommendation: “In spite of this conflicting [archival] testimony, and the hesitation of some critics (notably Villani and Prete) it is not difficult to establish the true order. Clearly B3 [*carmen* 10] responds to *Epp.* 21 and 22, and B4 [*c.* 11] to *Ep.* 23-4...”<sup>157</sup> When taken altogether, the correspondence between him and Paulinus illuminates Ausonius’ epistolary project as nothing less than an other-seeking attempt to send the text as a proxy of the self to the long-lost friend, a feat that if successful is tantamount to a teleportation of the self across not only locational distance but into a different plane where friendship can easily play out. By closely reading Ausonius’ letters to Paulinus (especially in brief contrast with Paulinus’ comparatively icy replies), we gain a picture of a man who considered letter-writing the next best way to be with a loved one when corporeal reunion is impossible. And when constructing an intellectual history of writing as a technology of the self, the belief that letters can serve this function is philosophically significant. First, I will explore

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<sup>155</sup> See Trout ch. 3 for an historical account of Ausonius’ and Paulinus’ later friendship.

<sup>156</sup> Following Green’s and Hartel’s numeration, respectively.

<sup>157</sup> Green 1991, 648.

Ausonius' valuation of friendship throughout these letters, and then comb for clues as to how he utilized the literary form to enact this friendship.

### **“Friendship Crisis”<sup>158</sup>**

Ausonius and Paulinus apparently met in Bordeaux when Ausonius, roughly forty years his senior, served as Paulinus' tutor. Thence forth “the two men formed a close literary friendship which was severed only at Paulinus' insistence on a committed, ascetic Christianity.”<sup>159</sup> From what we can tell, the two enjoyed an intimate, if competitive, friendship while cohabitating Bordeaux—so close, indeed, that Evelyn White introduces one letter by calling Paulinus Ausonius' son, probably taking his cue from Ausonius himself.<sup>160</sup> In 389, Paulinus would relocate from Gaul to Spain, residing at his wife's family estate. Five years later, in December of 394, the senatorial landowner and former consul would delve further into his already-devout faith to become an ordained priest in Barcelona. Shortly thereafter, he and his wife would relocate again to Nola, in Campania, where he would spend “the rest of his life, embellishing the shrine [of St. Felix], developing the pilgrimage cult of the saint, and engaging in correspondence with leading figures in the late fourth- and early fifth-century church.”<sup>161</sup> It is in the period surrounding Paulinus' “birth as a Christian” in 394 that the notable “later letters” between him and Ausonius were likely written.<sup>162</sup> If Paulinus' physical distancing from Ausonius' beloved Bordeaux put strain on their friendship, as distance is wont to do, the increasing spiritual distance after his ordainment would threaten to break the bond altogether.

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<sup>158</sup> Dräger 2002, 292.

<sup>159</sup> Conybeare 2000, 3.

<sup>160</sup> Hardie, *Classicism and Christianity in Late Antique Latin Poetry*, 6; Evelyn White, 80: “*Ausonius Pontio Paulino filio...*”; Ausonius 19a.2: “*Pauline fili!*” et alibi. Evelyn White's heading seems to be an editorial interpellation, as he and Green work from the same source material, MS. Z, which alone supplies this particular epistle.

<sup>161</sup> Hardie 2019, 6.

<sup>162</sup> Green 1991, 648. Cf. Fielding pp. 24-5.



This is the background that gives rise to Ausonius' epistolary drive toward Paulinus. Taking my cue from the general scholarly tradition, I consider these letters as genuine attempts at relationality, real tokens of a real friendship, not just a literary exercise for the goal of participating in epistolarity, lacking the impetus of prolonging a friendship.<sup>163</sup> As previously mentioned, these letters are generally divided into two categories: earlier and later. The earlier set of letters written by Ausonius to Paulinus feature what one might expect: "friendly but competitive performances of an elite late antique literary culture," friendly in their clear affection for one another, competitive in their seemingly mutual constructive criticism of the other's shared work.<sup>164</sup> These letters feature quotidian quips such as "your last poem was *delicious*" (*Ep.* 17) and "I could drown myself in the fish sauce you sent me!" (*Ep.* 19).<sup>165</sup> Again, standard fare for a check-in between friends. Indeed, most of Ausonius' epistolary corpus serves to demonstrate his personality: "his many-sided learning, lively humour, and great metrical versatility: in a word, his *poeticus character*."<sup>166</sup> So, how do we get from these pleasant, if bland, interactions, to the heat of the later letters? How do we get from these comfortable salutations to Ausonius' mobilization of "a dazzling array of classical devices and reminiscences seemingly targeting Paulinus for 'failure' in friendship"?<sup>167</sup> As Green points out, the groundwork for these issues may be seen throughout the correspondence, but is entirely programmatic in the later letters:

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<sup>163</sup> Cf. Knight, who argues that outside "the rhetorical gambits found within these epistles, however, there is no concrete evidence of any such close personal relationship" (361). However, the overwhelming scholarly consensus takes the letters themselves and their content as concrete enough evidence.

<sup>164</sup> Hardie, 6; see Green's introduction for more on the culture of epistolary textual feedback, as well as Sowers 2016.

<sup>165</sup> "*accessit tibi ad Artem poeticam mellea adulation,*" and "*addito etiam Barcinonensis muriae condiment cumulatius praestitisti... 'iam patinas implebo meas, ut parrior ille/ maiorum mensis apalaria sucus inundet.'*" The poem in reference is Paulinus' versification of Seutonius' *De Regibus*, and according to Green, likely represents the earliest of the extant letters (637). The fish sauce in question is, naturally, garum, and the couplet seems to be Ausonius' original. These translations are obviously quite loose, but I think they convey the familiar tone with which Ausonius regards Paulinus, if losing some of the pretense that marks Late Antique epistolary culture.

<sup>166</sup> Green 1991, 607.

<sup>167</sup> Knight 2005, 361.

The four earlier letters to Paulinus suggest tensions which make the final separation not entirely surprising. In the celebrated later ones Ausonius does not show imperceptiveness, as often thought, but a deep dedication to his concept of *amicitia* and the epistolary conventions which fostered it. He adheres to them even in crisis; Paulinus keeps the outward form but replies in a totally different spirit.<sup>168</sup>

The answer to the question of this friendship's ultimate dissolution lies in the men's definitions of that friendship, different and getting different every day.

Ausonius approaches friendship through the lens of the lofty tradition of *amicitia* as *officium*, friendship a shared yoke and social duty. The *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae* provides that *officium*, generally translated as "duty" or "favor," carries a special connotation of reciprocity in the epistolary context. Indeed, this is a common lens for Ausonius' literary milieu:

The idea of a letter as an *officium*, often expressed in Symmachus (and indeed in classical letter collections before him), remains prevalent in Christian correspondence. The term itself is often used; and the idea that it represents, of the duty for measured and regular epistolary exchange, is almost invariably present.<sup>169</sup>

Letters are an important duty of care, necessary for the maintenance of friendship and bound by values of reciprocity. For Ausonius and his literary community, letter-writing is a supremely intimate act of self-revelation and mode of relationality.<sup>170</sup> Ausonius begins *Ep.* 21, apparently written after three earlier letters went ignored by Paulinus, by invoking this *officium*:

Quarta tibi haec notos detexit epistula questus,  
Pauline, et blando residem sermone lacescit;  
Officium sed nulla pium mihi pagina reddit,  
Fausta salutigeris ascribens orsa libellis.<sup>171</sup>

This is the fourth letter in which I have laid bare my pain, Paulinus, and tried to rouse you from your slumber with charming words. But not a single page has reciprocated my devout attention, you refusing to write even a short line of text wishing me well.

By characterizing the role of letter-writing as an *officium*, Ausonius is arguing that a failure to

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<sup>168</sup> Green 1991, 607.

<sup>169</sup> Conybeare 2000, 24.

<sup>170</sup> Brown 2000, 153.

<sup>171</sup> *Ep.* 21.1-4.

return a friend's letters is to be derelict in the duty of friendship. Ausonius is accusing Paulinus of not only personal neglect, but a social faux pas based on said neglect. Later in the letter, he doubles down on this accusation:

...agnosco pudorem,  
quod vitium foveat ipsa suum cessation iugis.  
dumque pudet tacuisse diu, placet officiorum  
non servare vices, et amant longa otia culpam.  
quis prohibet 'salve' atque 'vale' brevitate parata  
scribere felicesque notas mandare libellis?<sup>172</sup>

I recognize a shame in you, for your continued refusal of our yoke replicates itself. For so long shame has kept you silent, so long have you denied the obligation of reciprocity, and this long silence revels in its error. Who is stopping you from writing "hello" and "be well" even with careful brevity—from committing to the page a simple greeting?

Friends are supposed to write to each other, and a failure to do so is a failure to abide by the laws of reciprocity. Epistolarity is the socially-sanctioned practice of relocating an in-person relationship to the written plane, when distance requires. This move is typified by Ausonius' exploitation of metrical constraints for his project: *Paulino Ausonius: metrum sic suasit ut esses/ tu prior et nomen praegrederere meum...* ("To Paulinus, Ausonius. Meter so requires that you are before me, your name preceding mine").<sup>173</sup> It is as though Ausonius is saying: "Look, even basic literary convention says we should be together." The connotation is subtle, but Ausonius is indicating that the form of the letter bears witness to the form of the relationship, rendering it possible that writing function as an organ of relationality. In the early stages of his correspondence with Paulinus, represented by the letters preceding *Ep.* 21, Ausonius has been attempting to make this relocation—but when Paulinus refuses to participate in the reciprocal letter-writing, Ausonius accuses him of neglecting his *officium*.

For Late Antique Roman authors, the *officium* of writing-to-friends finds its roots in Cicero, as does the concept of "friends as other selves." In his *de Amicitia*, Cicero admonishes

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<sup>172</sup> *Ep.* 21.28-33.

<sup>173</sup> *Ep.* 18.1-2.

those seeking out relationships primarily for their utility or the profit they might confer. He advises that the ideal friend, rather, is the person able to value in others for their own sake:

ita pulcherrima illa et maxime naturali carent amicitia per se et propter se expetita, nec ipsi sibi exemplo sunt, haec vis amicitiae et qualis et quanta sit. ipse enim se quisque diligit, non ut aliquam a se ipse mercedem exigat caritatis suae, sed quod per se quisque sibi carus est; quod nisi idem in amicitiam transferetur, verus amicus numquam reperietur: est enim is qui est tamquam alter idem.<sup>174</sup>

Thus, these people deprive themselves of that most precious and natural type of friendship: that which is desirable in and for its own sake. They cannot learn for themselves the power of this friendship—its depth and bounds. For everyone loves themselves, not for the purpose of exacting some profit from themselves from their self-love, but because everyone is dear to themselves without need for explanation. So, unless this same feeling is applied to friendship, a true friend will never be found. For in essence a friend is another self.

This model of viewing friends as other selves (which for Cicero means as alter egos, rather than selves in their own right) pervades the Roman cultural imaginary. Cicero's phrasing has its roots in Aristotle (e.g., *Nicomachean Ethics* 1166a) and is deeply engrained in the social norms of *amicitia* and *virtus*, in which it goes largely unaltered until Christian ideals begin to more expressly vie with traditional (pagan) Roman mores.<sup>175</sup> But even this ubiquitous definition needs unpacking, because if we do not understand Ausonius' working definition of *self* and *other*, the idea that "a friend is another *self*" does little for our understanding of his use of the letter as a self-presentation to an other.

Frankly, as an adopter of this Ciceronian view of friendship, Ausonius' views on the matters of self- and otherhood are pretty circular. The self is relational. The ethic of relationality dictates that the self is understood in terms of relation to an other rather than as a discrete individual, able to be completely divorced from sociality. As such, Ausonius seems to

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<sup>174</sup> Cicero, *De Amicitia*, xxi.80. Latin from Armistead Falconer's 1923 edition.

<sup>175</sup> Pakaluk 1991, 77.

understand himself as, for example, *grammaticus* because of his relation to his pupils and *amicus* because of his connection to his friends. Unsurprisingly given their presence in the same “web of learned [*amici*],” this is similar to Augustine’s relational theory of self, with a pivotal difference of the latter’s emphasis on interiority.<sup>176</sup> Rarely if ever does Ausonius speak of himself spontaneously and uninflected by his relation to someone else, which is probably why scholars tend to classify him (litotically) as “not a personal poet.”<sup>177</sup> This might seem a counterintuitive characterization for a poet whose corpus includes long accounts of his personal heritage and descriptions of his daily routine (and not least for his inclusion in a discussion of self-writing!). But, I think what Green and others mean when they say that Ausonius is impersonal, is precisely that he does not describe himself without reference. Unlike someone like Augustine or Dhuoda, as shall be shown, Ausonius’ works are not meditations upon himself, even when working to present himself— or perhaps more precisely, the meditation upon the self he conducts might not feel like one because his theory of self is entirely relational, and as post-enlightenment readers we are accustomed to a less referential self. In this case, Ausonius enactment of friendship through letter-writing, i.e. his enactment of relationality, is actually a necessary component of his identity. For those with this type of self-understanding, communication with others is more than communication of ideas, but of the self. Either way, the fact remains that Ausonius understands himself relationally, which leads handily to his adoption of the Ciceronian maxim on friendship. He views his friends, such as Paulinus, as second selves, and vice versa. Given this relational self-perception, acts of friendship are also acts of self-construction.

Naturally, Paulinus’ departure therefore presents a major problem for Ausonius. The changing nature of their relationship is tantamount to a rupture in his imbricated senses of

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<sup>176</sup> Green 1991, xvi.

<sup>177</sup> Green 1991, xvii.

amicitial duty (writing to friends as *officium* and moving friendship to the epistolary plane) and of self. The reciprocity of communication that was once so easy when the two could engage in-person, is made much more difficult by the addition of such physical distance. As has been demonstrated, letter after letter goes unanswered by Paulinus, signifying a refusal to relocate to that epistolary plane of relationality. So, as most would do in this situation, when he misses his absent friend, Ausonius tries to engage Paulinus in written correspondence. Ausonius continues to invite Paulinus to visit him in-person, so they can maintain their friendship in that more traditional way. Such invitations were commonplace in the epistolary tradition and sometimes feel to the modern reader like little more than polite, empty etiquette. However, Ausonius is serious when he invites Paulinus for a visit. He genuinely hopes to revive his wilting friendship with Paulinus by seeing each other in the flesh.<sup>178</sup> Ausonius' attempts to invite Paulinus for a visit go ignored,

as Ausonius reveals in *Epp.* 23 and 24:

Discutimus, Pauline, iugum, quod nota fovebat  
temperies, leve quod positu et venerabile iunctis  
tractabat paribus concordia mitis habenis,  
quod per tam longam seriem volventibus annis  
nulla querela loco pepulit, non ira nec error...<sup>179</sup>

We are dissolving, Paulinus, the yoke that letters once made bearable, a yoke worn lightly and worthy of those it joined, whom shared affection once led with gentle reigns—which for so long a series of passing years no complaint disrupted, no anger or misunderstanding...

Ausonius' construction of friendship as *iugum* is one method by which he weaves his relational theory of self into his writing, casting friendship as a mutual yoke connecting two people and demanding reciprocal care. Until now, he says, their relationship has undergone no real drama or

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<sup>178</sup> As a comparative, Green points out that Ausonius also invites Paulus through writing, and that man seems to have taken up the offer or at least entertain it (1991, 201).

<sup>179</sup> *Ep.* 24.1-5.

threat, at least in Ausonius' experience of it. It has been easy to enact their amicitial obligations toward the other. Now, however, something has gone seriously awry. Evelyn White gives this letter, *Ep.* 24, the heading: "To the same Paulinus, when he replied to everything without promising to come."<sup>180</sup> Whether this epistle is taken as a result of Paulinus' rejected invitation or as simply an escalation of an unsatisfactory correspondence, it remains clear that Ausonius sees Paulinus' treatment of him—or rather his refusal to treat him at all—as a fatal blow to their relationship. Again, friends are supposed to write to each other and abide by the norms of reciprocity, and Paulinus has refused to meet Ausonius' standards time after time. His literary silence is dissolving the very structure of their relationality, the yoke of mutual affection and obligation that is all-important for one whose self is inherently relational. Ausonius continues to evoke this failing bond, this *iugum*, throughout this letter:

tam placidum, tam mite iugum, quod utrique parentes  
ad senium nostri traxere ab origine vitae  
impositumque piis heredibus usque manere  
optarunt dum longa dies dissolveret aevum...  
hoc tam mite iugum docili cervice subirent  
Martis equi...<sup>181</sup>

How sweet, how light this yoke, which both our parents bore from their birth to their old age, which was placed upon their devout heirs where they would have wanted it to remain until so long a time would end our own lives... This yoke so light that Mars' horses would bear it on their dutiful necks.

Ausonius appeals to a social contract by reminding Paulinus of the well-established role of amicitial piety, referencing not only that their own parents participated in the tradition, but also pagan mythical antecedents (more on this issue later). He then proceeds to appeal to any sense of worldly empathy Paulinus might still hold for him, by describing the

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<sup>180</sup> "Ad eundem cum ille ad alia magis responderet neque se venturum polliceretur." Ausonius 1921, 99. See Green 1991, pp. 654-6 on his decision to include both letters 23 and 24, which are extremely similar, while Evelyn White and others print just 24.

<sup>181</sup> *Ep.* 21.8-11, 15-16.

painstaking process of bearing the load of friendship alone:

discutitur, Pauline, tamen, nec culpa duorum  
ista, sed unius tantum tua; namque ego semper  
contenta cervice feram. Consorte laborum  
destituor, nec tam promptum 99owever duobus  
unum deficient pari perferre sodalem...<sup>182</sup>

Yet, our yoke is falling apart, Paulinus, and not through the fault of two people, but only one: you. For I would be content forever to carry us. But I am bereft a partner in this emotional labor, and it is not so easy to bear alone that which is fit for two when my friend has denied me.

For Ausonius and the Roman traditions that generate his worldview, friendship requires an equality of effort, a sharing of emotional labor, and a sharing of the self. Ausonius has tried repeatedly to engage Paulinus, literally begging him to participate in this relationality. He has invited Paulinus to come see him, using writing to initiate a corporeal experience; he has tried to evoke social normativity, mobilizing a shared language of *iugum* and *officium*; and when all this fails, he settles for renegotiating their relationship onto an epistolary plane, wherein the written letter is a presentation of the self to the other. He has been fighting to move the friendship to this new plane in which the letter represents the author's self, the exchange of letters not just an act of friendship, but indeed an *enaction* of friendship. Paulinus has dodged his every scheme, his emotional, epistolary withholding a dissolution of the once-strong interpersonal relation. In conclusion of this section, I will discuss the root of Paulinus' refusal, as it contributes to our understanding of his vision of writing as a technology of self-presentation, and why his project ultimately fails.

For Paulinus, the need for emotional distance by means of epistolary non-reciprocation was theological; for Ausonius, the need to close that gap was personal. And herein lies the crux of the issue. Ausonius and Paulinus are operating with fundamentally different views on the

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<sup>182</sup> *Ep.* 21.19-23.



nature of the self, friendship, and writing as a technology thereof. Paulinus' growing faith has led him to view as antithetical to idealized Christian asceticism the type of deep interpersonal connection Ausonius is seeking through mutual epistles. Fielding points out that although Ausonius is also Christian, there was a significant generational divide between the two men that resulted in their incompatible hopes for their relationship: "Ausonius, while a Christian, would have been thirteen or fourteen when Constantine became sole ruler of the empire in 324; he came of age in that first generation of converts that did not, for the most part, see their new religion as being at odds with traditional Roman culture."<sup>183</sup> Ausonius represents an era of Roman Christians for whom community and earthly association with like-minded individuals was a theological benefit and sustained by frequent verbal or written communication. Presentation of the self to the other through letter-writing was entirely aligned with Ausonius' brand of selfhood. This clearly is not the case for Paulinus. He views these letters as sacraments, adhering to a distinctly Christian view of the form— after all, letters play an important role in the Church.<sup>184</sup> As such, the letter cannot represent a particular self to a specific other, because not only is that not what friendship is like, that is not what selves are. Ausonius does not share Paulinus' ascetic Christianity, and his religious affiliation does not penetrate his authorial persona to such a degree that would lead him to place the epistle in a singularly Christian context as it does his friend. He is able to compartmentalize, continuing his endeavor of presenting his self to his friend through the written letter. For Paulinus, however, both the *officium* of letter-writing and the idea that the written word can present a self to an other fails to meet his new standards of self and friendship: "Paulinus and his associates saw themselves as participating in an entirely new notion of friendship, reinterpreted through their faith," but Ausonius took no part in this reimagining of

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<sup>183</sup> Fielding 2017, 23.

<sup>184</sup> See Conybeare ch. 2 and Hardie.

relationality.<sup>185</sup> In these terms, the dissolution of their written interaction and consequently their relationship altogether, is nothing personal for Paulinus; for Ausonius, this is exactly the problem.

Paulinus' ill-fated attempt to assuage Ausonius' growing feeling of amicitial neglect by pointing out that their friendship actually has not been interrupted in his eyes, can only serve to confirm Ausonius' fears. As Paulinus' understanding of relationality and friendship has moved past the value of particular others (i.e., Ausonius as a unique friend), to understanding the self as a member of an omnipresent spiritual community of believers for whom spiritual fellows in Christ are never distant, Ausonius will always be justified in feeling neglected. The correspondence reveals two men at very different places in their life and faith, functionally writing in epistolary languages that are not only different, but practically incompatible.

Conybeare demonstrates this by looking to none other than each man's use of *iugum*:

In the image of the yoke is summarized the critical difference between Ausonius' classical notion of friendship, and the Christian one which Paulinus is beginning to devise. While the yoke invokes a certain relationality of selves, it is a far less thoroughgoing one than obtains for Paulinus—who wishes to acknowledge the conjunction, not just of two selves, but of the entire Christian community.<sup>186</sup>

They might be writing the same word, both speaking of *iuga* and *officia*, but their frames of signification are fundamentally divergent. To redouble this, Conybeare elaborates on Green's commentary here: "Even this [use of *iugum*], of course, shows their different sphere of reference in the use of the image of the yoke: Green draws our attention to Ausonius' reminiscence of Theocritus 12.15, while Paulinus...is more liable to recall Matt. 11: 30."<sup>187</sup> Ausonius' appeal to a shared litany of classical references such as Mars' horses, the intimacy of Orestes and Pylades,

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<sup>185</sup> Conybeare 2000, ch 3 \*\*\* find page number.

<sup>186</sup> Conybeare 2000, 156.

<sup>187</sup> Conybeare, 156 n. 95.

and the affinity Paulinus once held as a poet for the Muses—all of these appeals work against Ausonius because as rooted in paganism, they do not translate into Paulinus’ new christologism. Even his preference for metrical letters presents a problem for Paulinus: “...it is clear from his change of practice that Paulinus does reconsider his ideas about the proper application for poetry. It is not his medium of choice for Christian communication.”<sup>188</sup> The two men are clearly not on the same page.

Paulinus’ language has undergone a thoroughgoing transmutation, whereby his verbal referents are categorically different from Ausonius’. When Ausonius speaks of the mutual yoke joining Paulinus and himself, he envisions affection, a reciprocity of letters that would allow the men to enact their distanced friendship and maintain normative relationality; this simply is not what *officium*, *iugum*, and *pium* mean for Paulinus anymore. In fact, long bouts of amicitia silence do not present a problem for Paulinus:

ego te per omne quod datum mortalibus  
et destinatum saeculum est,  
claudente donec continebor corpore,  
discerner orbe quolibet,  
nec ore longum nec remotum lumine  
tenebo fibris insitum,  
videbo corde, mente complectar pia  
ubique praesentem mihi.<sup>189</sup>

Through everything given to mortals and ordained, so long as I am confined in this body, even when I am held a world apart from you—you are never far from my mind nor taken from my sight because I hold you in the fiber of my being. I will always see you in my heart. I will always keep you in my mind, you who are always present with me.

In Paulinus’ new understanding of interpersonal relationships, the friend is never far away. As if begging for reprieve from the all-too-human (and, truly, *too human*) desperation with which Ausonius’ epistolary self presents, Paulinus tries to convey that, for him, the feelings never

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<sup>188</sup> Conybeare 2000, 51.

<sup>189</sup> *Carmen* 11.49-56.

faded, because his faith allows him to see his loved ones everywhere, in spirit. Paulinus is content to experience relationships theoretically and in a Christocentric manner, because he views it as theologically appropriate. Ausonius is not satisfied, and/or is not able, to relocate their relationship to this spiritual plane, preferring the corporeal and epistolary to the spiritual.

To paraphrase, in response to Ausonius' desperate self-presentation, his grief at his friend's absence, Paulinus has essentially responded "I did not even notice you were gone." Of course, he means this with no malice. As he goes to great lengths to explain, his deepening faith has given him a vision of friendship as based in Christ, and therefore members of that community are never far from each other. This would do little to soothe the hurt apparent in the question that concludes *Epp.* 23-4, which *c.* 11 seems to answer: *credimus, an qui amant ipso sibi somnia fingunt?* ("Do I believe [in us]? Or do those who love fool themselves with beautiful dreams?").<sup>190</sup> However well-intended, Paulinus' explanation stings. It is all well and good for him to see his friends in everything, but what comfort can that offer Ausonius, for whom the yoke of friendship is heavy and his very sense of self has been fractured by refused relationality? Paulinus has redefined their relationship without Ausonius' consent—yet, we must acknowledge that Ausonius wants the relationship to stay the same, without Paulinus'. As Paulinus has tried to explain—which I take as sincere<sup>191</sup>—he will always love Ausonius, if only Ausonius can join him on the christological plan of relationality, in which attempts at epistolary self-presentation are impracticable. Paulinus is not "a cold and lonely man." He is simply someone for whom the nature of warmth and community have taken radically new meaning.<sup>192</sup> Ausonius says that their relationship is falling apart, and Paulinus (finally) responds that he has been unbothered.

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<sup>190</sup> *Ep.* 24.124.

<sup>191</sup> Cf. Witke, 42.

<sup>192</sup> Pace Brown, 153.

Ausonius says “I cannot keep missing you like this,” and Paulinus says, “I did not even notice you were gone.” Of course, Paulinus’ dismissals are followed by an important qualification, but Ausonius cannot hear that. For all their heartfelt attempts to explain themselves (and their selves) to each other, the two men cannot help but speak past and over each other, rendering Ausonius’ desperate attempt at textual self-presentation wasted. Paulinus is sincere when he says in “*videbo corde, mente complectar pia/ ubique praesentem mihi*”!<sup>193</sup> But because of his transmuted linguistic frame of reference, his sentiment is illegible to his former mentor.

### Missed Connections

Invitations ignored, flattery rebuffed, and appeals to a shared history rejected, Ausonius is desperate for anything that might reestablish his and Paulinus’ relationship. He attempts to reconstitute their friendship onto an epistolary plane, where the written word is a presentation of the author’s self to the other. Ausonius cranks up the emotion, the tone of the letters reaching a fever pitch, so as to make his writing so visceral and so over-flowing with appeals to relationality, that his letters aim to effectively deliver the man himself to Paulinus’ door. Paulinus is unable to receive his friend in this way, and for someone who defines the self relationally, nothing could be more distressing. Ultimately, Ausonius’ project of presenting himself to Paulinus through writing, his attempt to relocate their relationship to the epistolary plane, can never work—not for lack of trying, and not because textual presentation of the self is impossible, but because of the lack of a shared language of relationality and selfhood. This brings us to our final case study, Dhuoda, for whom the lines between the self and the text are even blurrier—or erased altogether.

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<sup>193</sup> Cf. Green 1980, 204, where he characterizes Paulinus as indifferent to Ausonius attempts at (re)connection.

### **Dhuoda's *Liber Manualis***

Four centuries later and 400 kilometers to the southeast, Dhuoda would begin her own journey of textual self-presentation. As a civil war occupied her Carolingian homeland, Dhuoda sat in Uzès, a small Gallo-Roman town in southern France, preoccupied with her own domestic turmoil. Her household had been ravaged, not by some hostile intruder but by her own husband. Through her husband's political missteps, Dhuoda would go from a devoted mother and wife whose days were occupied by raising two young sons to the woman we meet in the *Liber Manualis*. Polanichka argues that Dhuoda thematizes, for example, vision and vigilance, the value of seeing the divine in the mundane encounter—such as the textual encounter. When Dhuoda's text is read through a lens of self-writing, though, Dhuoda's spiritual epistemology emerges as a way for a locationally distant mother to physically engage with her beloved offspring. If the physical encounter—with nature, with other people, with physical objects such as texts—can function as an interaction with a spiritual essence, then the written word becomes a theater of encounter between the essence of the writer and of the reader. Dhuoda is working on a project similar to Ausonius', wherein she attempts to utilize the physical text to create a metaphysical relationality between the self and the other, herself and her son. But whereas Ausonius works to reconstitute his relationship on a textual plane, Dhuoda tries to elide the epistemic distinction between physical and textual as she elides the distinction between self and text. As such, the text is an integral part of the redefined maternal relationship Dhuoda is seeking both through the act of writing and in the eventual act of reading. If the spiritual plane is to be preferred over the mundane, then the physical distance between writer and reader is rendered a non-issue by virtue of the text's metaphysical significance.

## The Nature of the *Liber Manualis*

Many scholarly attempts have been made to classify the *LM*. Some consider this strictly as a mother's manual, a *speculum principum*, an early Fürstenspiegel, and more esoterically an “*écriture féminine*...” all her own.<sup>194</sup> One scholar even begins their reading with a decidedly bold claim: “Dhuoda's text is *not* an autobiography...”<sup>195</sup> I will argue here that the *LM* is first and foremost a self-writing of the most intimate kind. The *Liber Manualis* is quite long. Riché divides the text into the following sections and topics, which I present here with my own interpellations:

- Prologue – the author and her reasons for writing  
(*Incipit textus; In nomine Sanctae Trinitatis; Epigramma operis subsequentis; Incipit prologus; Praefatio*; and finally *Incipiunt capitula huius libris*, Dhuoda's own table of contents)
- Book 1 – loving God
- Book 2 – the mystery of Trinity
- Book 3 – social order and secular success
- Book 4 – moral life
- Book 5 – God's chastisement of those he loves
- Book 6 – the usefulness of the beatitudes
- Book 7 – the deaths of the body and of the spirit
- Book 8 – how to pray and for whom
- Book 9 – interpreting numbers
- Book 10 – summary of the work's major points, more on the author  
(Herein Dhuoda begins a series of endings that mirrors the multiplicity of beginnings found in the “Prologue,” including subsections in which Dhuoda begs for prayer before her death, lists her sons' deceased ancestors, and writes her own epitaph)
- Book 11 – the usefulness of reciting the Psalms  
(The text's actual closure)

The structure of the *LM* is more complicated than a standard “table of contents” could convey, a revolving door of beginnings and endings that is emblematic of the author's complex relationship to time and connectivity. Throughout the remainder of this chapter I will consider

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<sup>194</sup> Butler 2011, 12.

<sup>195</sup> “Le Manuel de Dhuoda n'est pas une autobiographie, mais un miroir de prince, un *speculum*.” Meyers 2018, 9.

the ways in which Dhuoda documents her experiencing, demonstrates her identity, and mobilizes the technology of writing to fuse the writer and written to such an extreme degree,

Dhuoda was a noblewoman, married to the notorious Bernard of Septimania, mother of two young sons, and in 841 would become the author of “one of Latin’s only major pre-Modern texts by a woman.”<sup>196</sup> Like Ausonius, Dhuoda’s sense of self is highly relational. She tends to understand herself in terms of her role in others’ lives and the concept of relation permeates every element of her text. Dhuoda’s sphere of relationality is comparatively narrow and impossibly capacious: she is a mother, and as such views her self in terms of maternal relationality or maternity. Her writing shows a woman who understands herself wholly through and as her relationship to her beloved, absent children. As will be shown, everything Dhuoda writes serves to underline her maternal relationship to her addressee, and she indicates throughout that this maternal instruction is her very life’s meaning. We need not imagine the psychic pain that someone with the self-perception of Dhuoda would feel at the abrupture of mother and child(ren), because she tells us explicitly. Dhuoda’s text is therefore the litterization (the letter-ification) of a self who has experienced—is constantly experiencing and re-experiencing—an essential wound. Maternity is her source of relationality, so a maternal loss is nothing short of a loss of self.

As a brief aside, given our interest in maternity, it might seem necessary to discuss Dhuoda’s experience of gender—and I have certainly gestured toward the topic (and will do so again). However, for my purposes in this dissertation, I need not more than gesture at this topic. It is true that being a woman in the world certainly contributes to Dhuoda’s social circumstances, and motherhood in Dhuoda’s time was enmeshed with womanity. But there is an important level

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<sup>196</sup> Butler 2011, 12.



of nuance to attend to here: Dhuoda's sense of self-as-mother functions as a category of relationality, and while genderedness certainly inflects the ways that one might engage in relationality, gender *per se* does not seem to influence Dhuoda's self-perception.<sup>197</sup> Dhuoda is a woman, but she views her self as a person engaging in maternity (who, *de iure temporis*, will happen to be a woman). Wonderful treatments of gender in Dhuoda's text and also in her contemporary France abound, so I commend their work without focusing too much on gender as a topic in itself.<sup>198</sup>

Unlike the men writers we have considered so far were able to enjoy a vibrant cadre of friends and colleagues, Dhuoda's life was one of isolation. Despite the social mobility that her family's political status might have afforded her, Dhuoda seemingly did not have the luxury of creating a sororal community that could compare to, say, Plato's academic pals, Augustine's well-loved crew of believers, or the fraternity of *servi Dei* for Ausonius and Paulinus. Even Dhuoda's marriage would provide very little in terms of community. She writes very little about her relationship dynamic with her husband, Bernard. However, what we are able to recover from the choices he made and the circumstances in which she was left behind in Uzès reveals plenty.

Indeed, Dhuoda's writing not only describes her experiences, but proves that there was a Dhuoda to experience them. While ample information is available about her husband Bernard, none of this evidence mentions Dhuoda by name or describes Bernard's wife in more than oblique terms. If not for Dhuoda's writing, we would know that Bernard had a wife and two sons, but we would have no clue who that wife was. In writing her *LM* Dhuoda proves her existence. Even in so doing, however, she provides little strictly biographical or historicizing

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<sup>197</sup> I think of this as similar to women-loving-women who describe their gender as "lesbian."

<sup>198</sup> See Nelson 2003, esp. chs. 11 and 12; Dronke 1984, esp. ch. 2; Marchand 1984; Claussen 1990 and 1996; Mayeski 1995; Jaffe 1997; Kerr 1997; Polanichka 2020; Prieto 2010 on gendered education at this time; Weissman et al., 2020 on the concept of maternity in general.

data. The strong sense of self we will bear witness to throughout Dhuoda's writing will occupy our discussion, but the curious fact remains that she provides the reader few details as to where, whence, or when this self actually existed. Beyond naming her husband as Bernard and her firstborn son as William, she does corroborate various details of a political context that would establish their author unequivocally as the wife of Bernard of Septimania. Let us consider briefly the data that Dhuoda herself does provide and then fill in the biographical lacunae with details known of her husband, so that we might have a firmer grasp on Dhuoda's literary context.

We swiftly run up against our first problem. Dhuoda does not mention her birthdate, birth place, parents' names, or any such sundry information. It has been speculated that she names her parents among those deceased ancestors for whom William ought to pray toward the end of the *LM*, but this cannot be proved with total certainty.<sup>199</sup> However, even without this information, we can infer from her education, literary frame of reference, and spouse's social status that Dhuoda comes from a wealthy family.<sup>200</sup> It has even been argued that Dhuoda was educated in Charlemagne's palace.<sup>201</sup> That she was an educated woman is further evinced by her use of varying literary techniques, such as her inclusion of acrostic verse in her prose text, and her ease in referencing source material. Several attempts have been made to reconstruct Dhuoda's library: "The *Liber manualis* draws on the Bible, Alcuin's *De virtutibus et vitiis*, the Rule of Benedict, and writings by Augustine of Hippo, Gregory the Great, Gregory of Tours, Isidore of Seville, Ambrosius Autpertus, Paulinus of Aquileia, Jonas of Orléans, Hrabanus Maurus, and Lupus of Ferrières."<sup>202</sup> At the very least, Dhuoda would have had access to a myriad of authors through

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<sup>199</sup> Thiébaux 1998, 8.

<sup>200</sup> See Prieto 2010.

<sup>201</sup> Jaffe 1997, 180.

<sup>202</sup> Polanichka 2020, 33, n. 26. See also Riché, 29; Neel, xvi; and Romig, 101.

florilegia.<sup>203</sup> This context is helpful in that it helps fill out a picture of Dhuoda's interior frames of reference.

It has been speculated that Dhuoda's name is a transliteration of the Basque name "Toda," and that her father was Sancho I, Duke of Gascony, who assisted Charlemagne's capture of Barcelona in 801.<sup>204</sup> If this is true, she would have been born Dhuoda Sanchez. Interestingly, this would make her connection to Charlemagne twofold, as her husband is the son of Charlemagne's cousin William of Gellone. However, the historicity of her parentage is uncorroborated by Dhuoda herself. What she does concretely provide, mainly toward the beginning of her text, are a handful of dates pertaining to the significant relationships in her life—underscoring the idea that she views her life as a series of relational refraction points.

Early in her writing, Dhuoda provides her 824 wedding date: *Anno feliciter, Christo propitio, XI, domno nostro Ludovico condam fulgente in imperio, concurrente V, III Kalendarum iulii diem, in Aquisgrani palatio, a meum dominum tuumque genitorem Bernardum legalis in coniugio accessi uxor* ("In the eleventh year of our late lord Ludovic, who ruled in splendor with Christ's favor, with five concurrents, I was given as wife in legal marriage to Bernard, my lord and your father, three days before the Kalends of July, in the palace at Aachen").<sup>205</sup> Assuming that she was aged between fifteen and twenty on her wedding day, we might estimate a birth-year between 804 and 809.<sup>206</sup> Regarding her birthplace, an etymological guess takes us as close as we can get to the truth. Based on the Germanic root of her name, Thiébaux posits that Dhuoda is of northern or southern Frankish descent: "If the author's origin were northern Frankish, her

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<sup>203</sup> Mayeski 1995, 27–34.

<sup>204</sup> Bachrach 2013, 120ff.

<sup>205</sup> *Praefatio*, 48. Given this text's lack of linear numeration, for clarity I will cite the section heading and number (when provided), as well as the page on which the text might be found in Thiébaux's edition. For example, this quotation is pulled from Dhuoda's *praefatio* and appears on page 48 of Thiébaux, thus: *Praefatio*, 48.

<sup>206</sup> Thiébaux 1998, 8–9.

parents were perhaps the Guarnarius and Rothlindis of Luxembourg whom she lists among the deceased kin for whom her son should pray. But Dhuoda could have come from the south... or she might have descended from the Visigothic nobility of Septimania...”<sup>207</sup> This speculation falls in line with Bernard’s background, but, again, should not be accepted wholesale.

Next, Dhuoda provides the dates of her sons’ births and subsequent departures from, again conflating her experience of time and her experience of maternal relationality. Her eldest son, William, to whom she explicitly addresses the *LM*, was born 29 November 826, two years after her wedding to Bernard: *Et iterum in tertio decimo anno regni eius, III Kalendarum decembrium, auxiliante, ut credo, Deo, tua ex me, desideratissime fili primogenite, in saeculo processit nativitas* (“And again, in the thirteenth year of that rule, on the third of the Kalends of December, with God’s help, I think, your birth issued forth from me in the world, most desired first-born son”).<sup>208</sup> Fourteen years later, Dhuoda would give birth for a second time, another son, born on 22 March 841: “*Post mortem quoque eius, in anno sequente, nativitas fratris tui XI Kalendas aprilis: ex meo secundus post te, in Uzecia urbe, Deo miserante, egressus est utero*” (“After [Ludovic’s] death, in the following year the birth of your brother [was] on the eleventh Kalends of April; he issued forth from my womb, second to you, in the city of Uzès, with God’s mercy”).<sup>209</sup> Note the phrasing of these births. Rather than the more common language of *parturitio* or even *generatio* (the latter for which she does have an affinity elsewhere), Dhuoda chooses the prolonged *tua ex me processit* and *ex meo egressus est utero*. These phrasings serve her relational agenda in a few ways. First, they obviously employ corporeal language to assert her sons’ dependence on the maternal body, rendering her very self as their essence. Next, the

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<sup>207</sup> Thiébaux 1998, 8.

<sup>208</sup> *Praefatio* 28.

<sup>209</sup> *Praefatio*, 48-50.

repeated directional language of *tua ex me* and *ex me utero* evokes for the reader and image of a literal thread of relationality connecting the the *me* and *te* in question. We will continue to see Dhuoda relying on directional imagery for these ends. And finally, the hypotactical explanation is representative of relationality through time—the drawn-out syntax resembling the prolonged labor of childbirth and also the fact of a maternity that extends through time. In other words, she wants her sons to know that they came from her body, they are still coming from her body, and they always will have come from her body. This is just a taste of the ways Dhuoda plays with time to assert her role in her sons’ lives despite a physical distance. But returning to our recovery of Dhuoda’s biography.

In addition the dates she provides, and given her ignorance of her own family history, Dhuoda goes to great lengths to provide genealogical information for her sons. In fact, so detailed is this heterogenealogy that it strikes one as “unusual for so personal a document,” not least because “Dhuoda gives more attention to Bernard’s family than her own.”<sup>210</sup> Perhaps this tracks for her particular project—she is not attempting to write for her sons an historical account of her days, but something much more personal, something emphasizing the importance of relationality. As such, it would make sense for Dhuoda to focus more on tracing a lineage than stating her own birthday. Either way, she makes editorial choices such as neglecting to mention her parents’ names (so far as we can definitively say) but documenting an extensive list of Bernard’s ancestry. Prime examples of Dhuoda’s genealogizing occur at 3.1, 8.8, and especially 10.5. In a similar vein, Dhuoda likes to remind the reader that he is of noble stock, calling him a *nobilis puer* who has *nobile[m] sanguine[m]* and is therefore *dign[us] et abt[us]* of heaven.<sup>211</sup> It is clear that family ties govern Dhuoda’s worldview and self-perception. What can be gleaned

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<sup>210</sup> Thiébaux 1998, 7.

<sup>211</sup> 11.2; 1.1; 4.8.

from this set of biographical data? What does it mean that Dhuoda mentions her wedding date and her sons' birthdates, but not her own birthdate or her family name? I suggest that the very selective type of personal information Dhuoda deems relevant reveals her point of contact with the world: relationality. Rather than systematically documenting the events of her life, Dhuoda chooses to signpost her existence with relationally pertinent information. This is not to argue that she defines herself solely in others' contexts, because she absolutely possesses and writes a strong sense of individuality. However, individuality for her is always *in contact with*. Her prioritization of relationality through writing further implies that she understands the text itself as an organ of relation. As we shall see, this is supported by her juxtaposition of familial dates and authorial statement. Dhuoda's logical collocation of text and relation indicates that she sees the text as a location in which relationality might occur. Coupled with her what we know of Dhuoda's social status, from which we can infer details of her daily life, Dhuoda's text presents a woman for whom relationality and familial ties are paramount. She values the concept of family, especially in terms of maternity, exceedingly highly and therefore devotes significant time to establishing relational bonds throughout her writing. Intimacy and relationships were at least a major concern for Dhuoda's writing—at most, her primary. She speaks of herself by speaking of others, consistently deprioritizing the boundaries of selfhood.

Turning now to consider Dhuoda's home-life, we must discuss Bernard. Bernard was the Frankish Duke of Septimania, Louis the Pious' godson and counsellor, and a longtime member of the Carolingian political court. Due to his political affiliations and obligations, it is likely that much of their marriage was spent living separately, Bernard at court in Aachen and Dhuoda without him in Uzès.<sup>212</sup> This would be done in service to Bernard's career. So it is bittersweet

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<sup>212</sup> Jaffe 1997, 180–81.

that it was precisely Bernard's professional ambition that would ultimately "[bring] ruin to himself and his son William."<sup>213</sup> Not to mention the effect on his wife. But for the years preceding this ruin, Dhuoda's marriage was relatively normal, if lonely. By the spring of 841, Dhuoda was the happy mother of two,<sup>214</sup> tending to her teen and infant sons while their father travelled for work. This is all par for the course for a Carolingian noblewoman. So how does Dhuoda get to the distraught state in which we find her in the *LM*?

This is where Bernard's notoriety and professional missteps come into play, utterly changing the course of Dhuoda's life. As the chamberlain for Emperor Louis the Pious, Bernard would first come under scrutiny in 830 (when William would have been four years old), when he allegedly engaged in an affair with his boss' wife, Judith. Whether or not this affair actually happened, the allegations would forever plague Bernard's reputation—and in fact, such illegitimate behavior would have been on-brand for Bernard: "...even if the liaison between Bernard and Judith was simply rumor, the result of a smear campaign waged against Bernard by his enemies, there is no denying that Bernard's own behavior, both as chancellor and after Louis's death, was less than honorable."<sup>215</sup> Bernard continued to serve the imperial family as Charles the Bald, the son of Judith and Louis and potential godson of Bernard himself, ascended to the throne.<sup>216</sup> All seemed relatively well for the next decade. Despite an explicit pledge to support Charles' military endeavors, Bernard consistently faltered on his promise, ramping up to a fatal error in 841. In the battle that would become known as the culmination of the Carolingian Civil War, Charles would defeat his brother Lothair in a battle, forcing him to withdraw his troops to

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<sup>213</sup> Thiébaux 1998, 13.

<sup>214</sup> Palmer postulates that Dhuoda had a third child: "One scholar has suggested that a daughter was born in 844, as one chronicler reports the marriage of William's sister." However, she provides no citation or bibliography, and I have been unable to track down her source.

<sup>215</sup> Claussen 1996, 806.

<sup>216</sup> Claussen 1996, 806.

the south. Bernard should have been an active participant in this battle, but instead he exempted himself and his troops from military service, waiting in safety to see how the conflict would shake out: “At the bloody and destructive battle at Fontenoy in June 841, Bernard withheld committing his troops to Charles until the outcome was sure,” thereby displaying a distinct cowardice and a conditional loyalty to the court that he served.<sup>217</sup> This was considered an act of treason, and if Bernard wished to save his life, he would have to make a grand gesture of loyalty to the court.

These are the reasons why, a mere three months after his younger brother’s birth, and the day after Fontenoy, on 26 June 841 William would be entrusted by his father as a vassal to King Charles: *Audivi enim quod genitor tuus Bernardus in manus damnit e commendavit Karoli regis* (“For I have heard that your father Bernard has commended you to the hand of the lord King Charles”).<sup>218</sup> While the circumstances of this commendation are well-documented, there is some debate on its implication—but most scholars frame William’s status as one of political hostage.<sup>219</sup> William’s commendation had the secondary function as a collateral guarantee that Bernard would deliver on his promise to obtain for Charles the support of Pippin of Aquitaine, but again Bernard lets us down. It seems that Bernard had no real intention of following through on this promise, given that no such support was ever delivered or sought.<sup>220</sup> Jaffe phrases this all even less flatteringly for Bernard, saying that “Bernard sent William to Charles’s court where the young man may have been a virtual hostage to guarantee his father’s loyalty,” before absconding to Aquitaine, wailing infant in tow.<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>217</sup> Claussen 1996, 806.

<sup>218</sup> *Praefatio*, 50.

<sup>219</sup> See: Polanichka, 8-17; Dronke, 49; *cf.* Kosto, esp. p. 133, wherein he problematizes the category of political hostage.

<sup>220</sup> Thiébaux 1998, 18–19.

<sup>221</sup> Jaffe 1997, 181.



In short, Bernard committed several serious acts of political disloyalty and dishonesty, for which his sons and wife would pay the ultimate price, a reality that Dhuoda herself politely acknowledges in her *praefatio*. Indeed, she obliquely references her husband's faults throughout the *LM*, as in 3.1, where she repurposes scripture to admonish William not to disdain his father despite his flaws: *Suscipe si ad hoc Deo perveneris auxiliante, senectam illius, et ne contristes eum in vita sua, neque spernas eum in virtute tua* ("Support his old age, if you can arrive at this with God's help, and do not cause him grief in his life, and do not scorn him in your strength").<sup>222</sup> Five months after William's commendation to the court, in November 841 when the couple's youngest son was only eight months old, Bernard ordered him taken to live with his father in Aquitaine: *Etenim parvulum illum, antequam baptismatis accepisset gratiam, dominus et genitor Bernardus utrique vestrum, una cum Elefanto, praedictae civitatis episcopo... in Aquitaniae partibus ad suam fecit adduci praesentiam* ("When he was so little, and before he had received the grace of baptism, the lord and father of you both had him led to the region of Aquitaine by one Elefantus, the bishop of the aforementioned city, alongside the rest of his followers").<sup>223</sup> Dhuoda would never see her baby again. She would never even learn his name. In the course of eight turbulent months, Dhuoda had seen her eldest son traded into political servitude, given birth to her second child, had that child ripped from her care, and left entirely alone in the family estate at Uzès with all the financial and household responsibilities that entailed. She had been abandoned. So, she began to write. And it is finally time to turn our attention to Dhuoda's writing entirely.

Dhuoda's commenced her writing project on 30 November 841, and finished eighteen months later on 2 February 843: *Incoatio huius libelli IIo anno obitus Ludovici condam*

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<sup>222</sup> 3.1, 84.

<sup>223</sup> *Praefatio*, 50.

*imperator, II kalendas decembri, sancti Andreae missa, incoante sanctum Domini Adventum. Finitus est autem, auxiliante Deo, IIII nonas februarii, Purificationis sanctae et gloriosae semperque virginis Mariae, Christo propitio regnante...* (“The beginning of this little book, I compose in the second year of the death of emperor Ludovic, two days before the Kalends of December, on the mass of Saint Andrew, at the beginning of the Holy Advent of the Lord”).<sup>224</sup> She had lost little time between losing her offspring and creating this little handbook.

In the first section of her writing, Dhuoda carefully outlines her vision. She describes the nature of the text, the nature of her authorship, and the nature of the reader’s idealized relationship with those two. I include the first paragraph of the *Incipit Textus* in its entirety, as we will refer back to it frequently throughout the rest of the chapter:

Praesens iste libellus in tribus virgulis constat esse erectus: lege cuncta et in fine plenius nosse valebis. Volo enim ut simili modo in tribus lineis secundum auctoritatis seriem utilissimum habeat nomen: id est Norma, Forma et Manualis. Quod utrumque hae partes locutionis in nos specietenus continentur cuncta: Norma ex me, Forma in te, Manualis tam ex me quam in te, ex me collectus, in te receptus.<sup>225</sup>

This present little book, stood [before you], consists of three branches: read the whole work and at the end you will be able to understand more fully. For I intend that the very useful sequence of my teachings be named for its three threads with equal emphasis: namely The Rule, the Form, and the Manual. Each part of this discourse pertains to us both in all ways as an example: the Rule from me, the Form in you, and the Manual as much from me as it is for you—composed from me, received in you.

There is much to unpack here. Dhuoda begins the text by specifying her audience and their preferred method of reading: she commands the addressee to read the text in its entirety, guaranteeing them fuller understanding (understanding of what? fuller than what? we have yet to find out). She swiftly moves far beyond the mere acknowledgement of an audience, as she proceeds to equate each aspect of the text’s makeup with herself, her reader, and the relationship

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<sup>224</sup> 11.2, 236-238. It is potentially interesting to note that Dhuoda describes the text’s beginning only near its end.

<sup>225</sup> *Incipit*, 40.

between the two. This means that by Dhuoda's command, the existence of the *LM* must be understood as a meeting-place of writer and reader. Both author and addressee are inextricably woven into the very fabric of the text—author as foundational as *norma*, addressee as integral as *forma*, and the connection of the two as tantamount to the text's very existence. Dhuoda tells us that this text does not exist without her, not without the entity *in quo receptus*. That Dhuoda has introduced her text by stating herself as one of the three key components means that the object received by William is more than an ordinary text—it is a bricolage of mother, son, and written word. This author's statement is enough to define this work as primarily, in its essence, a textual self-presentation. As we have and shall see, Dhuoda's *LM* is always at the same time a substitute for a mother's presence, an attempt (like Ausonius') to reconstitute a relationship to a metaphysical plane, and most importantly: Dhuoda herself.

Even beyond the text's existence, writer and reader are vital for its meaning, as indicated by their association with the triadic division of textual messaging, a point articulated by *tribus lineis* and rearticulated mere lines later:

Item. A capite huius libelli usque ad finem, et in arte et in sensu, et metris melodiae et in articulatione atque motibus fluxuum membrorum, omnia et per omnia et in omnibus ad salutem animae et corporis tui cuncta tibi scriptitata cognosce.<sup>226</sup>

Again, from the very beginning of this little book all the way to the very end, both in craft and in feel, both in measure of its melody and in the articulation and movement of its flowing sections, know this: the whole thing, through all and in all, has been written for you for well-being of your soul and body as a whole.

In citing the addressee's reception of the text as a source of its meaning, Dhuoda has even further confirmed the weight of the reader as necessarily structural and thematic. In the first few paragraphs of her writing, Dhuoda has already begun to weave a subtle yet robust bond between

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<sup>226</sup> *Incipit*, 40.

writer, written, and reader. And who is this reader, thus far addressed only in the second person singular pronoun?

Dhuoda first nods toward this identity as she closes the *Incipit*, briefly addressing her *fili* in the vocative. In the next section, *In nomine Sanctae Trinitatis*, the author makes this gesture toward the audience's identity explicit, now mentioning her son's name. Again, I include the paragraph in its entirety:

Incipit liber Dhuodane Manualis quem ad filium suum transmisit Wilhelmum. Cernens plurimas cum suis in saeculo gaudere proles, et me Dhuodanam, o fili Wilhelme, a te elongatam conspiciens procul, ob id quasi anxia et utilitatis desiderio plena, hoc opusculum ex nomine meo scriptum in tuam specie tenus formam legendi dirigo gaudens. Quod si absens sum corpore, iste praesens libellus tibi ad mentem reducat qui erga me, cum legeris, debeas agere.

Here begins the book, Dhuoda's Handbook, which she has sent to her son William. Observing that most women on earth rejoice in their children, and facing the fact, my son William, that I, Dhuoda, am long separated from you, on account of which fact I am anxious and brimming with desire of being useful, I happily direct this little work, written in my own name, to you for reading as a sort of model. Although I am absent in body, this little book is present for you. As you read it, may it restore to your mind those things which you ought to do for my sake.

Dhuoda has quickly expanded upon the once-ambiguous second-person references by specifying that she is writing to and for none other than her eldest son, William. It follows, then, that the *te* of the preceding section was William, and he the subject of *lege* and *valebis*. She is carefully reiterating the intimate nature of her writing project by pointing out time and again that the audience for whom she writes is her own son.

The intense intimacy between writer and reader is further underscored in the following section, which takes the form of an acrostic verse. The acrostic functions essentially as a prayer to God on her son's behalf. In lines whose initials spell out DHUODA DILECTO FILIO VVILHELMO SALUTEM LEGE ("Read this greeting from Dhuoda for her dear son William"), Dhuoda reminds the reader of the importance of

her relationship with her sons.<sup>227</sup> She passionately declares herself indispensable, saying: *Mis michi similem non habebit unquam,/ Quanquam indigna genetrixque sua* (“Mine will never have anyone who is similar to me, though unworthy I am still his mother”).<sup>228</sup> Even now, she says, William cannot ignore her importance as his eternal mother. As in the *Incipit* with its triptych of images, Dhuoda takes this opportunity to remind her son that their relationship is vital. A few lines later, she adds her younger son to this realm of maternal dependence: *Mis duo nati ostensi in saeculo vivant* (“May my two sons, visible in this world, live”).<sup>229</sup> She further refers to herself as *Genetrix duorum masculini sexus* (“A mother of two of the male sex”).<sup>230</sup> This is the first instance of Dhuoda taking a title, and she opts for *genetrix* (we will discuss the import of this vocabulary choice shortly). Overall, the acrostic operates as a concise collocation of the author’s and reader’s names within the receptional directive. The first line of the acrostic, whose initial is also the first letter of Dhuoda’s name, refers to God and Dhuoda’s motherhood. The last line reference’s the writer’s son. Dhuoda understands this text—and demands it be understood its reader—as a *salutem*, the start of an encounter. Butler’s analysis on the fourth line of the acrostic illuminates the entire section, and as it challenges traditionally accepted readings of this text, I include a large portion:

Translators since Riche have taken *sim conscripta* to be deponent and have read the fourth line to mean “You will be able to work out what I have written.” But Dhuoda, who, as we shall see, is fond of *conscribere*, uses it thus nowhere else, making it clear that that this passive form, addressed to that reader not so much by the author as by the acrostic poem itself (“You, reader, who want to know our formula”), means, instead, what it says: “You will be able to work out who has been written here.” And Dhuoda has

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<sup>227</sup> *Epigrama operis subsequentis*, 42-46.

<sup>228</sup> *Epigrama*, 46. Harrison explain the peculiar *mis* as an archaic version of *mei*. In this context *mis* emphasizes the integral role she plays in her son’s life (275, note 51). It is difficult to see how a proper genitive fits into this sentence, so I opted to translate this essentially as a nominative (“the one of me/mine”), retaining the genitive case’s emphasis on ownership and relationality.

<sup>229</sup> *Epigrama*, 46.

<sup>230</sup> *Epigrama*, 46.

carefully prepared us to ally this b the folded inscription with the passion of Christ. “Dhuoda to William,” in other words, is the device by which Dhuoda has described her slippage, like that of the divine author, into the passivity of being read.<sup>231</sup>

If we accept Butler’s reading, and I think we should, Dhuoda has already begun priming her for the increasingly slippery relationship between writer and written. She closes this epigram with a brief aside: *Opitulante Christo adgrediar opus coeptum ad prolem* (“With Christ helping, I will continue this work begun for my children”).<sup>232</sup> In mentioning her second son, Dhuoda deliberately loops him in as an additional addressee, all while she solidifying a her maternal futurity with the future indicative verb: this book is for William, and later he ought to share it with his younger brother. In this way, she is directing the traffic of and within her text. She writes it, then sends it to William, who reads it, and then shares it with his brother.

### **Dhuoda and/in/as Writing<sup>233</sup>**

For Dhuoda, the authorial directive is coterminous with the maternal. By advising her reader how to engage with the *LM*, she asserts her own bodily autonomy and a futurity of the self otherwise unavailable to her. She cannot control what is done with her children, or where she herself is located, but she can try everything to control how her text is read. In section 1.7, Dhuoda deliberately envisions her ideal scene of being read:

Haec verba a me tibi directa lege, intellige et opere comple, fratremque tuum parvulum, cuius modo inscia sum nominis, cum baptismatis in Christo acceperit gratiam, insinuare, nutrire, amare, ac de bono in melius provocare ne pigeas, atque hunc codicellum Manualis a me comprehensum, et in tuo nomine conscriptum, cum perfectum loquendi vel legendi acceperit tempus, illi ostende, et admone legendo; caro enim et frater tuus est. Admoneo vos iam quasi utrosque ego Dhuoda genitrix vestra, ut, inter mundanas seaculi curas obpressi saltem ad tempus sursum teneatis cor; aspiciate regantem in coelis illum qui dicitur Deus.

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<sup>231</sup> Butler 2011, 95–96.

<sup>232</sup> *Epigrama*, 46.

<sup>233</sup> Thanks to Ava Shirazi for introducing me to this perfect and/or/as construction.

Read these words directed from me to you, understand them and perfect them in deed, and your little brother, of whose name I am presently ignorant, when he has received the grace of baptism in Christ, do not be lazy in teaching him, building him up, loving him, and challenging him from good to better, and when he attains the perfect age of speaking and reading, show to him this little codex Manual written by me, composed in your name, and urge him by reading; for he is your flesh and brother. I, Dhuoda, your mother, now urge you—both of you, as it were—that, crushed among the mundane cares of the world even at this age, lift your heart; behold him reigning in heaven, that one who is called God.

As we can see, Dhuoda makes full use of the imperative mood. For a woman whose life is so out of her own control, these authorial directives are her only outlet for maternal authority. She feels she can do so little in her sons' lives—she cannot even be there to name the youngest—so she uses this writing as an opportunity to enforce maternity and a sustained influence with every word. Dhuoda's careful decision to eschew the title *mater* in favor of *genitrix* helps her emphasize this. She views her maternal role, and therefore the connective potential of her maternity, as sustained and ongoing. Throughout the *LM*, Dhuoda refers to herself as William's *genitrix* eight times: twice in her first acrostic (Thiébaux, 46), once in the *Incipit* (46), thrice in 1.7 (68, 70) and once in 7.1 (190). While she does use *mater* derivatives five times, it is never in self-reference and typically within a quotation or paraphrase. Thiébaux describes the subtle difference between the terms, contrasting Dhuoda's maternal self-conception to the popular view on maternity of the roughly contemporary Isidore of Seville:

[Dhuoda] renounces passivity, claiming instead a dynamic role in her maternal authorship. As William's *genitrix*, she imposes the principle of form on his receptive mind. Her notion of motherhood improves on that of Isidore of Seville, who derived "mother" from "matter," *mater* from *materia*. "Those who 'engender' (*genitores*) are named from 'bringing forth'.... A 'mother' (*mater*) is so called because from her something is made: for 'mother' (*mater*) is as it were 'matter' (*materia*) while the father is the cause." But Dhuoda avoids the passive implications of *mater*; she calls herself *genitrix* (as Bernard is *genitor*). She has her own idea of how, as a mother, *she* imprints the form of rule on the mind her receptive, malleable child.<sup>234</sup>

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<sup>234</sup> Thiébaux 1998, 28.

Dhuoda's vocabulary is something programmatic of her refusal of the maternity as-traditionally-conceived, the mother's role immediately depreciating upon the child's entrance into the world. But not only does Dhuoda refuse that traditional *mater* title, she equates herself with the boys' father. Dhuoda demands her reader acknowledge the fact that she is not just someone from whom William was made, she is an eternal parent with an immutable, formative relation to her son. Dhuoda is not object, she is perpetual subject. Another word Dhuoda prefers to *mater* is *ortatrix*<sup>235</sup> or *oratrix*,<sup>236</sup> both of which words further assert a continuity of authority and presence. Indeed, Dhuoda goes to such great lengths to foreground herself in the reader's experience of the text, incessantly reminding them of her name (which she uses twelve times, in addition to spelling it twice acrostically). The effect of Dhuoda's incessant self-reference, no matter the other subjects covered by the *LM*, the reader is always reoriented toward the writer. Through writing and writing alone can she exert ownership of her own earthly and motherly experience. The act of writing becomes not just an act of mothering, but an act of performing selfhood. And Dhuoda knows this.

Dhuoda's exertion of authorial control is further supported by her consistent use of directional and gestural language, most obviously by means of *dirigo* and its derivatives. The readers have already born witness to this with the *LM*'s opening line: *Incipit liber Dhuodane Manualis quem ad filium suum transmisit Wilhelmum...; hoc opusculum...in tuam...legendi dirigo gaudens,...; and filium suum transmisit Wilhelmum*. She is directing this work as it moves across time and space to connect one thing to another (i.e. mother with son). Even the phrase *hoc opusculum* in this context becomes deictic, as though the author is jabbing her finger into the page saying "*this* one, right here." Later in the *Incipit*, Dhuoda reiterates the text's necessary

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<sup>235</sup> 1.7, 68; 4.8, 148.

<sup>236</sup> 9.5, 214.



directedness when she says *quod vol out cum ex manu mea tibi fuerit directus...* (“What I want is that once this thing has been directed to you from my hand...”).<sup>237</sup> And again in her *Praefatio*: *transcribe et dirigere curavi*. The cumulative effect of these various moves is not only that of an inescapable authorial hand (*manu mea*), but a thematization of the connectivity that only missive writing can provide. As the text moves through time and space, maternity seems to connect the writing mother and her reading son with a string made up of uncountable literary threads.<sup>238</sup>

Dhuoda’s preoccupation with corporeality will lead us to our final discussion of her ultimate self-text fusion. Unsurprisingly, the reader is drawn back to the text’s *Incipit*. Dhuoda introduces her work by referring to her work, calling it *iste libellus*, this little book. She follows this with that beguiling description of the text’s threefold design: *Norma ex me, Forma in te, Manualis tam ex me quam in te, ex me collectus, in te receptus*. It bears repeating that this formula explaining the text’s nature places equal weight on Dhuoda, William, and the *LM* itself as a coalescence of the two. In the simplest sense, she conceives of the writing as a locus of interaction for herself and William. Thiébaux phrases the idea thus:

When Dhuoda names the threefold division of her labor... this is not a structural outline of the book’s contents which she later abandons, but a sophisticated analysis of how a written text exists: the author’s production of thought, the reader’s reception of thought, and between them the physical object of the book itself. The divisions demonstrate how author, reader, and book intersect.<sup>239</sup>

I would refine this interpretation slightly, not arguing that Dhuoda’s text is *not* a structural outline, but rather that it is *not only* a structural outline. Certainly, the formulation in question

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<sup>237</sup> *Incipit*, 40-2.

<sup>238</sup> In a future project, I plan to read self-writings of the sort considered in this chapter through a lens of the impossible body. The self-writing becomes for someone like Dhuoda an impossible body, a type of corpus unbound by the laws of physics, immune to the ravages of time and untroubled by the fact of physical distance. Not only does Dhuoda teleport herself through the text as we’re discussing here, but I see her also stopping and reversing temporality, turning the years back to a time when not only was she physically with her sons, but they physically depended on her for their life force. I gesture toward these ideas here, and they are certainly connected to the later discussion of Dhuoda as *genitrix*, but their pursuit is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

<sup>239</sup> Thiébaux 1998, 29.

pertains not just to the literal makeup of the *LM*, but its conceptual structure. The point does stand, however, that Dhuoda's formula is describing her own understanding of the text's true nature as a place of intersection for writer and reader, elevating the *LM*, as Ausonius' letters, to the status of metaphysical locale. When William reads Dhuoda's writing, the material text is transformed to a meeting spot where he can interact with his mother in a literary landscape.

Dhuoda's repeated reference to corporeality further demonstrates the locational ability of the text, but it will also finally lead us to the writer's *piece de resistance*, which I have been eagerly working toward throughout: the self-writer's textual transubstantiation of the self. To build my case, because similar experimental claims have met skepticism, I will first analyze Dhuoda's fixation of the physical text.<sup>240</sup> I begin at the beginning: the book's title. It is a self-proclaimed *Liber Manualis*, a *handbook*. The phrase first appears right after the tripartite formula, where Dhuoda performs some quick, charmingly idiosyncratic etymological work on *manualis*. She muses that *-alis* has many patristic connotations, such as *scopon... consummatio...vel certe ales* ("scope... consummation... maybe even bird").<sup>241</sup> She treats *manus* more traditionally:

"Manus" enim multis intelligitur modis: aliquando Dei potestas, aliquando Filii, aliquando etiam ipse intelligitur Filius. Potestas Dei, sicut ait Apostolus: Humiliamini sub potenti manu Dei... Haec omnia vel his similia operatio et potestas intelligitur sancta, nam manus opus significat perfectum. Scriptura dicente: Et facta est super me manus Domini...<sup>242</sup>

Now, the "hand" in "Handbook" can be taken many different ways: sometimes it denotes God's power, sometimes the Son's, still other times it refers to the Son himself. As far as "God's power," the Apostle says: "Humble yourselves before the power of God's hand... All these and similar references can help us understand divine activity and power, for the hand signifies perfection. It is as Scripture says: "And the Lord's hand laid upon me"...

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<sup>240</sup> See Polanichka's rejection of Butler's very similar argument: "Shane Butler has pushed Dhuoda's mirror metaphors and her understanding of her text to a rather far extent, one not fully supported by the original Latin or the historical context..." (p. 35 n. 44).

<sup>241</sup> *Incipit*, 40.

<sup>242</sup> *Incipit*, 40.

Built into the book's title and the first hint the reader receives as to its nature, is the physical hand. Perhaps not quite to the degree of personifying the text or literizing the writer, Dhuoda's fixation upon the *manus* is programmatic. Butler similarly fixates upon the phrase *manus opus significat perfectum*, arguing that:

*Opus* can mean any handiwork, but here and elsewhere it is for Dhuoda connected most immediately with the written opus, as we have seen. We might therefore understand the conjunction of *potestas* and *operatio* as the linguistic power of 'authority.' But this is an authority that Dhuoda entirely inverts in four words: *manus opus significat perfectum*, i.e., the hand (that writes) signifies the work (that it wrote). It is, of course, writing (not the writer) that is supposed to signify.<sup>243</sup>

It would be subversive indeed for Dhuoda to defy convention by placing the power of signification with the writer and not the written. However, I think there is a further, extrasubversive even, level to Dhuoda's play in the *Incipit*: the rejection of difference between writer and written. Not only is she toying with the concept of authority, but of corporeality and essence. By saying as she does that the hand signifies the work (which could also reasonably be read as the inverse, work signifying hand) she blurs the line between subject and object, hand and handiwork, writer and written. Throughout their chapter on Dhuoda, Butler rightly notes that our writer associates the *LM* (as a product of her labor) with her son, but I must note also that she is doing something much more radical by associating the *LM* with herself as mother.

The astute reader will see this discussion of *manus* as an overt prefiguration, when, a few lines later, Dhuoda describes her ideal textual economy, referenced above and treated more fully now:

Quod volo ut cum manu mea tibi fuerit directus, in manu tua libenter facias amplectum opus, et tenens, volvens legensque stude opere compleri dignissime. Dicatur enim iste formatus libellus Manualis, hoc est sermo ex me, opus in te...

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<sup>243</sup> Butler 2011, 94.

What I want is that once this has been directed from my hand to you, you may happily embrace this work in your own hand, and holding it, turning it over, and reading it, you should desire to fulfill it in the most dignified way. For this, in the form of a little book, is the Handbook, which is a word from me, a work for you.

She defines the text through its power of relationality and manual transmission: *manu mea directus, in manu tua amplexu... sermo ex me, opus in te*. The text is passed from her hand to William's, and he engages with it in a distinctly physical manner, reading Dhuoda's work not just with his eyes, but embracing, grasping, turning it over in his hand. One might also take the *sermo ex me, opus in te* as a statement of obedience: as I say you will do. If this is the implication, Dhuoda is granting her words the ability to transform into action, a quasi-magical speech act. No matter the interpretation, the fact remains that William's is to be a supremely active hermeneutic, one both always essential and physical (because after all, Dhuoda has worked tirelessly to dissolve the boundary between essence and body). The text is not a mere signifier pointing to an idea beyond itself, more important than itself, but is a necessarily physical artifact that points to itself, which is always also Dhuoda's—a tangible tether connecting mother and son. In the way Dhuoda describes her writing project, one cannot help but picture Dhuoda's and William's hands stretched out toward one another, she offering the book and he accepting. The *LM* is defined by its physical natures and its ability to serve as a locus of metaphysical connection, by Dhuoda's careful design, her clever slippage between subject and object, text and author.

To illustrate the semantic slippage that is tantamount to a metaphysical slippage, I now consider Dhuoda's turn toward herself as a literary object toward the end of the *LM*. In a section of 10.4 poignantly titled *Ad me recurrens, lugeo* ("Returning to *me*, I grieve"), Dhuoda presents perhaps her most vulnerable self yet. "*Ad me recurrens, lugeo*" is difficult to render into English—its brevity, its efficient indicative verb phrase, the pain expressed by the concision. In

particular, I have been puzzling over the iterative *re-*. Dhuoda has not treated herself so explicitly as a textual topic yet as she does in this moment, so this does not feel like a *return* to anything. Further, makes sense also, I think, to translate *me* non-reflexively, because turning toward something implies a separation from it. The prepositional phrase seems to admit a non-reflexivity toward the self, a psychic fracturing that began the day her sons left. Is the sense, then, that as she approaches the end of her writing, she is faced with the prospect of returning to solitude? Returning to just... herself, alone, in a room? While she is writing, she is able to commune with the son whose essence is the source of every word, the potential for a futurity of the self, but when the writing is done and the ink dries? What then? Here, the woman who did not deem it necessary to share her own birthday, reveals her feelings of love, loss, longing, and regret, as well as the deterioration of her physical state:

Ex nimii amoris dulcedine et desiderio pulcritudinis tuae, memetipsam quasi oblitam postponens, ianuis clausis, iterum intus ingredi desidero. Sed, quia nec Digna in numero sum computari praescripto, tamen rogo ut, inter innumeros, numerabili affectu pro animae remedio meae orare non cesses. Tibi non latet qualiter, pro infirmitatibus meis assiduis, et pro certis ex causis... haec omnia vel cetera his similia pro meis praepedientibus meritis in meo fragili sustinui corpore.<sup>244</sup>

Because of the sweetness of my intense love for you, and my grief at the absence of your beauty, I am negligent, as if having forgotten my own self. I long to reenter those long-locked doors. But, though I am not worthy to be counted among those whom I have enumerated in writing, I still ask that, along with those countless others, you do not stop praying with considerable love that my soul might be healed. It is not hidden from you in any way that, from my constant infirmity and other reasons,... I have endured all these things and all the rest in my fragile body for the shackles that I deserve.

As in the introductory books, Dhuoda reflects near the end of her text upon her intense emotions, bemoans her inability to be physically present with her son, and the emotional destitution in which she finds herself. In a stunning and certainly unintentional reversal of the *Phaedrus*' Socratic maxim, Dhuoda admits that she has forgotten her self. Missing her children has become

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<sup>244</sup> *Ad me*, 224.

Dhuoda's primary activity, evoking the all-too common experience of a depression so deep even showering seems like too much. No wonder Dhuoda struggles to close her text.

In Dhuoda's most arresting move, she announces unambiguously that she intends the *LM* to be more than her proxy. This is a flat-out presentation of Dhuoda herself:

Ortatrix tua Dhuoda semper adest, fili, et si defuerim deficiens, quod futurum est, habes  
his memoriale labellum moralis, et quasi in picturam speculi me mente et corpore  
legendo et Deum deprecando intueri possis, et quid erga me obsequi debeas pleniter  
inveniri potes.

Dhuoda is always present as your exhorter, son, and when I am dead and gone, which is going to happen, you have this little book of moral teachings as a reminder. May you be able to gaze upon me as a picture in a mirror by reading with mind and body and by praising God. And you can discover completely what work you owe to me.

Let us work through this passage claim by claim: first I consider *ortatrix...moralis*. This will strike the reader as curious, given that Dhuoda has thoroughly established her physical distance from her son; now she is claiming that she is always present with him. The obvious explanation of this seeming paradox is that she is claiming a metaphorical textual presence. However, I argue that Dhuoda's phrasing is too strong for this traditional formulation. She does not say *libellus adest* and *iste manualis adest*, or any of the types of phrases she regularly uses to reference the text *qua* text. She deliberately places her name in the nominative with that assertive copulative *adest*—and *semper*, at that. Dhuoda is supremely interested in physicality and literality, so for her to claim actual presence with her son despite her body's obvious distance from him indicates that something more complicated is going on. Dhuoda's habit of attributing to the text the ability to stand in for the self is itself noteworthy—and she has now gone one (major) step further. Also struck by *Dhuoda semper adest*, Butler argues that with this move “Dhuoda at last becomes present to William, it is in the third person that she will do so... in the form of the book through

which and as which she will be his ‘encourager.’”<sup>245</sup> This is a helpful analysis, but I want to push it further, because while it is true that *Dhuoda semper adest* is third person, something actually does appear to William in the first person: *me*. And this is a crucial move that Dhuoda makes to further transubstantiate her self and text, such that her text presents Dhuoda herself to the reader.

The cognitive and metaphysical connection established by *et quasi...possis* is the pivotal moment at which Dhuoda’s textual transubstantiation of the self is incontrovertible. Whether this was done intentionally by Dhuoda, for which there is reasonable doubt, is irrelevant: even an *accidental* semantic slippage that obliterates the line between writer and written reveals the imagined semantic range of a text to present a self. The implicit indication that the text is the self reveals an extraordinary fact of the perceived ability of writing as a technology of the self.

After explaining the permanence of her maternal influence, she instructs him (again) to read with his mind, his mouth, his heart—again situating his experience of her text (and her self) in a metaphysical realm that is itself hyperphysical. This scene of reading is a full-body and -soul activity. William’s encounter with Dhuoda as text is able to occupy all of his senses at once: physical and spiritual. In other words, she is telling him where he can meet her, and that place is everywhere, if only he obeys his mother’s lessons of legibility. Further, evoking the *speculum* tradition, Dhuoda invites William to gaze upon the text as if in a mirror—or, rather, that is what one would expect her to say. What Dhuoda *actually* says is that *me* ought to be treated as a *speculum*. Dhuoda’s corporeal person is not present for William, so the referent of *me* must be understood as the text itself, which now has the profound ability to speak in the first-person, assuming the authorial role that Dhuoda has so emphatically claimed throughout her text. In a passage that Thiébaux deems “one of her bold strokes of individuality,” Dhuoda has elided her

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<sup>245</sup> Butler 2011, 97–98.

corpus and her *corpus*, her self and her text.<sup>246</sup> Dhuoda— so fond of self-reference and using formal elements to symbolize the connection between herself and William—has moved almost imperceptibly from referring to herself as the reader’s mother and claiming the text’s mimetic capability, to finally speaking from the text’s vantage point. In so doing, Dhuoda has completely collapsed the distance between writer and written, self and self-writing, such that the text itself is Dhuoda herself. The importance of this collapse cannot be overstated. In her conception, Dhuoda’s *LM* no longer stands in her place at her son’s side (or on his desk)—it *is* her. The act of writing and the written product are able to transpose Dhuoda from her lonely Uzès to William’s hand. This idea is further supported by Dhuoda’s ultimate sign-off in 11.2, in which she refers to herself as *praescripta Duodane* (“the afore-written Dhuoda”), which recalls Butler’s argument about Dhuoda’s “slippage into the passivity of being read.”<sup>247</sup> But there is nothing passive about how Dhuoda demands to be read. Everywhere you look in the *LM*, you find Dhuoda, just as one drowning sees nothing but water.

Far from a death of the author we have come to expect in the modern literary climate, the activity of self-writing is a resolute *living* of the author, a self-immortalization, a defiant securing of an otherwise foreclosed futurity of the self. Remember that Dhuoda’s text is the only evidence of Dhuoda’s existence. Without her textual self and the profound connection she creates through her writing, we would know that her husband had a wife and her sons a mother, but we would know nothing of the woman herself. For someone like Dhuoda, then, self-writing is the ultimate form of Foucauldian self-care, the ultimate Derridean self-seeking, the ultimate rejection of the Barthesian intransitivity of writing— because self-writing is at its core placing the self *trans*. In truth, “to write” is not an intransitive verb, but a radically transitive activity, an extension of the

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<sup>246</sup> Thiébaux 1998, 28.

<sup>247</sup> Butler 2011, 95.



self across time and space all but exclusive to this presentational act. In light of what Dhuoda's writing can mean, it seems that the specter of poststructuralism looms not so large after all.

### Conclusions

In my reading of these two sets of missive writings, I observe a blinding demonstration of the human drive to relate with the other by connecting the self of the writer (or source of the written word) to the material of the word. Dhuoda's text represents a desperate mother's only salvation, allowing an escape from her worldly circumstances while she works feverishly to put so much of herself into her text that she might send a "mother's manual" that literally presents the reader both a manual and mother—more of a maternal hand than a handbook, in truth.

Ausonius' project is similar. He too writes out of the pain of grieving a loved one's physical and emotional distance, left with no hope but a textual reconstitution of relationality. In both instances, the self-writer blurs the line between literary corpus and physical *corpus*, resulting in a written artefact that is so much more than literary. This should give us pause, because if a writing is not just a writing, then reading is not really confined to the page. Rather, this intellectual history of self-writing casts "reader" as an ethical agent and the act of reading bound by laws of the interpersonal encounter, something performed as much by the eye as in the whole body and soul of the reader—how Dhuodanian.

## Chapter Six: The Ethics of Reading Selves

### Reading and Recognition

This dissertation was born out of the Arendtian drive to understand: how am I supposed to *be* in the world with others; how can I make my work matter; why does some reading feel different from other readings; and, honestly, what am I like?<sup>248</sup> Throughout the preceding study, we have waded through various and varying attempts to link the self, whether as a concept or as a particular identity, to the activity of writing and its material product. In doing so, we have seen the ways in which authors have long utilized writing as a technology for representation, translation, and presentation of the self to the other through mimetic linkage and signification, construction of a shared language through which alone the self is made legible, and the formation of a writer-as-written that allows us to literally send the self through the mail, to *be* there with others when it is physically impossible to be *there* with others. Now, in our conclusion, we turn from thinking about writing selves, to asking how the preceding construction of self-writing affects reading-selves and, of course, the activity of reading selves. I offer this discussion of reading selves as a call to reframe reading as necessarily other-oriented, unavoidably political, and bound by ethics— whether we are encountering others in- our outside the classroom, on or

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<sup>248</sup> Krauß and Schott 2021, 1051. Krauß notes a discrepancy between the transcription and the original recorded interview: “No other passage in the published version undergoes more extensive cuts. All that remains of the spoken text is the mere axiomatic positing that derives the I from a necessary condition and thus orients thinking by principles. What is cut out is a long insertion that splits the positing and separates the *conditio* of the I thus envisioned (‘what is really essential for me’) from its being fulfilled in understanding (‘what is essential for me is: I must understand’). Simultaneously, understanding is what takes place here, even before the I explicitly says it” (1051).

beyond the page. Ample work has been done on the ethics of self-writing, and this is my attempt to contribute to the conversation from the other side of the page by exploring an ethic a reading selves. As readers experience it, self-writing enjoys a unique ontological status and therefore invites us to reconsider our very understanding of the phenomenology of reading. Before we get to the theoretical backing for this claim, let's take a quick anecdotal detour.

**The Curious Case of JT LeRoy  
(or Anecdotal Evidence of our Ethical Privileging of Self-Writing)**

In 1999, the literary scene was abuzz at the publication of two autobiographical novels written by Jeremiah “Terminator” (JT) LeRoy. Both works, *Sarah* and *The Heart is Deceitful Above All Things*, tell the harrowing and frankly depressing story of a young male narrator battling unhousedness, meth addiction, gender dysphoria, all manner of abuses, and involuntary sex-work that would result in an HIV diagnosis. *Sarah* features an unnamed, ambiguously aged and gendered (though seemingly a pre-adolescent AMAB) narrator, who falls into the world of “lot lizards” in a desperate attempt to connect with his abusive and negligent mother from whom the book receives its title. *The Heart...* begins with a four-year-old narrator named Jeremiah whose teen mother, Sarah, is unable to care for him; the reader watches as he is thrown into the foster system before being sent to live with his grandparents, at whose hands he suffers severe physical and religious abuse; as a young teen, we see Jeremiah briefly reconnect with Sarah, who is a meth-addicted lot lizard, before the novel closes on a fifteen-year-old narrator fully entrenched in his own life of nonconsensual sex, abuse, and addiction. The two narrators’ tales do vary slightly, but they are undeniably the same person. Reading LeRoy’s writing felt like listening to a friend recount their traumatic upbringing. Readers felt they were being given access to somebody’s innermost secrets—secrets that encouraged them through affective mimesis to face their own trauma. Soon, the public was clamoring for the reclusive LeRoy to let

them meet the self behind the self-writing. Throughout the time of his growing popularity in the late 1990's, no one had met or even glimpsed LeRoy.

In 2001, LeRoy granted his readers' wish, and began a series a public appearances ranging from interviews and book signings, to social outings with a bevy of edgier celebrities. Invariably, LeRoy was accompanied by a woman named Speedie, his British assistant. So successful were these appearances and LeRoy's work, that Asia Argento produced and starred in a film adaptation of *The Heart*, working closely with LeRoy to ensure accurate representation of the supremely personal material. In a post-screening Q&A, Argento intimated: "We had to get as much as we could right... and a lot of it was to do with the fact that I love JT truly as a friend. He's somebody who will be in my life for ever. It wouldn't have been the same film if we didn't trust each other."<sup>249</sup> When you are interpreting someone's life trauma, you want to get it right, especially when this singular trauma has been so extremely relatable to its audience—the stakes are high when dealing with this deeply and this publicly with the human psyche. The success of LeRoy's work hinged on the desire for a textual presentation of what life is *really* like, what being a person is *really* like.

But LeRoy was not a real person. It turns out that LeRoy was more like a persona, a character, a fictional identity, and the agent of one of the greatest (read: most devastating) literary hoaxes of all time. Let us explore this devastation. In a 2005 article published in *New York* magazine, journalist Stephen Beachy revealed the startling truth that the person who had made themselves known to readers as JT LeRoy, the real-world antecedent of their beloved narrator, was actually a woman named Savannah Knoop. This woman had been hired by her sister-in-law, Laura Albert, to be the public face of LeRoy, who was evidently a character

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<sup>249</sup> Rose 2016.

created and written by Albert, who had until her wild success as LeRoy had been a struggling writer and sometimes sex-advice columnist.<sup>250</sup> Albert herself (not British) had been masquerading as Speedie. The two women—neither of whom are men, transgender, HIV-positive, or sex-trafficking victims—presented for over five years as the tragic hero and his loyal sidekick. Albert has since revealed a lifelong penchant for false self-presentation for the purposes of eliciting emotional reaction and sympathy, rooted in the interlocutors’ affinity for representation. From a young age, she would regularly call into suicide hotlines, adopting a “more masculine” voice, and divulging life-stories that were as varied as they were fictional. The aftershock of this revelation was profound. In disguise, “LeRoy” had formed relationships, both in-person and through-the-page, that felt honest and real from the other side. It has been reported that Knoop had even engaged in sexual activity as LeRoy—the other party, of course, not knowing to whom they had given access to their body (necessarily negating any would-be consent). The victims of this hoax report feeling profoundly betrayed and deceived, tricked into a false act of recognition and relation. In 2016, a decade after the unmasking of LeRoy, Argento broke her silence on the ordeal and its emotional afterlife:

A way I thought I could get rid of the resentment was to just not talk about it. It is something I cannot forgive. Believe me it’s hard to carry this burden. I would be very grateful if one day this stops in me. I couldn’t do movies as a director for 10 years. Because I’ve been fooled. I’m a fool! How could I not see it? It made me feel worthless to be honest. I didn’t have a lot of self esteem after that. It took me a long time to rebuild it. I was lost. So forgiveness ... it’s a beautiful thing, of saints and martyrs, but I can’t let it go. I was fucking manipulated, it’s time for me to say that.<sup>251</sup>

Contrary to Albert’s later characterization, this was not as simple as the adoption of a public persona or a pen-name, an avatar or a mouthpiece that enabled her to share her true self; this was

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<sup>250</sup> I mention this not as a judgement, but because I think it lends to Albert’s own fetishistic perception of the traumatic events claimed as LeRoy’s own as somehow sexy, rather than representative of the relating-reader’s real trauma.

<sup>251</sup> Rose 2016.

the creation of a false self with the express purpose of being perceived as a true self and the promulgation of false life-stories for profit and intrigue.

Readers regularly engage with fictional texts and “bind with” literary characters for their ability to represent the reader’s self: “I am *such* an Eleanor, but you’re more of a Theodora.” We have no problem finding representation in fictional characters. So whence the devastation at LeRoy’s unveiling? Sure, finding out that you have been lied to is upsetting, but that does not seem to account for the sheer viscosity of emotion felt at this hoax. I think the answer is found in the combination of the lie and the dishonest usage of the written technology for self-presentation. Albert was keenly aware of the power of self-writing to be received as a genuine presentation of the author’s self, and therefore to create an intense emotional bond between writer, written, and reader. What this means for the literary theorist, and indeed the ethicist, is that the experience of reading a self-writing is ontologically distinct from other types of reading. We are doing something unique when we read a self-writing, and I argue that it is because we receive the autobiographical text as possessing the unique capability of presenting the face of the other to us. The whole of self-writing is ethically greater than the sum of its parts— or perhaps more accurately, the whole of self-writing becomes for the reader synonymous with its part that is “the self.” To read the written-self is to meet the writing-self on the page and therefore to receive them as a total other—and as readers we are aware of this, as evinced by our ability to form intense and very real bonds with written selves, as so many did with LeRoy. We know that reading self-writing *feels* different and therefore *is* different. For all modernity’s talk of the “death of the author,” it seems that the epistemic value of self-writing stems entirely from encountering the author on the page and holding their place in the world of the text. As so often

happens, when it comes to the experience of reading a fraudulent written-self, our emotions betray our theoretical pretenses.

### **Self-Writing as the Textual Instantiation of Ethics**

The remainder of this chapter, and of this dissertation, will be spent outlining a series of intersecting theoretical frameworks, which all bring us toward one important conclusion: when we fail to recognize others as selves, in whatever form they reach us, we fail to meet the most basic ethical requirement of the human condition. The results of this failure are not theoretical, because selves and others are not theoretical. For the professional reader, self-writing is the perfect medium for the determination of reading as implicated in ethics, because it is a type of writing uniquely capable of presenting the self (the writer) to the other (the reader). Human experiencing of the world is marked by the inevitability of engaging with others' selves. Indeed, this inescapable relationality is the basis of the ethical and the political encounter: the event of coming face-to-face with the other. Given the astounding ability of writing as a technology to present a self to the reader, it logically follows that a work of self-writing instantiates the ethical encounter. To explore the implications of this, I will pull from the work of Arendt, Levinas, and Gadamer.

### **Phenomenology, Politicality, and Totalitarianism**

As has been hinted throughout, I write this dissertation through a phenomenological lens. This assumes several things: first, a focus on the human condition as opposed to human nature. Arendt, the accidental phenomenologist, phrases it best: "the human condition is not the same as human nature, and the sum total of human activities and capabilities which correspond to the human condition does not constitute anything like human nature... if we have a nature or essence,

then surely only a god could know and define it...”<sup>252</sup> Rather than speaking of what a human is like irrespective of worldly and bodily engagement, phenomenology speaks of what a human does and how a human is (when we understand the existential verb as an activity, done through time). One way of understanding this is that we don’t “have right,” we enact the activities that happen to also be described by the system of rights. The phenomenological lens privileges the first-person experiencing, rather than looking at the person from without. “Readers” are therefore understood as “ones reading,” or reading-selves as we have been calling them. Second, we assume the inevitability of relationality. The human condition finds us always already in-the-world-with-others, thrown into intersubjectivity, earthbound. In her treatment of the concept of shame in Plato’s *Gorgias*, Tarnopolsky develops a theatrical framing that is helpful here: for Plato, shame is not a thing, but the process of experiencing yourself being watched by others, a metaphorical theater in which I am practicing self-comportment in front of others’ judgement. For our purposes, reading is similarly a theater of interaction.

This prioritization of the verbal and the social means that we understand the reader rather as “one reading,” a reframing that helps us remember the experience of the self as oriented toward and in relation to that which we encounter. For the reader, that encountered entity is the text. Reading is the process of a self engaging with a text. And reading a self-writing is the process of a self engaging with an other self. A work of self-writing is therefore not mere ink and paper that conveys some sort of meaning, but a theater of relationality such that we read others not *as though* face-to-face, but literally face-to-face.

Levinas’ formulation of the Face Of The Other (which I will stylize uncapitalized or abbreviated as FOH) illuminates the concept. Here is a brief illustration of the FOH theory in

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<sup>252</sup> Arendt 1958, 10.



practice: when I walk up to you (or any other Other), I see your face and am thereby forced to acknowledge you as other than me. As I gaze upon your face, I see you gazing back, I recognize your features as the same type I have, and I know that you are not just an object in my particular context, but are a singular self in your own context. Arendt gestures toward this concept in her formulation of the self's ontological plurality (though she is reticent to call hers a phenomenology).<sup>253</sup> Outside of your own, you have no other context because you are not a sign that points beyond yourself. Human being is personal, not symbolic. You and I are both singular ethical entities with distinct alterity from each other. It is necessary that there is distance between the self and the Other, because without distance from any visual object, encounter is impossible (insofar as we remember the directional force of the preposition, and the distance implied by directionality). The distance between the self and the other is the theater of interaction, and the moment of recognizing the face is the drawing of the stage curtain.

It is because I see your face and understand all that it entails that I know what I owe you—more essentially, I know *that* I owe you, the condition upon which interpersonal *owing* and obligation is founded. Levinas explains this:

The first word of the face is the 'Thou shalt not kill'... There is a commandment in the appearance of the face, as if a master spoke to me. However, at the same time, the face of the Other is destitute; it is the poor for whom I can do all and to whom I owe all. And me, whoever I may be, but as a 'first person,' I am he who finds the resources to respond to the call.<sup>254</sup>

The human condition necessitates that I experience the world in the first-person as myself, just as, so I realize, you experience the world in the first-person as yourself. The "Thou shalt not kill" need not be understood literally; it signifies the treatment of the other by the self and the duty to the other. Ethics is born from the I's encounter with the other because the other's face demands

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<sup>253</sup> See Topolski ch. 3 for a resituating of Arendt's work as, indeed, phenomenological.

<sup>254</sup> Levinas 1985, 89.

recognition *qua* face and ethical reception. In this way, ethics is an obligation placed on me by the other at the moment of reception, reading a function of Arendt's recognitive politics. Ethical engagement is marked by maintaining that space between the self and the other and by a refusal to reduce the other to the same. When I treat the other correctly, that is ethically, I let them remain other-than me, a self in their own regard. I do not appreciate the other only in my own context or by minimizing their selfhood, ignoring the totality of their existence, but I acknowledge that they have their own context that is necessarily other than my own.

However, the irreducibility of the other should not be taken as advocating radical particularity, whereby we are disallowed from relating to our textual peers. Indeed, if this were the conclusion, why read at all? It is of course not my aim to prevent interpersonal community. Quite the opposite. We are ethically permitted to relate to others and form interpersonal bonds, even suffering that bittersweet affective mimesis, but we cannot do so ethically if we do not recognize others as selves. For the reader of self-writing, this means that we cannot act ethically if we ignore the particularity of the self-written. We must remember the work that made the work, the hand that wrote the handbook. It is the goal of this theory to guide activity such that we do not fall into the trap of radical alterity—a goal that has an explicitly political rationale.

As Arendt warns, the failure to form ethical interpersonal relations, whether from too little or too much distance between the self and the other, can have disastrous political and ontological effects. For Arendt, the experience of politicality “is the disclosure of the world that lies between us; it exists intersubjectively... In this vein, the political is a realm that brings together human agents and helps create bonds between them... the political [is] an activity that can (re)-found and preserve the fragile human world...”<sup>255</sup> To participate in that interpersonal

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<sup>255</sup> Topolski 2015, 45.

theater (i.e., to engage with a work of self-writing, or indeed any writing) is to adopt the political pose. A failure to properly understand the stakes of holding this pose, of being in the world with others, the requirements of relationality, and the political reality of reading, in Arendt's view, lays the foundation for the type of existential loneliness upon which totalitarians prey— incidentally, something that the self-presentational capability of self-writing is especially apt to assuage. The loneliness born from an inability to recognize others is “the distinctive experience of modern mass societies,” a type of existential isolation that enables “modern totalitarian parties” to more easily recruit and radicalize members.<sup>256</sup> Systems of oppression and exploitation thrive when we experience the world as lonely, atomized individuals, missing the cue to receive others as subjects and not mere objects (textual or otherwise), refusing to receive the textual face-of-the-other as a face at all. And in addition to the sociopolitical danger of this loneliness is the psychic damage it renders the individual self. When the human condition is relationality, loss of the other is loss of the self: “Radical alienation from the world and radical alienation from oneself go hand in hand.”<sup>257</sup> Or to put it differently: ὦ Φαῖδρε, εἰ ἐγὼ Φαῖδρον ἀγνοῶ, καὶ ἐμαυτοῦ ἐπιλέλυσμαι.<sup>258</sup>

Reading is an important act of social construction and political engagement. Indeed, Levinas himself prescribes engaging in discourse as a remedy for overt particularization and alienation. Discourse, conversation, textual communication can all be ethically carried out so long as the critical space between self and other is 1) recognized, 2) retained, and 3) examined. For the professional reader, this sounds a lot like the formation of a hermeneutics. Gadamer characterizes hermeneutics as the deliberate decision “to let what seems to be far and alienated

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<sup>256</sup> Arendt 1973, 474ff.

<sup>257</sup> Roviello and Temerson 2007, 922.

<sup>258</sup> *Phaedrus*, 228a. (“Phaedrus! If I don’t know Phaedrus, I don’t know myself!”)

speak again,” a mode of interpretation that leaves space for otherness.<sup>259</sup> The hermeneutic activity, i.e. purposeful reading, begins by accepting as “irrefutable that art is never simply past but is able to overcome temporal distance by virtue of its own meaningful presence.”<sup>260</sup> The primary object of the reading-self is to encounter the text aware of one’s own biases and leave room for the alterity of the written word—and, in our case, the written self. The scene of reading is inherently non-neutral: we always read in the real world, with all its sociopolitical implications. Moreover, we always read as ourselves. A non-hermeneutical reading is impossible insofar as it would require a suspension of the self that is impracticable and undesirable. The preferable hermeneutic for those reading written-selves is not a feigned non-hermeneutical reading, but one that is conscious of the self’s positionality and of the other’s alterity. As such,

[a] person trying to understand something will not resign himself from the start to relying on his own accidental fore-meanings, ignoring as consistently and stubbornly as possible the actual meaning of the text until the latter becomes to persistently audible that it breaks through what the interpreter imagines it to be...this kind of sensitivity involves neither ‘neutrality’ with respect to content nor the extinction of one’s self...[but an awareness] of one’s own biases, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against [the reader’s] own fore-meanings.<sup>261</sup>

With a form of writing so liable to overflow with self-as-meaning as, say, Dhuoda’s *LM* or Ausonius’ letters to Paulinus, it does not take long for the ignored self to reach that fever pitch, clangoring for recognition. Self-writing demands a hermeneutic of radical hospitality, an approach that places the written-self and the reading-self on equal ontological footing and lets the other *be* other. Though the two men’s work notoriously clash, we would do well to pull

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<sup>259</sup> Gadamer 1979, 93.

<sup>260</sup> Gadamer 1997, 165.

<sup>261</sup> Gadamer 1997, 269.

Derrida into the Gadamerian conversation, particularly when Derrida explodes the circularity of an attempt at define *xenos* to the level of self- and other-definition:

When Benveniste wants to define the *xenos*, there is nothing fortuitous in his beginning from the *xenia*. He inscribes the *xenos* in the *xenia*, which is to say in the pact, in the contract or collective alliance of that name. Basically, there is no *xenos*, there is no foreigner before or outside the *xenia*, this pact or exchange with a group or, to be more precise, with a line of descent.<sup>262</sup>

The condition of being a self in-the-world-with-others is to be irrevocably linked to the other, forced into a social contract of hospitality. How we read in the world is how we be-in-the-world, so the hospitable hermeneutic of self-writing is more than a literary pose. Indeed, the brand of other-oriented hermeneutics as espoused by the likes of Gadamer and Derrida has even been implemented for patient-facing medical research, apparently with some success.<sup>263</sup> This should come as no surprise, given the fact that reading a work of self-writing is non-unique in the sense that it is bound by the same ethical obligation as all encounters between the self and the other. It sounds simple, but thinking carefully about how we read, is how we can become better classicist-humans. What we do with the page speaks to how we are as a self.

Treating the activity of reading as an ethical interaction positions the other not as an alter ego, but as an ego unto themselves. The other must be allowed to remain singular, though not particular. Further, we must be careful not to engage with others for the primary purpose or with the primary results of collapsing the other into ourselves, denying their singularity and ethical status. When we understand other as nothing more than extensions of ourselves, as our alter ego, we cannot act ethically because we have flouted the commandment borne by the face. In instantiating the ethical encounter, the textual face prescribes a type of receiving activity that prioritizes treatment of the other as a particular being.

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<sup>262</sup> Derrida 2000, 29.

<sup>263</sup> See Guzys et al.

Phenomenologically speaking, self-writings appear to our perception in the same way as the selves who write them. In other words, the self-written text seems to enjoy the same ontological status as the person. As we have seen, the imbrication of self and text can take myriad forms, from those obvious instances of self-presentation to the reader to those more covertly self-representational. When a writer employs the technology of writing for self-representation, -translation, or -presentation, they create a text that is uniquely capable of serving as the face of the other. Given that such fusion is a necessary condition of the activity (and often the driving force). Self-writing is the textual instantiation of the ethical encounter, and therefore its study provides unique insight on the ethical and political ramifications of how we read and why. As has been discussed, responsible engagement is that which retains a critical space between the reading-self and the written-self and refuses to appropriate the other's singularity. This ethic of reading is applicable to any instance of the encounter with others. How we read others is how we treat others, so for the professional reader a careful initiation of the textual encounter is imperative. This is particularly true when we model reading to our students. As a public space, the classroom is an inherently political space, and the reception of texts—modern and ancient, self-writing and no—is an opportunity to perform political engagement. The textual encounter—that first moment of reading a text—is as-yet ontologically ambiguous because the intent of the writer (i.e., the text's relationship to a self) is unclear until it has been read. We therefore ought to understand all acts of reading as ethical encounters. I understand that this might sound silly, or like an invitation to drastically overthink a simple activity—believe, I have heard this feedback and I understand. But the stakes are high and the ramifications are real. When we habituate a hermeneutic of self-reflexivity, whereby we engage with others' products uncritically and with no regard for the potential self we might hold in our hands, we habituate a

general ethic of self-reflexivity, whereby that type of engagement is borne out in our every worldly interaction... because, again, reading is something we do in the real world. This is not an attempt to overcomplicate or overintellectualize our daily lives, but a reminder that whenever we encounter the other, there are ethical stakes (however seemingly insignificant). Self-disclosure is a leap of faith and a sublime act of self-care, so it matters how we receive that self.

### **Conclusions (For Now)**

This dissertation represents not an answer to the question of “what lies between the self and the other” or “why exactly do we write ourselves,” but a suggestion that because the act of writing is able to instantiate the ethical encounter between self and other, the act of reading--especially works of self-writing—can serve as the theater in which we stage such inquiry. Through this study of the history of writing as a technology of the self, we gain a deeper understanding of how others share themselves with us and how we should handle them, of what it is like to be a self in the world with others. Through this study, we find reason for ethical classicism and academia and one avenue for continuing the push for engaging classics in the real world, in real ways—because after all, classics is already engaged in the real world, whether we realize it or not. We instinctively feel different when we read certain types of writings— we relate, sympathize, empathize, bond, fall in love—and I think the possibility of a written-self is to credit for that phenomenologically distinct literary encounter. In the end, I cannot answer what is between you and me, but I do know that it matters how I meet you in the interstices, textual or otherwise.

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