STATESMAN AND SELF IN THE PARALLEL LIVES

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There has been considerable interest lately in how subjectivity is constructed in the first two centuries of the Roman imperial era, with particular emphasis on the ways that the subject, inherently “split” in and by language, attempts to reconstitute its already always lost “wholeness” by reference to the master signifiers within its cultural matrix.¹ This paper offers some suggestions as to how we can relate these issues to the encounter between the Statesman and the Self in Plutarch’s Parallel Lives, by studying these narratives as an instance of the performance of the exercise known as the “technology of the self”. The increasing concern with technologies of the self during the era in which Plutarch writes has been delineated by Michel Foucault, most notably in the third volume of The History of Sexuality, entitled The Care of the Self, and in a number of articles and interviews dating from the final years of his life.² The Parallel Lives, I shall argue, speak especially to the dialectic between the self and the other, or, to put it another way, to the tension between the individual’s technē of self-fashioning and his ties to the wider community.

The technology of the self is a complex phenomenon, but one of Foucault’s more succinct definitions of it runs as follows:

Technologies of the self permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.³

It is perhaps somewhat surprising that although the Parallel Lives date from the period which Foucault designates as the heyday of the culture of the self, namely the first two centuries of the imperial era, they are barely mentioned in The Care of the Self;⁴ material from several other works by Plutarch does, however, figure prominently in part 3 of that

¹ See, for instance, Janan (2001); Goldhill (2001).
² See Martin et al. (1988); Bernauer (1991).
³ Bernauer (1991) 44.
⁴ Only the Life of Solon is mentioned (207–208).
volume, entitled “Self and Others”. Many of Plutarch’s treatises in the *Moralia* have their origins in the *hypomnêmata*, or notebooks, in which Foucault became greatly interested as he was working on the care of the self:

Into them one entered quotations, fragments of works, examples, and actions to which one had been witness or of which one had heard the account, reflections or reasonings which one had heard or which had come to mind … they also formed a raw material for the writing of more systematic treatises in which were given arguments and means by which to struggle against some defect (such as anger, envy, gossip, flattery) or to overcome some difficult circumstance (a mourning, an exile, downfall, disgrace).5

The *Lives* exhibit a similar provenance and should be seen as part of the same project of self-cultivation “through reading, through the precepts and examples that will provide inspiration” and “by contemplating a life reduced to its essentials”.6 Although frequently mined for historical and biographical material, it is important to recognize that these *bioi* are primarily “books of life” and may be regarded as much as a collection of *hypomnêmata* for moral edification as history or biography in anything like the modern sense. Indeed, Foucault’s ethical projects and Plutarch’s avowedly ethopoietic *Lives* exhibit many intriguing moments of correspondence: in their under-emphasis on specificities of sources and chronology, and their focus on provision of a basic structure for practices of self-constitution, for example, the *Lives* are themselves rather reminiscent of the broader Foucauldian project of the ethical life, especially as it took shape in his later writings and interviews. The *Lives* can be viewed as a series of fragments which can only be experienced as a narrative by labour—primarily philosophical and ethical—on the part of the reader. For Plutarch, the individual *bios*—like the traditional historical narrative—is a work of art, only recognizable once it has been brought into being in the space between the authorial self and that of the reader.7 Yet, it is important to remember that this technology of the self was far from a retreat into the self or isolation: it constituted a broader social practice, and actually involved, as Foucault puts it, “an intensification of social relations”.8