Philip Rousseau. 'Cassian, Contemplation, and the Coenobitic Life', Journal of Ecclesiastical History 26. [photocopie]

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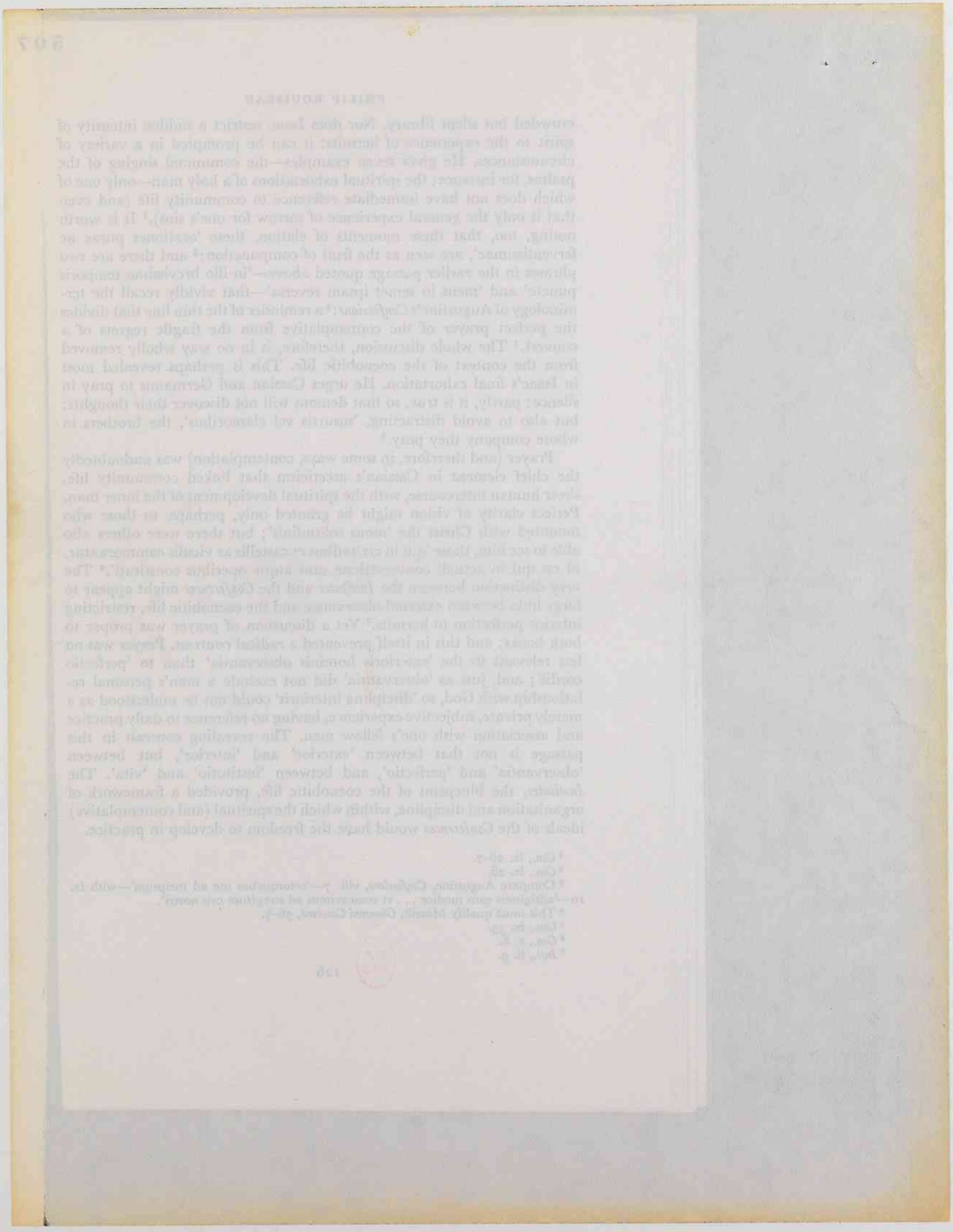
crowded but silent library. Nor does Isaac restrict a sudden intensity of spirit to the experience of hermits: it can be prompted in a variety of circumstances. He gives seven examples—the communal singing of the psalms, for instance; the spiritual exhortations of a holy man—only one of which does not have immediate reference to community life (and even that is only the general experience of sorrow for one's sins).[1] It is worth noting, too, that these moments of elation, these 'orationes purae ac ferventissimae', are seen as the fruit of compunction;[2] and there are two phrases in the earlier passage quoted above—'in illo brevissimo temporis puncto' and 'mens in semet ipsam reversa'—that vividly recall the terminology of Augustine's *Confessions*:[3] a reminder of the thin line that divides the perfect prayer of the contemplative from the fragile regrets of a convert.[4] The whole discussion, therefore, is in no way wholly removed from the context of the coenobitic life. This is perhaps revealed most in Isaac's final exhortation. He urges Cassian and Germanus to pray in silence: partly, it is true, so that demons will not discover their thoughts; but also to avoid distracting, 'susurris vel clamoribus', the brothers in whose company they pray.[5]

Prayer (and therefore, in some ways, contemplation) was undoubtedly the chief element in Cassian's asceticism that linked community life, sheer human intercourse, with the spiritual development of the inner man. Perfect clarity of vision might be granted only, perhaps, to those who mounted with Christ the 'mons solitudinis'; but there were others also able to see him, those 'qui in civitatibus et castellis ac viculis commorantur, id est qui in actuali conversatione sunt atque operibus constituti'.[6] The very distinction between the *Institutes* and the *Conferences* might appear to forge links between external observance and the coenobitic life, restricting interior perfection to hermits.[7] Yet a discussion of prayer was proper to both books; and this in itself prevented a radical contrast. Prayer was no less relevant to the 'exterioris hominis observantia' than to 'perfectio cordis'; and, just as 'observantia' did not exclude a man's personal relationship with God, so 'disciplina interioris' could not be understood as a merely private, subjective experience, having no reference to daily practice and association with one's fellow men. The revealing contrast in this passage is not that between 'exterior' and 'interior', but between 'observantia' and 'perfectio', and between 'institutio' and 'vita'. The *Institutes*, the blueprint of the coenobitic life, provided a framework of organisation and discipline, within which the spiritual (and contemplative) ideals of the *Conferences* would have the freedom to develop in practice.

[1] *Con.*, ix. 26–7.
[2] *Con.*, ix. 26.
[3] Compare Augustine, *Confessions*, viii. 7—'retorquebas me ad meipsum'—with ix. 10—'adtigimus eam modice . . . et remeavimus ad strepitum oris nostri'.
[4] This must qualify Marsili, *Giovanni Cassiano*, 36–7.
[5] *Con.*, ix. 35.
[6] *Con.*, x. 6.
[7] *Inst.*, ii. 9.

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