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## G. Misels, The greco-roman world, Aristide

**Auteur : Foucault, Michel**

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might of Him that Is"—to whom is due "the opening and closing of the soul-wombs".\*

In the second century there are many testimonies to experiences of this sort. The principal document is the "Sacred Discourses" of the rhetorician and "Sophist" Ælius Aristides, surnamed Theodorus, of Smyrna, perhaps the strangest autobiographical work in Greek literature. He writes in a clear, simple classic Greek, artistically produced by the technique of imitation; for his literary skill Aristides was admired for centuries, even more than his contemporary Lucian, as a master and exemplar. In this classic language he wrote, strange to say, "Discourses", telling of states of sickness, describing adventures of the nerves, and telling of dream-states in an intercourse with a god that is a revelry of mind and senses. How vast a change must have come over the ancient spirit for such disharmony to be bearable, even to give æsthetic pleasure, and, as a self-portrayal, to be in accordance with the taste of a supreme literary artist!

These six Discourses enable us to see how the sense of reality became transcendental, as generally happened in those days, and to see this significant change taking place in the most earthly sphere of a human existence. The concrete facts in these testimonies are, in our judgment, quite simple and not difficult to define. In his thirties Aristides suffered incessantly from one ailment after another, rheumatism, asthma, facial neuralgia, debility, inflammation of every organ capable of it, and nervous complaints such as were nothing abnormal at that time in the learned professions.<sup>101</sup> He turned from secular physicians to the healing art of the god Æsculapius. The therapy of the gods of healing was widespread from of old in the Hellenistic world, and maintained itself with the tenacity of such religious beliefs in nature-cures in spite of all enlightenment; we have another document of that same century, showing that the cures indicated by dreams to the sick man slumbering in faith in the temple were not mere swindling or cures by suggestion, but depended also on medical treatment on the principle of natural healing.

In addition to the temple treatment Aristides profited by his other dreams, interpreting them by means of a partly allegorical, partly rational, method, and so deducing from them medical prescriptions which were attributed to Æsculapius; this, too, was a general custom at the time and in no way indicated special

\* Philo, *De migratione Abrahami*, 31, 34-5. Translated by F. H. Colson, in the Loeb Classical Library.

piety: his contemporary the emperor Marcus thanked the gods for having granted him "assistance in dreams", showing him "especially how to avoid spitting blood and fits of giddiness", and for "the answer of the oracle of Caieta" (I, 17, 9). Some of the cures to which, if his report is to be believed, Aristides submitted were appallingly drastic, but, apart from their violent nature and excessive strength, many of them are traditional and sensible prescriptions—cold baths, mud baths, dieting, abstinence, and the like; also psychotherapy, such as the expulsion of nervous pains by music, pleasing fancies, and brain work.

Aristides kept a diary of his dream transactions, on rolls of parchment, giving just the details of the dreams, and he lost it; he estimated its length at 30,000 lines.\* This is no more than an extension of a practice traditionally followed in the temples, with which we are familiar through the similar practices in Roman Catholic places of pilgrimage. Public records of cases of sickness, kept for the edifying purpose of proving the god's wonderful healing power, and dating from the Hellenistic period, are still extant; they come from Epidaureus, the centre of the worship of Æsculapius; at the temples of the healing gods there was a regular profession of certificate-writing to attest miraculous cures or to record dreams and visions for those concerned; we have a long temple document of the middle of this second century, over thirty lines on a stone tablet, on which the progress of a cure was inscribed, as in Aristides' case, by the cured person at the god's command.<sup>102</sup> And in Aristides' work we have glimpses of customs in private life that served the daily communication and discussion of these marvels. Friends meet in the presence of the sick man, and he places before them for interpretation or for wonderment his dreams of the previous night; he regularly tells the keeper of the temple of Æsculapius of his experiences; in the temple sit resident devotees, three abreast, and the question is asked, "Has the god made known anything new?" Often at the god's appearances in his dreams Aristides sees other persons present as witnesses; and for his enjoyment of the lasting favour of the god he can appeal to the testimony of those who were present, or of "all who know anything about me".† Such practices originate as a rule in times of religious excitement, since the cultivation of emotional states of mind naturally leads

\* Ael. Arist., *ἱεροὶ λόγοι* (ed. B. Keil, vol. II, pp. 376-7), II, 1 sqq.; I, 3; III, 30; IV, 15; III, 26.

† Ael. Arist., *op. cit.*, I 9; II 35, 72; IV, 16; II, 41; I, 49, etc.; II, 37, 56; cf. 20.

