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[G. Misels, The greco-roman world, Aristide - suite]

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to the formation of societies for mutual edification. We shall see this rule operative again and again in the origins of religious autobiographies.

Urged on by his friends, Aristides, now famous, boldly took these personal matters as the theme of his oratory. This, too, he did under divine inspiration—as is also the usual feeling in such cases among Roman Catholic mystics. He began to write his “Sacred Discourses” in his forties (about 170), when he had been more or less cured, and continued them later until his death (c. 179); he described their subject as “The exertions of the Saviour, by which I have benefited to this day”. He was not entitled to claim, as he did, to be the inventor of this type of religious discourse: it had developed out of rhetorical practice at festivals; ¹⁰⁸ his original contribution was to change the central feature, the glorification of the god (which could draw its miracle stories either from the lives of others or from the writer’s own life), to the emotional presentation of his own ego.* He thus prepared the way for the further development of autobiography in a particular direction.

In taking it as the subject of his rhetorical art he set out to treat his miracle-story differently from the diary entries: he filled it with accounts of the subtle changes in his physical condition and his consequent emotions, and the traditional story of sickness became his starting-point for tracing and presenting the workings of divine providence in his life throughout that decade, in outward events, in travel incidents, and especially in the field of his oratory. For he felt that it was this art of his that had lifted him out of the “swinish” pleasures of the masses to “truly human” enjoyment, and he considered that it would have been absurd to tell of the medical treatment of the body and to say nothing about “what set up the body and at the same time strengthened the soul and imparted eminent greatness to the discourses” (I, 19; V, 36).

But he has little to say about his actual achievements, his declamations and the enthusiastic public: † “I convinced myself and many others that no human affairs ever puffed me up”; his vanity was too fastidious to allow him to dwell on visible successes and honours.‡ Here, too, his interest lies in the “honours received from the god”, that is to say, first of all, in

* In II, 13, he himself says this.

† These are described once in V, 32. The contrast may be seen in Libanius—see below, Part III, chap. I.

‡ V, 37, 16; IV, 67; VI, 1, etc.

his dreams; on these he bases his attempt to understand and even to live his life as a series of spiritual adventures. It has been suggested that his case was one of somnambulism.¹⁰⁴ Actually this pathological concept is no more than a catchword covering a spiritual condition which, in spite of its morbidity, was typical of that time. Aristides found in his dreams oracles by which he directed his path in daily life; he even carried the æsthetic theory of inspiration into practice by means of productive dreams, which helped him in semi-consciousness to conceive verses, hymns, the beginnings of speeches, and compositions. As he could think of no natural explanation of these psychic phenomena, which recurred with abnormal regularity, he saw in them proof of his association with a transcendental world, the sense of whose reality had become overpowering in the religious movements of those days. From it came all real causation. In one place where he adduces simple human motives for a decision, desire for fame and the like, inducing him to return to his homeland, he adds: “I reflected upon this, as is only human, but I was well aware that everything is but babbling in face of the surrender to guidance by God” (V, 56).

If religion has a value of its own, independent of its substance, if absolute obedience to a power believed to be divine and a blind trust in providential guidance can be accounted a mark of religious feeling, Aristides was certainly a very religious man. Much of his stories may be exaggerated or concocted for edification; he had only part of his diary left, and memory can play many tricks with a decade; there remains nevertheless a great courage, building purely on fictions of fancy and leading him to brave the most senseless treatment in everyday matters affecting his body, to brave them not under excitement but coolly and with his eyes open, because the god commanded it.* He himself bases his piety on this fearlessness with which he carried out the “paradoxical” in spite of all warnings. In those days Tertullian (160–220) coined the phrase “It is certain because it is impossible”—the phrase from which the *credo quia absurdum est* originated. Aristides, who was an older contemporary of Tertullian, reminds us of this paradox by his religious principle of living. This cult of miracles has, however, a rational basis, and the morbidity and unctuousness of his piety brings him, if we regard it simply from the psychological aspect, close to the late representatives of pietism.¹⁰⁵ His self-portrayal, too, recalls pietistic

* See especially II, 52; III, 38 sqq; I, 68.

