Ode to both a grecian urn and a roman aqueduct: Commentary on mary jo peebles-klieger's paper entitled, “contemporary psychoanalysis and hypnosis”

Michael R. Nash

Published online: 31 Jan 2008.

To cite this article: Michael R. Nash (2001) Ode to both a grecian urn and a roman aqueduct: Commentary on mary jo peebles-klieger's paper entitled, “contemporary psychoanalysis and hypnosis”, International Journal of Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis, 49:2, 166-168, DOI: 10.1080/00207140108410066

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00207140108410066
ODE TO BOTH A GRECIAN URN
AND A ROMAN AQUEDUCT:
Commentary on Mary Jo Peebles-Klieger's
Paper Entitled, "Contemporary
Psychoanalysis and Hypnosis"

MICHAEL R. NASH

I found this paper to be a lucid, thoughtful, and concise description of psychoanalytic theory as it pertains to hypnosis. The author weaves hypnosis in and out of this story in a masterful manner; her paper is a gem. Now, let me share with you my thoughts as they occurred to me immediately after reading this paper. In so doing, I hope I add something of value.

Being a bit of a dilettante when it comes to history, I have always been fascinated by the tension between the Roman and the Greek. These cultures brought to our modern table some very different ways of viewing the world. What I am about to say is, of course, an oversimplification—but I will pursue it anyway.

The Greeks impress with stunning esthetics of beauty, reason, and intellect. They ennobled the examination of the rich inner world of form, experience, expression, and meaning. As I like to think of it, the major theme here is the being of the human condition. It's no coincidence that Freud and even contemporary psychoanalysts return time and time again to Greek myths. Who among us (whether clinician or researcher) does not encounter Oedipus on a regular basis in interactions with colleagues and family? Who among us has not secretly imagined the dark sweet satisfaction of a Medea-like retaliation? Who has not observed the hubris of an Agamemnon? Whether it is Achilles vaunting over an expiring (but still-conscious) Hector or the pathos of Priam, what we encounter with the Greeks is being.

The Romans, on the other hand, had a tendency to see such things as a bit much—even effete. Instead, they were "doers." Their emphasis was, of course, on power and doing. In a phrase, they were most interested in what works. Their emphasis was on doing parsimoniously what works—architecturally, politically, and religiously. They were in a sense garish, with a touch of the vulgar à la Las Vegas.

It may then startle you when I say that in some sense I am more Roman than Greek, or at least I feel that the robust notion of doing can in fact be compromised by an excessive architecture of esthetics and theory... and, when this is carried out to its extreme, we can end up plodding...
along some very old and dangerous paths that lead (at best) to an intellectual and procedural cul de sac. At worst, to a tyranny of revealed truth.

No, if psychotherapy is to survive, if psychoanalysis is to thrive, if hypnosis is to contribute, they must address not just the Greek but the Roman. That is, postmodern, intersubjective, and pluralistic models aside, there is one very Roman question that must be answered; one buck that cannot be passed; one doing question that we are compelled, morally, to ask; one question that cannot be addressed by aesthetics and theory. That question is: Does it work?

Not should it work, because it is beautiful and satisfying in its conception. Not must it work because it fits current political or intellectual fashions. But does it work? In short, the challenge for psychoanalysis, as for hypnosis, is not just to keep pace with changes in theory but to demonstrate in some very Roman way that it makes a difference—that application of these theories actually reduces the suffering of our patients, both medical and psychological. If we fail to embrace this notion, if we fail to meet this challenge, there is no theory, no integration, no conceptual nuance that will rescue the therapeutic enterprise from oblivion, at least as a health care intervention.

I think of an incident that occurred in a 15th-century monastery. Mees (1924) attributed the story to Francis Bacon, although this remains conjectural.

In the year of our Lord, 1432, there arose a grievous quarrel among the brethren over the number of teeth in the mouth of a horse. For thirteen days the disputation raged without ceasing. All the ancient books and chronicles were fetched out, and wonderful and ponderous erudition was made manifest. At the beginning of the fourteenth day a youthful friar of goodly bearing asked his learned superiors for permission to add a word, and straightway, to the wonder of the disputants, whose deep wisdom he sorely vexed, he beseeched them in a manner coarse and unheard of, to look in the mouth of a horse and find answers to their questionings. At this, their dignity being grievously hurt, they waxed exceedingly wroth; and joining in a mighty uproar they flew upon him and smote him from hip to thigh and cast him out forthwith. For, said they, “Surely Satan hath tempted this bold neophyte to declare unholy and unheard-of ways of finding truth, contrary to all the teachings of the fathers.” After many days of grievous strife the dove of peace sat on the assembly, and they, as one man, declaring the problem to be an everlasting mystery because of a dearth of historical and theological evidence thereof, so ordered the same writ down. (p. 18)

How common, how barnyard to do something so vulgar as to lay one’s hands on an animal to help resolve these celestial questions. The boy, in fact, had perpetrated a revolutionary act. Indeed, from my perspective he is the ideal graduate student.

Now, I am not arguing for the vulgarity of mindless reductionism, and least of all am I arguing that psychoanalysis and hypnosis should
turn away from evolving theory about being and the interior of human experience. These are all very Greek to me, and (as a psychoanalytic practitioner) I know that my heart is Greek. But my mind is not. It is Roman. I contend that we, like Bacon’s novice, must take deliberate, systematic, and frequent visits to the stable to test our theories—to see if they work. Those theories that do not translate into real-world effects must be discarded, no matter how beautiful in conception or how compellingly they fit current fashions about what should be. Our theories and our science must move together, or we, like the scholastic monks, the Greek sophists, the creationists, and the geocentrists, will be, well, simply irrelevant.

Happily, I see movement in this direction both within psychoanalysis and hypnosis. Indeed, in the April 2000 issue of this journal, we (arguably) took an extended tough-minded field trip to the stable. We empirically evaluated the evidence for hypnosis as an adjunctive therapy in a host of clinical contexts. It is only a beginning. It is in fact a long overdue beginning. But maybe some day we will marry the rich insights about human nature bequeathed to us by the Greeks to the austere pragmatism of the Romans. Hence, my heart, and my mind, will rest in an easier place.

Reference