Personal Legend and Obligation

Cruising used bookstores is not as dangerous as cruising singles' bars, but one may nonetheless encounter rather strange characters. My most recent discovery—evidently a discovery only to me—is the Brazilian writer Paulo Coelho, author of *The Alchemist*, which, I learn from the Internet, has sold more than seventy million copies worldwide and has been translated into more languages than any other book by a living author. Somehow I missed the initial publication of this work (in 1988) and have only just come upon the tenth-anniversary edition of the first English translation, published with a new introduction by the author in 2002. I cannot say that my experience of this work has been a literary pleasure, but it at least provides illumination of much of the tone and tempo of contemporary culture.

Calling this book a "novel" would be to stretch the definition, since it lacks the concreteness and specificity of that genre in action, setting, and style. The plot is schematic and the characters—even the principal figure, Santiago the shepherd boy—are abstract types. The narrative takes place in identifiable places (Andalusia, Tangier, the pyramids of Egypt), but they are not realized with even a minimum degree of particularity, and the time frame is vaguely preindustrial (there are undifferentiated castles and the Moors have been expelled from the Iberian peninsula). There is no effort at plausibility: although the boy attended a seminary until he was sixteen in order to become a priest ("and thereby a source of pride to a simple farm family"), he is completely unfamiliar with the name of a man who identifies himself as Melchizedek King of Salem and gives him the two stones, Urim and Thummim. Such casual expropriation of a biblical figure is highlighted by "Melchizedek's" approval of the shepherd's decision to leave the seminary, because knowing about the world "was much more important to him than knowing God and learning about man's sins."

I lack the competence to comment on the style of the original Portuguese text even if it were available, but the descriptions in the translations are predictable and banal, and the dialogue provides not even a hint of the actual speech of men and women. Nevertheless, a portentous admonition by "the King of Salem" offers both a fair sample of the book's tone and a clue to its popularity:

> The Soul of the World is nourished by people's happiness. And also by

> unhappiness, envy, and jealousy. To realize one's Personal Legend is a person's only real obligation. All things are one.

Adam and Eve found similar counsel enticing when it was presented by the serpent in the Garden of Eden, and their children have changed hardly at all. Evidently, there are numerous readers who will eagerly heed the message that self-fulfillment is all that matters and must be pursued at any cost, although the story conveying it is thin and contrived and the characters giving it voice as lifelike as so many ventriloquists' dummies.

The reason for dwelling upon this ephemeral literary fetish is the evidence it furnishes of the formidable task of cultural and education reclamation now facing conservatives. Burke was dismayed almost as much by the vulgarity of the French revolutionaries as by their immorality and imprudence. We are likewise confronted not only with bad judgment and the moral decay of the smug egotism driving contemporary social and political life but also by the appalling lack of good taste and good sense. Further, it is a telling index of the current state of cultural attitudes that a paean to unabashed self-centeredness and self-aggrandizement can be perceived as "liberal."

This issue of *Modern Age* offers a wide array of perspectives, but all our authors have in common an awareness that reality exists independently of wishful thinking and a commitment to the search for a truthful assessment of the human condition. If a definition of conservatism in a single phrase were required, one could do worse than to designate it *moral and political realism*. Such an understanding would certainly inoculate a man against the notion that a preoccupation with his "personal legend"—a phrase that sounds like part of an advertising slogan—might put him on the way to fulfilling all his obligations. One of the remarkable paradoxes of our time is the blatancy of those who profess a politics of compassion while shaping their own lives and aspirations according to the canons of self-indulgence—or their "personal legends." Before demanding a polity of general benevolence for humanity, it is wise to become acquainted with the human nature of actual individuals, above all the nature of oneself.

No piece in the present number of *Modern Age* deals more directly with this problem than William Graddy's "Song of the Earth in Suburbia." The devotee of New Age nostrums dramatized in this poem could have stepped out of the pages of *The Alchemist*, except that Graddy's characterization is considerably more vivid, his style more textured, than anything in Coelho's fable. Among the prose pieces, William Gairdner's "Hyperdemocracy and the Gnostic Impulse" deals with the same problem on a grander political scale, and Mark Signorelli analyzes the way in which contemporary man has turned physical science into a variety of magical mythology.

Gairdner's essay, in its discussion of Gnosticism as a political concept, offers a reserved account of the philosophy of Eric Voegelin and his equivocal relationship to conservatism. Robert Kraynak pairs Voegelin with the still more controversial figure of Leo Strauss, providing a balanced and dispassionate assessment of men who sometimes provoke rather heated responses. It is to the credit of conservatives that they continue to make use of the work of such men as Strauss and Voegelin, neither of whom may be regarded as a conservative in any straightforward sense. In sharp contrast, those who currently claim the title "liberal" are either indifferent,

hostile, or utterly oblivious to liberal heroes of an earlier generation, such as Lionel Trilling and George Orwell.

Finally, we have two essays that reflect upon the practical implications of conservative thought. John Caiazza demonstrates, in "Reagan's Intellect," that political intelligence and aptitude are distinct from academic acuity. The student with the highest SAT score may not be an ideal president. Jude Dougherty takes up what has long been a familiar theme in conservative thought, "Property as a Condition of Liberty," but he enhances the idea with an astute philosophical perspective.

The variety of reviews furnished in this issue, along with two more poems, is a further indication of the diversity—a term much abused in our time—of conservative interests and outlooks.

—RVY