

Plutarch

By KENNETH REXROTH

IT WOULD BE EASY to write abusively about Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*. They could be called "The Myth of the Ruling Class Dramatized," or "The Social Lie Personified." More perhaps even than Plato, Plutarch is the founding father of the notion of a heroic elite. His great Greeks and Romans, with few exceptions, do not only seek power, they assume responsibility. As he compares them, from Romulus and Theseus to Mark Antony and Demetrius, he judges them always according to the degree they successfully assumed, as leaders, unlimited liability for the commoner men they led.

Although succeeding ages have believed Plutarch, it is doubtful indeed if human affairs are put together or if political morality functions as Plutarch conceived it, or even if nobility can be found at all among generals and politicians—Greek, Roman, Russian, American, or Chinese, then or now. Yet, like the Bible and Shakespeare, *Parallel Lives* is a desert island book. Classical literature contains a good many greater works of art, and many truer pictures of the ways of men. But Plutarch never palls. He is always engaging, interesting, and above all else—to use a word that will provoke smiles today—elevating. Men are like the quarreling chiefs of a predatory war band as they are described in Homer's *Iliad*. They are like the neurotics who destroy each other in Euripides, but they are not like the heroes of Plutarch. Some men may be noble—John Woolman or Martin Buber or Albert Einstein or Martin Luther King. Our common sense tells us that men who came out on top of political systems far more corrupt than those of Kansas City, New Jersey, Memphis, or Chicago in their heyday, and at least as merciless as Moscow, may have been heroic in a sense but they were not noble by either Plutarch's definition or ours. They were not great and good men as judged by Greek, Christian, or Jewish standards. They were not by the standards of Plutarch's Romanized Stoicism.

It has been said that Plutarch was simply a propagandist for the truculent Roman Senatorial caste and for their traditional ancestors, the Athenian partisans of the Spartan despotism. It could be said, too, that out of the legendary materials provided by Plutarch we still

construct the legendary idols of our own rulers—Franklin Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, Douglas MacArthur, Dwight Eisenhower.

It doesn't make Plutarch any the less absorbing. Nobody has ever been so foolish as to believe society would ever be ruled by the wise, the philosopher-statesmen of Plato's *Republic*. We hope of the human social structure that somewhere, far away, long ago, or ages to come, it may rise at its summits into regions of nobility. Society would not be better if its masters were like Plutarch's heroes. It would certainly be more satisfying. This is the great secret. His characters may be bloodthirsty, lustful, treacherous, but they are never trivial. They are always purposive. Plutarch's is a world in which men do not live at random, as we learn in our hearts that, in fact, they do.

The *Parallel Lives* are lives of adults of the kind we all thought we would meet when we grew up, which we never did and which we have ceased to ever expect to encounter. Or have we? Perhaps we always hope that we will meet nobility and responsibility walking together just around the corner. We can accept sin in our fellows and even learn to forgive it but it is a bitter and endless chore. We never really learn to accept gratuitous meanness, least of all in our masters. Plutarch compels us to believe of his characters that they are masterful because they are never mean. Although this is diametrically opposed to the facts, it is not a falsehood. It is the kind of truth that, like "The School of Athens," the *Jupiter Symphony*, or the *St. Matthew Passion*, provides life with meaning that it does not in the least deserve. It is obvious why Plutarch gave Shakespeare some of his greatest characters. They had similar life attitudes. Even Bottom is not mean. Coriolanus was an arrogant traitor. Mark Antony was a

bloody demagogue infatuated with an aging nymphomaniac. There is nothing whatever trivial about them.

Plutarch's book is a kind of antonym to Petronius's *Satyricon*. Petronius knew power. His hands were on the levers of decision until they were cuffed away by the fasces of Nero's lictors. His view of human motivation was dim and bawdy. Plutarch did not know power but only honors and so he believed that the wielders of power were men of honor. I think he really believed it, as certainly many of the Stoic mythographers—Seneca for instance, of Greek and Roman upper-class morality—did not. He is nothing if not persuasive. There are few more convincing narrators in all literature.

WE need to be persuaded. If we accept the fiction that society is put together this way, we are likely to find ourselves perpetually duped, but it is good for us to believe that even if we aren't noble we can hope that we ourselves might possibly be so put back together. If we accept the testimony of experience with too much pessimism we demean ourselves. Alas, that pessimism continuously forces itself upon us and we need such reassurance as Plutarch provides. It may lead to role playing—Roger Casement or his caricature, T. E. Lawrence, or our own tedious adulteries elevated to the barge of Cleopatra—but role-playing is better than nothing. In acting out there is hope. In the words of Gabriel Marcel, "Without hope, nobility is impossible."

No modern translations of Plutarch's *Lives* compare with North's Elizabethan version, from which Shakespeare transcribed almost verbatim great sections of his Roman plays. If North's English is too strange for your taste, Dryden's in the plain but elevated style of the late seventeenth century seems today much more like our own speech as well as more like Plutarch's Greek. This is complete in the Modern Library Giant and is to be preferred to any of the many paperbacks of selections. Get the complete *Parallel Lives*. They are endlessly satisfying. Sooner or later you will read them all, and, besides, you never know when you might find yourself on a desert island.



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Report from Santo Domingo

EDITOR'S NOTE: *The following account is by James F. Fixx, Feature Editor of SR.*

SANTO DOMINGO.

ONE SWELTERING afternoon during a lull in the fighting here, I accompanied several hundred rebels, armed and unarmed, who gathered at El Conde Gate in Independence Park for a demonstration. Earlier in the day a top rebel leader had assured U.S. newsmen that, despite reports to the contrary, they were free to enter the city's rebel zone. Although somewhat uneasy at finding myself deep in the stronghold of one of the warring camps, I couldn't help noticing the incongruities of the setting. Atop a building facing the park, a giant billboard ad-

vertising Presidente beer overlooked hibiscus bushes bright with blossoms, tangles of lush bougainvillea vines, and an eternal flame that burns here in memory of the nation's patriots. But the billboard also overlooked jeeps bristling with weapons, tanks that had ground their imprint into the grass, and haggard, serious-faced men with rifles and submachine guns and hand grenades slung over their shoulders. As I arrived at the park and made my way into the crowd, a group was rhythmically chanting "Yankee go home!" When I passed them, however, one of their number smiled and clapped me warmly on the back, as if to make it clear that it was only the U.S. troops they were talking about. Meanwhile, moving among the

crowd selling copies of a hastily assembled rebel newspaper called *Patria: Vocero de la Dominicanidad* was a youth in a soiled, sweaty T-shirt. On the shirt was a picture of the Beatles.

But if one was startled or amused by the contrasts, it soon became apparent that the mood of the gathering was deadly serious. The rebels had sustained heavy casualties. In the northern part of the city they were being steadily squeezed into an increasingly smaller pocket, their backs pressed uncomfortably against the Ozama River, which curls like a muddy ribbon through Santo Domingo. And their movement, which purportedly had begun as a popular effort to restore democratic government, was—or so they insisted—being snagged and sabotaged by 20,000 U.S. troops who, although theoretically neutral, were aiding the rebels' antagonists, the loyalists.

A young man in a blue sports shirt open at the neck mounted the speaker's platform, grasped a microphone, and began to demand loudly that the *Yanquis* go home.

There were cheers from the crowd. "This is *our* problem," he said, "not the problem of the U.S. Marines."

More cheers.

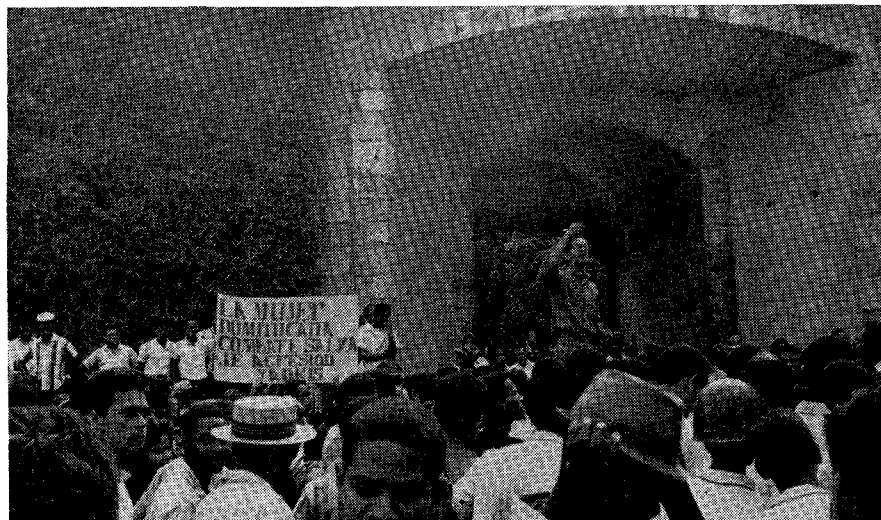
Then his argument shifted. Punctuating the words with his arms, he shouted: "We must join with the people of Venezuela, with the people of Cuba!"

An angry murmur began to ripple through the crowd, and someone near me said in quiet horror: "A Communist!" Hands reached up to pull the speaker from the platform. He resisted, gripping the microphone. The wire was yanked from its base. He continued to speak, gesticulating at the crowd with the dead microphone. Finally he was pulled from the platform, but he managed to remount it. A rebel aimed an M-1 rifle into the air and fired a shot. A second rebel, standing nearby, answered with two or three shots, and the crowd, myself very much included, fled for cover. The rebels had effectively deprived the unwanted speaker of his audience.

As I crouched behind a parked car, a young rebel took me by the arm and smiled reassuringly. I realized the shooting was now over. The rebel Minister of the Armed Forces was mounting the platform, the crowd was calmer, and I began to move closer in order to hear what he was saying. But I was immediately stopped by a dozen or so rebels who surrounded me, pleading with me to understand that the first speaker had in no way represented their views.

"We are not Communists," they said. "How can we make the Americans understand that we are not Communists?"

They explained that, certainly, radical opportunists had joined their movement—no one would deny that—but the move-



—SR photos by J.F.F.

Rebel rally—Minutes after this photo was made, shots were fired and the speaker was dragged angrily away from the demonstration.