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Ayn Rand: engineer of souls

by *Anthony Daniels*

Books in this article

Anne Conover Heller

Ayn Rand and the World She Made

Nan A. Talese, 592 pages, \$35.00

A critical account of the "Chernyshevsky of individualism."

Love thy ego as thyself. —Leonard Peikoff

My copy of *The Concept of Benevolence* by T. A. Roberts, in the series New Studies in Practical Philosophy, was deaccessioned from a university library. The librarian took advantage of the fact that it had not been borrowed since October 17, 1977, only four years after its publication, to disembarass his institution of yet another book so uselessly cluttering up the library shelves. It was carefully endorsed with ugly withdrawal stamps to reduce its resale value to an absolute minimum. Perhaps the librarian was a

follower of Ayn Rand, the apostle of selfishness, who did not want youth corrupted by stray thoughts of altruism. Going from the loan history of the book (and from my casual observations of British youth), there was never much danger of this, but it is always better to be safe than sorry and therefore to treat selfishness as if it were an endangered species.

Ayn Rand was never, in fact, much appreciated or very influential in Europe; at the height of her fame in America, where her books sold by the million, her name was not one to conjure with on the other side of the Atlantic. She was much read by middle-class young Indians of the time, however, as well as by Americans, and she is now coming back into fashion globally. I confess that enthusiasm for her is to me utterly mysterious, and the excellent new biography by Ann C. Heller does not clear up the mystery but, rather, deepens it.¹ Able and gifted people (not the least of them Alan Greenspan) were captivated both by her writings and her person, but the picture of Rand that emerges from Ms. Heller's book is all the more damning because the biographer is obviously fair-minded and, indeed, something of an admirer of her subject.

Clearly, Rand was a most remarkable person, admirer and detractor must agree. She was born in St. Petersburg in 1905 into a middle-class Jewish family that hovered uncertainly between prosperity and persecution, but that nevertheless managed to penetrate into the higher echelons of Russian society. (Vladimir Nabokov's sister was a childhood friend of Rand's.) The Bolshevik Revolution deprived the family of everything. They fled to the Crimea in the hope that the advancing White armies would restore their

fortunes, but, with the final victory of the Reds, they returned home, to live —like everyone else—in sordid and oppressed penury. At the age of twenty-one, Rand (alone of her immediate family) managed to escape to America.

There, with a determination truly admirable and heroic, she transformed herself into a writer. Although she wrote in English, and her two most famous books are American in subject matter and location, she remained deeply Russian in outlook and intellectual style to the end of her days.

America could take Rand out of Russia, but not Russia out of Rand. Her work properly belongs to the history of Russian, not American, literature—and nineteenth-century Russian literature at that.

Rand's virtues were as follows: she was highly intelligent; she was brave and uncompromising in defense of her ideas; she had a kind of iron integrity; and, though a fierce defender of capitalism, she was by no means avid for money herself. The propagation of truth as she saw it was far more important to her than her own material ease. Her vices, of course, were the mirror-image of her virtues, but, in my opinion, the mirror was a magnifying one. Her intelligence was narrow rather than broad. Though in theory a defender of freedom of thought and action, she was dogmatic, inflexible, and intolerant, not only in opinion but in behavior, and it led her to personal cruelty. In the name of her ideas, she was prepared to be deeply unpleasant. She hardened her ideas into ideology. Her integrity led to a lack of self-criticism; she frequently wrote twenty thousand words where one would do.

Rand believed all people to be possessed of equal rights, but she found relations of equality with others insupportable. Though she could be charming, it was not something she could keep up for long. She was deeply

ungrateful to those who had helped her and many of her friendships ended in acrimony. Her biographer tells us that she sometimes told jokes, but, in the absence of any supportive evidence, I treat reports of her sense of humor much as I treat reports of sightings of the Loch Ness monster: apocryphal at best.

A passionate hater of religion, Rand founded a cult around her own person, complete with rituals of excommunication; a passionate believer in rationality and logic, she was incapable of seeing the contradictions in her own work. She was a rationalist who was not entirely rational; she could not distinguish between rationalism and rationality. Of narrow aesthetic sympathies, she laid down the law in matters of artistic judgment like a panjandrum; a believer in honesty, she was adept at self-deception and special pleading. I have rarely read a biography of a writer I should have cared so little to meet.

The Russian tradition to which Rand belongs is not that of Gogol, Turgenev, and Chekhov but that of Dobrolyubov, Pisarev, and Chernyshevsky: that is to say, of angry literary and social critics, pamphleteers and ideologues. She was neither fully a philosopher, nor fully a novelist, but something in between the two—the characters in her novels are not creatures of flesh and blood but opinions on legs, and her expository prose has the quality of speechifying. This is not to say that a woman of her intelligence and life experience had nothing interesting to say or no insights to convey. She did, on occasion, put things very well. She was often shrewd, seeing the dangers of statism very clearly, when few others did.

Rand's statement that racism is the lowest and most primitive form of collectivism is a striking apothegm. Likewise, she was among the first to appreciate that the notion of collective rights (a mirror image of racial discrimination) would "disintegrate a country into an institutionalized civil war of pressure groups, each fighting for legislative favors and special privileges at the expense of one another." This could hardly be expressed better; neither could her observation that "Even if it were proved ... that the incidence of men of potentially superior brain power is greater among the members of certain races than among the members of others, it would still tell us nothing about any given individual and it would be irrelevant to one's judgment of him."

Unfortunately, Rand's vices as a writer are never very far from her virtues. Not only does the above passage suggest that people are to be judged mainly by reference to their brain power, a very narrow and inhumane criterion, but she continues: "A genius is a genius ... and a moron is a moron, regardless of the number of morons who belong to the same race." This grates because one knows that she not only divides the world into creators and parasites with no intermediate category, but also because she never expresses any sympathy or understanding for the weak or ill, always referring to them with disdain at best and eugenicist hatred at worst. A moron is to be blamed for his own lack of intelligence.

Rand treats the physically ill as if their misfortunes were always their own fault, and a sign of their moral and human worthlessness. In *The Fountainhead*, for example, she compares "the bright, the strong, the able boys" of Ellsworth Toohey's class during his childhood with Skinny Dix, who "got infantile paralysis, and would lie in bed." This comparison is indicative

of a truly loathsome and disgusting hardness of heart and lack of compassion as well as a crude intellectual error (made, no doubt, partly as a result of her loathing for Roosevelt—infantile paralysis does not affect the intelligence and therefore cannot be taken as a symbolic opposite of ability).

Rand's hardness of heart was not only confined to the page. There is a chilling account in the biography of how she treated her long-suffering husband, Frank O'Connor, when he suffered from dementia:

She nagged at him continually, to onlookers' distress. "Don't humor him," she [said]. "Make him try to remember." She insisted that his mental lapses were "psycho-epistemological," and she gave him long, grueling lessons in how to think and remember. She assigned him papers on aspects of his mental functioning, which he was entirely unable to write.

This downright cruelty (as well as downright stupidity) derived from her overvaluation of supposed intellectual consistency in the conduct of daily life. She believed that it was more important to adhere to a principle than to behave well. Among her many bad ideas was the compatibility of all human desiderata, and that any conflict of a man's interests was merely the consequence of his not having thought through his situation sufficiently, and applied a fundamental and indubitable principle correctly and consistently. For Rand, there was no ambiguity in the world: if it is true that man has free will and is responsible for his conduct, it cannot also be that there is a condition such as dementia that robs a man of his capacity for choice. Hence her husband's lapses were wilful and deliberate, to be corrected by Randian brainwashing. This is authentically horrible.

Rand's crude dichotomizing is evident throughout her work. Her rejection of compassion is Nietzschean in tone, seeing in pity merely an attempt by the weak and ill-favored to overcome the power and influence of the strong and healthy. But this is an elementary error. From the correct psychological insight that the allegedly compassionate sometimes use the existence of the weak and needy as a tool for their own social ascent and attainment of power—whole political parties, in almost every country, are founded upon this principle—it does not in the least follow that there are no people in need of assistance or that compassion for them is ipso facto bogus and a cover for the will to power. From the insight that government assistance to the unfortunate increases the number of the unfortunate, often imprisoning them in their misfortune, it does not follow in the least that it is right for human beings to be utterly callous and indifferent to the fate of the unfortunate. Human sympathy is, as Adam Smith himself pointed out, implanted by nature in the human breast, but Ayn Rand, to a greater extent even than Pharaoh, hardened her heart and expunged sympathy from it utterly.

Rand's hero-worship is also Nietzschean in inspiration. It is deeply unpleasant. She entirely lacks the literary ability to convey anything admirable, or even minimally attractive, about her heroes, who are the kind of people one would not cross the road to meet, though one might well cross it to avoid them. They partake fully of her humorless monomania and have all the human warmth of a praying mantis. We are told that they are geniuses, but their genius seems mainly to consist of an unswerving adherence to their own ideas.

Howard Roark is the architect-hero of *The Fountainhead*, but there is abundant evidence in the book that he is not a very good architect: his ideas are totally derivative and, furthermore, derivative of ideas that are themselves not merely worthless, but monstrous. Like his creator, he claims an originality that he does not have. Here he describes how a house may have what he calls “integrity”:

Every piece of it is there because the house needs it—and for no other reason. The relation of masses was determined by the distribution of space within. The ornament was determined by the method of construction, an emphasis of the principle that makes it stand.

This is pure, unadulterated Le Corbusier. Indeed, it could have been written by him. (Roark also praises Le Corbusier’s favourite thing in all the world, reinforced concrete.) We all know what Le Corbusier led to; the very idea that a house “needs” things while the desires of human beings can be disregarded is one that would occur only to someone with a reptilian mind.

It is not altogether surprising that Roark lacks taste; Rand herself did, too. She called Bach and Mozart “pre-musical,” preferring Tchaikovsky and even Lehár. She thought that Victor Hugo was the greatest novelist who ever lived. She ridiculed Rembrandt’s “visual distortions.” These judgments show her to have been seriously deficient in sensibility and discrimination across a wide range of important human activities: in fact, I cannot think of any field in which she showed proper aesthetic or intellectual judgment.

Humanity, according to Rand, is divided into heroes, creators, and geniuses on the one hand, and weaklings, parasites, and the feeble-minded on the other. Needless to say, the latter outnumber the former by a very wide margin, but only the former are truly human in the full sense of the word.

But let us leave aside for a moment the empirical justification for such a sharp division of mankind into two categories: it never seems to occur to Rand that her classification does not provide a very strong rationale for the limited government and free market that she claims so strongly to admire. On the contrary, it would seem to justify the reign of philosopher-kings, though she claims also to hate Plato passionately.

Let us examine the “heroism” of Howard Roark as an example. Why is he a hero to be admired? In the book, Rand grants Roark the right to rape Dominique because of his status as a Nietzschean hero, an act which she would have found repellent and inexcusable if, say, his enemy Ellsworth Toohey, had committed it. Roark is a hero because, as a completely self-sufficient man, he sticks to his guns and never compromises; this means that he eventually manages to build a skyscraper according to his own conception and to none other. But why should this make him a hero, unless his skyscraper is of superior value? Heroism in pursuit of an undesirable end is not itself desirable, very much to the contrary. Unless what Roark builds has some social or aesthetic value, his heroism (actually, arrogance and pigheadedness) is itself worthless, indeed reprehensible.

It is odd that Rand should have chosen architecture as her battle-horse for radical individualism because, of all the arts and crafts, architecture is not—or rather, should not be—individualistic in any pure sense. Let me give a brief illustration. When I am in England, I live in a Queen Anne house in a church close which consists of Elizabethan, Jacobean, Queen Anne, and Georgian houses. I own my house and the land on which it stands outright, but this (in my opinion) does not give me the right, even if the law granted it, to knock my house down and build a brutalist construction of reinforced

concrete in its place, however much it might be in my individual financial interest to do so. A single such construction would ruin the whole once and for all; where architecture is concerned, the public or collective interest really does exist.

Moreover, Rand fails to notice that, by the standards of the marketplace, Roark is a comprehensive failure and is prevented from being a success by market forces—all those supposed philistines who do not commission him, but retain instead the people whom he and Rand consider second-rate, philistine, and unoriginal. Either the marketplace is not always the source and proper judge of value, or Roark deserves his failure. Neither does Rand notice that, while she considers the skyline of New York to be mankind's highest architectural achievement (a debatable proposition), she also considers each individual building as being without merit, which is why New York needs Roark so badly.

These contradictions would not be very grave were Rand not so adamant that a wholly consistent and rational philosophy of life were possible, and that she herself had found it and propagated it in her books. Her combination of vehemence, moral fanaticism, and mediocrity as a thinker was very characteristic of the earnest journalistic tradition of Dobrolyubov, Pisarev, and Chernyshevsky. The only other tradition known to me that shares this unfortunate combination of characteristics is that of the German materialists of the second half of the nineteenth century such as Moleschott and Buchner.

In some respects, Rand is almost Soviet. Her habit of remaking the past in accordance with her wishes or needs of the present is most striking. The original edition of *Atlas Shrugged* was dedicated to Nathaniel Branden, a

young man whom Rand deemed to be in apostolic intellectual succession to her until he displayed his irrational tendencies by refusing to continue a sexual liaison with her (a refusal she considered irrational despite their very considerable age difference). The dedication was removed from subsequent editions in the way that Trotsky and others were removed from Soviet photographs once they had fallen from favor. Perhaps the most significant sentence in Ms. Heller's biography is this from the preface: "Because I am not an advocate for Rand's ideas, I was denied access to the Ayn Rand Papers at the Ayn Rand Institute ..."

Allied to this tendency to remodel the past was Rand's megalomaniac notion that moral philosophy had been nothing but a tissue of sentimental error until she came along. This is rather like the Stalinist view, Marxist in inspiration, that all was misery and exploitation until Stalin brought happiness into the world: Ethics and ethics laws lay hid in night; God said, Let Ayn Rand be, and all was light.

Like any Stalinist despot, Ayn Rand considered herself to be totally unprecedented and quite without parallel. Like Kim Il-Sung and Howard Roark, she sprang into the world with her philosophical genius fully formed, not needing any support from any other thinker, despite the fact that (in fact) no element of her thought was entirely original. For example, it was perfectly well known to Hobbes that power-seeking might be masked by alleged altruism and compassion; the fact that no man did or could love humanity was expressed by Hume as follows:

There is no such passion in human minds, as the love of mankind, merely as such, independent of personal qualities, of services, or relation to ourself.

Hume, however, did not go on to draw the extreme conclusion (Russian in style) that, if one could not love humanity, one was condemned, or fortunate enough, to have to think only of oneself:

Tho' it be rare to meet with one, who loves any single person better than himself; yet 'tis as rare to meet with one, in whom all the kind affections, taken together, do not over-balance all the selfish.

In her expository writings, Rand's style resembles that of Stalin. It is more catechism than argument, and bores into you in the manner of a drill. She has a habit of quoting herself as independent verification of what she says; reading her is like being cornered at a party by a man, intelligent but dull, who is determined to prove to you that right is on his side in the property dispute upon which he is now engaged and will omit no detail.

Her unequivocal admiration bordering on worship of industrialization and the size of human construction as a mark of progress is profoundly Stalinist. Where Stalinist iconography would plant a giant chimney belching black smoke, Randian iconography would plant a skyscraper. (At the end of *The Fountainhead*, Roark receives a commission to build the tallest skyscraper in New York, its height being the guarantor of its moral grandeur. According to this scale of values, the Burj Dubai would be man's crowning achievement so far.) Industrialists are to Rand what Stakhanovites were to Stalin: Both saw nature as an enemy, something to be beaten into submission. One doesn't have to be an adherent of the Gaia hypothesis to know where this hatred of nature led.

Finally, Rand's treasured theory of literature, what she called Romantic Realism, is virtually indistinguishable from Socialist Realism:

Since my purpose is the presentation of an ideal man, I had to define and present the conditions which make him possible and which his existence requires. I had to define and present the kinds of premises and values that create the character of an ideal man and motivate his actions.

Zhdanov could have written that, and it is hardly surprising that, as a result, Rand's heroes are not American but Soviet. The fact that they supposedly embody capitalist values makes no difference. Rand fulfilled Stalin's criterion for the ideal writer: she tried to be an engineer of souls.

Rand's fanaticism is Russian; philosophically, she resembles Bazarov in *Fathers and Sons*, but without his more attractive qualities. Nathaniel Branden was still Rand's sexual partner and intellectual eunuch when he wrote, with her complete nihil obstat, the following:

There is no greater self-delusion than to imagine that one can render unto reason that which is reason's and unto faith that which is faith's. Faith cannot be circumscribed or delimited; to surrender one's consciousness by an inch is to surrender one's consciousness in total. Either reason is absolute to a mind or it is not—and if it is not, there is no place to draw the line, no barrier faith cannot cross, no part of one's life faith cannot invade: one remains rational until and unless one's feelings decree otherwise.

One doesn't know whether to remark more on the arrogance, self-delusion, or sheer ignorance of this. According to the passage above, the man who was probably the greatest scientist of all time, Sir Isaac Newton, was not rational. Ayn Rand was the only rational being in history. Of course, she was so intolerable that her sister, visiting her in the United States after decades of separation, couldn't wait to return to the Soviet Union. After reading Ms. Heller's book, I sympathize with her sister. Rand was the Chernyshevsky of individualism.

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