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Source: *Salmagundi*, Winter - Spring 2004, No. 141/142 (Winter - Spring 2004), pp. 227-242

Published by: Skidmore College

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40549561>

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Who Was Ayn Rand?

BY GENE H. BELL-VILLADA

The year 1999 was the hundredth anniversary of the birth of Vladimir Nabokov, the great Russian-American novelist who died in 1977. Now there is another Russo-American writer whose centennial we can look forward to, although how her birthday will be noted is anybody's guess at this time. I'm referring to Ayn Rand, the novelist and essayist who was born in 1905, and who died (coincidentally, at the same age as did Nabokov) in 1982.

If bulk sales of books were the chief measure for determining literary worth, then Rand as scribbler would have to be ranked well above her exquisite émigré compatriot. Rand's thick, preachy epics, *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*, along with her half-dozen collections of essays, continue to sell in the six figures every year. Her ardent followers, most of them teenagers or twenty-somethings when they've gotten hooked, have numbered in the millions. It's a passing phase, as a nervous mom might note; the kids will usually outgrow their infatuation and become everything from libertarians or Marxists or New-Agers to plain old centrists and Republicans. Yet there are bright grown-ups who'll cleave to the faith, and some convinced "Randians" now hold positions in the headiest upper reaches of U.S. life. The very witty Gore Vidal once remarked of Ayn Rand that she's the only writer whom everyone in Congress has actually read.

But Randianism is also a mass phenomenon—an object of wide-eyed reverence for the faithful, and an oddity, a risible nuisance, or a

perniciously seductive dogma for many others. For a sampling of those faithful, check under Rand's byline at Amazon.com, the "Reader's Comments" section. In the four years since that service was set up, each of Rand's titles has chalked up extreme responses from hundreds of folks (591 of them for *Atlas* alone), mostly favorable. The hosannas tend to the ecstatic. "This book changed my life!" and "This is the greatest novel I'll ever read!" are recurrent opinions, and hardly atypical.

Randianism, then, exists. There is the movement, now on the wane but still a grass-roots presence via the Objectivist Clubs whose posters bedeck the campus bulletin boards each year. And there is the 1997 film *Ayn Rand: A Sense of Life*, a glowing, sans-blemishes fairy tale made under the auspices of a Randian financier from Bermuda, and an Oscar nominee under the Documentary category the next year. (When I saw the movie at a multiplex art house in Boston, the hush among the audience was church-like. Subtitle of the picture could well have been *A Sainted Life*.) Randian history has all the morbid if fascinating features of a religious sect, as expertly anatomized by Canadian journalist Jeff Walker in his important muckraking study, *The Ayn Rand Cult* (1999). Like all guru-centered cults, Randism has had its fair share of eager acolytes, passive followers, and loyal dissidents who, in some way or other, have been linked or witness to the rivalries, the infighting, the excommunications, the quarrels over fine points of doctrine, and the sordid sexual intrigues. Rand herself achieved some notoriety as a nasty little dictator, who demanded total dedication and, conversely, who ruthlessly quashed any hints of doubts as to her rightness. It's a bizarre tale that is beautifully evoked in Mary Gaitskill's disturbing, seriocomic novel, *Two Girls: Fat and Thin* (1991).

But Randianism also exists as a consistent and rather simple set of beliefs, a theology one readily grasps and absorbs after spending some time with its scriptures. "Objectivism" is how the founder dubbed her system. At its core is the idea that selfishness is good, greed is admirable, and altruism is evil. (*The Virtue of Selfishness* is the pointed title of one of her essay collections.) Unfettered capitalism is the only true moral system in history. The successful businessman is the ideal hero of our time. The sign of the dollar is an icon to be worshiped and flaunted. On the other hand, generosity and compassion have no place in the world according to Rand. In a letter from the 1940s she singles out competence as "the only

thing I love or admire in people. I don't give a damn about kindness, charity, or any of the other so-called virtues." Or, as Dominique Francon, the gorgeous and cold-hearted heroine-cum-bitch of Rand's *Fountain-head* reflects at one point with lofty sarcasm, "Compassion is a wonderful thing. It's what one feels when one looks at a squashed caterpillar."

Having ambitious claims as a total philosophy, Objectivism also posits a theory of knowledge. For Rand, the external world is to be grasped only through man's highest faculty: reason. (*Reason*, not accidentally, is the name of a libertarian magazine.) Rand's and Randians' formulaic paeans to rationality often sound like sloganeering, though admittedly the tradition goes back to the French Revolution and its anti-clerical, anti-religious struggles. Rand herself was aggressively atheistic. On the other hand, despite Randroid fixation on the term "epistemology" and their own mega-word (take a deep breath) "psychoepistemology," she and her friends have little to say about messy, more complex and elusive ways of understanding such as experience or intuition. Darwin and Einstein, to cite just a couple of dramatic instances, were not exactly pure rationalists.

Feelings, meanwhile, are secondary, or dangerous, or simply shouldn't count for much. Within our range of human faculties, emotion for Ayn Rand is a no-no as a path to wisdom, let alone as a means to a good life. As she herself thundered in her 1964 *Playboy* interview, whosoever chooses to live for family and friends rather than for "creative work" is an "emotional parasite" and, what's more, is "immoral." She adduces no figures, but those immoral parasites easily number in the billions, world-wide. They presumably include the field workers who've picked your table grapes and the Salvadorans who now mow many a front lawn in Long Island—all for the sake of their wives and kids right here or back home. Could anything under the sun be more morally repellent?

Rand thought. Randspeak. Randcult. They're very much an American phenomenon. Though she has some fans scattered about the U.K., the (white) British Commonwealth realms, and Scandinavia, her oeuvre is something scarcely known beyond our coastal shores and southern borders. Over the past decade I've chanced to mention La Rand to well-read Europeans and Latin Americans. Almost invariably her name draws a blank. And when I proceed to summarize for them her cherished ideas and values, my interlocutors generally find such notions puzzling, strange, and kind of wacky.

By contrast with Nabokov, a high priest of aestheticism who banished all publicist art to outermost darkness, Rand in her fiction oozes and exudes publicism, putting her message in-your-face at center stage, with trumpets a-blarney, fortissimo. Hers is a literature whose sole purpose is to make converts and prod them on to victory. (If Nabokov is the fox who knows many little things, Rand is the hedgehog who knows one big thing—and moreover wants everybody else to know it.) Orthodox capitalism's La Pasionaria, she nourished the hopes that her prolix philosophical fantasies would prompt major changes in American life. Indeed, she and her close cohorts expected *Atlas Shrugged* to spark a revolution in the streets when the tome came out in 1957. Weighing in at 1,200 pages, the volume did make a sizeable splash on the market, but as time passed the Rand cénacle faced an intellectual cold shower: the grandest of all books was grandly savaged by the critics, even in the *National Review*, in a charge led by none other than Whittaker Chambers. While Rand's mignons first imbibed, and then wept, the rest of America, for the time being, shrugged.

Though the Rand cult may be solely American, the messiah herself was Russian, profoundly so. This is a fact scarcely glimpsed or acknowledged outside the ranks of the Objectivist "church." Whereas Nabokov lovingly evokes his Russian roots in his now-classic *Invitation of a Beheading* (1967), Rand at her peak had little to say about her country of origin, other than to disparage it in talk-show appearances as a land of "mysticism."

Only with the posthumous, admiring yet warts-and-all biography, *The Passion of Ayn Rand* (1986) by immediate disciple Barbara Branden, did the Russian youth and upbringing of the priestess-to-be receive an extended initial look. And only since the mid-1990s have serious scholars such as Chris Matthew Sciabarra and D. Barton Johnson started digging up and reconstructing the Russian and then Soviet education of young Rand. Their researches help demonstrate just how much the mind and life's work of an obscure immigrant who morphed into Ayn Rand had actually originated in certain broad issues and debates from pre-Bolshevik Russia (as we shall see later). Such insights would not have been possible during Queen Ayn's reign, when her born-again Americanism, and her vaunted image of self-fashioning from scratch, were myths too

potent to be challenged by past history. Besides, the paladin of individualism was wont to sue any authors who dared feature her pen name in their book or article titles.

Born Alyssa Rosenbaum of a middle-class Jewish family in St. Petersburg, she enjoyed a happy, loving childhood with her mother, two young sisters, and successful pharmacist father. There were home comforts, foreign governesses, and vacations in the Crimea and the West. From early on little Alyssa felt drawn to greatness. Among her favorite books was *The Mysterious Valley*, a colonial romance that depicts a dashing imperial hero named Cyrus. Nine-year-old Alyssa developed an obsessive, lifelong love for this tall, long-legged adventurer, a British pre-Rambo who overcomes every Asian ordeal and merely laughs at the evil Rajah's would-be torturers. Alyssa also cultivated a predilection for operettas, precisely because of their happy obliviousness to human suffering.

These tastes would remain in her adult make-up, influencing her thought and fiction. The haughty heroine of her first novel, *We the Living*, bears the name "Kira," the Russian feminine form of "Cyrus." Noble, mighty Cyrus was also to serve as inspiration for Rand's triumphant male heroes. John Galt (who gallantly resists torture) in *Atlas Shrugged* is old Cyrus writ large to world-historical stature. Moreover, the future thinker Rand would systematically dismiss all ordinary suffering—whether physical or spiritual—as a topic of scant interest. She did outgrow her love of operettas and come to prefer marches and Rachmaninoff over other kinds of music.

The Rosenbaums lost their wealth to the Bolsheviks, and the chaos of the civil war reduced them to near-penury. Alyssa's girlhood idyll was now shattered, but in time she managed to attend Leningrad University, graduating with a degree in history. Libertarian philosopher Chris Sciabarra—a "Randologist" at NYU who edits the *Journal of Ayn Rand Studies*—published in 1995 a book on Rand with the telling subtitle: *Russian Radical*. Building on some impressive archival researches that he carried out in post-Soviet St. Petersburg, Sciabarra makes a convincing case for a bright Alyssa's having absorbed the dialectical thought and methods then prevalent in her academic milieu.

In 1926, an aunt and uncle in Chicago offered to sponsor Alyssa for a six-months' visit to America. Seeing an opportunity for her eldest child, Mrs. Rosenbaum now sold the family jewels to defray the cost of the restless twenty-one-year-old's Transatlantic pilgrimage. Alyssa already harbored literary dreams, and soon after arrival in the U.S. she decided on a pseudonym: "Ayn" after a Finnish author by that name, "Rand" after her Remington-Rand typewriter. The newcomer's Chicago relatives found her self-absorbed and difficult, to say the least. For one, she'd regularly begin her creative typing around midnight, unconcerned about the clacking noises that kept everyone in the house awake.

Ayn soon felt the lure of Hollywood, and there were some lucky breaks in store for her. By pure chance her aunt and uncle owned a movie theater. Through their contacts with distributors the couple obtained for Rand a letter of introduction to one of Cecil B. DeMille's mid-level employees. Relatives also raised funds for a gift of a train ticket to California, plus \$100—sums today worth thousands. In L.A. she settled into the Studio Club (a privately subsidized dorm for female aspirants to the movie life) and headed for the DeMille Studios. And right at the very front gate—in an astounding coincidence—she saw Cecil B. himself, sitting in his convertible. She approached the man and introduced herself as an admirer. On a whim, DeMille waved her into the car and drove her to the shooting site of *King of Kings*. In addition he gave her casual professional advice, four days' worth of entry passes, and, eventually a stint as extra. Over the next few years Rand earned her keep at white-collar jobs such as script reader, file clerk, and wardrobe supervisor within the Hollywood machine.

Weeks into her L.A. phase, Rand got involved with a handsome young movie extra, of Ohio working-class origins, named Frank O'Connor. Meanwhile she kept renewing her visa, and just as the extensions were about to run out, she married Frank the same month of her scheduled return to Russia. Without exception friends of the groom—by all accounts a passive, easy-going, nice-guy type—saw Frank as doing his sweetheart the favor of resolving her immigrant status. For the next fifty years Frank put up with Rand's many manias and caprices—with disquieting results. In the 1950s and '60s, when the couple were living in Manhattan, Ayn—now a famous author and cult figure—conducted a lengthy amour with her

right-hand man, Nathaniel Branden. The other respective spouses grimly accepted the twice-weekly trysts at Ayn and Frank's apartment as a rational choice between two superior beings. Nathaniel's wife Barbara did live to include this bizarre tale in her authoritative life of the priestess, but the affair contributed to Frank's slow destruction, driving him to drink. He died a broken man in 1979, still married to a Rand he no longer much liked.

The American Rand wrote obsessively, working especially hard on her English, and single-minded about attaining fame and riches from her typed plots and prose. The 1930s and early '40s brought the usual apprenticeship struggles and disappointments. Her "experimental" play *Penthouse Legend* (a murder mystery in which the audience serves as jury) enjoyed moderately successful Hollywood and Broadway runs, then dropped from sight. *We the Living*, about a love triangle in a bleak USSR (and Rand's only work with an explicitly Russian setting) was put out by Macmillan, and died a fast death. No U.S. house would initially take *Anthem*, her brief sci-fi fantasy about a future totalitarian society from which the pronoun "I" has vanished and been replaced by the first-person plural. Rather derivative of fellow émigré author Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*, Rand's reverse utopia in fact had the pronoun *Ego*—Latin for "I"—as its working title. Cassell in England (the dictionary people) first published it in 1938.

Already in mid-decade Rand had done preliminary sketches for *The Fountainhead*. By 1940 her agent was sending out portions of the work-in-progress for consideration. A dozen major houses turned it down; how it finally saw print is a small publishing legend. Archibald Ogden, a junior editor at Bobbs-Merrill, now read the sample chapters. On that basis he envisioned a great book. Mixed reports from in-house readers, though, led to rejection orders from on high. In response, Ogden wired the company head in Indianapolis: either accept this manuscript, or I quit. The boss gave his bold employee the go-ahead for a contract, but warned him that "THE BOOK BETTER BE GOOD." Despite poor reviews when it came out in 1943, *Fountainhead* built up a gradual following that grew further in the wake of King Vidor's 1949 movie, starring Gary Cooper and Patricia Neal. (Rand herself wrote the final script on condition that not one word be altered—an audacious demand to which Jack Warner surprisingly acceded.)

Fountainhead features Howard Roark, the first of those god-like heroes who would people the Objectivist pantheon. A brilliant and original architect, Roark faces constant battle against stodgy traditionalism or villainous mediocrity at every point of his career—at design school, in the New York professional world, with art critics who preach the social gospel, against meddling bureaucrats who dare alter his creations (the latter dunderheads causing him to blow up a building site in reprisal). Rand’s soft-porn plot also exudes what at the time was considered steamy sex. In its most notorious scene, Roark (he’s almost never simply “Howard”) arrives one night at the swank, Connecticut country house of icy, taunting brat Dominique, and proceeds scornfully to toss her onto the bed and violate her without uttering a word. And, reader, she adores it. Next morning, a blissful Dominique, the dominatrix now tamed, goes around chirping repeatedly to herself, “I’ve been raped... I’ve been raped...”

Among Rand’s works, *Fountainhead* is the first to dramatize in the flesh her visionary doctrine of an endless clash between a high, inspired selfishness and a low, degrading altruism. The strictly economic side of Rand’s thought, however, is not yet explicit. Her novel can still be read in the light of a certain twentieth-century Modernist sub-genre that tells of the free creative spirit in revolt against authority, censors, and booboisie—a pattern famously pioneered in Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. (That the idea as filtered through Rand becomes vulgarized and debased is an entirely different matter.) Had Rand died prematurely in 1950, she would have subsequently been seen more as an advocate of a pop-individualist ethics and esthetics than as the militant crusader for unbridled capitalism she later evolved into.

The Fountainhead generated a steady flow of gushy fan letters. Rand in time met with some of her youthful correspondents; from among them there took shape a shifting but close-knit circle of ten or so star-struck disciples who adopted the casually ironic group name “the Collective.” Meeting at Rand’s apartment on Saturday evenings, they provided company and support as a kind of “family,” along with a loyal readership and weekly feedback for the ever-growing *Atlas Shrugged*, on which she was to spend thirteen years. Set in an indeterminate future, her mammoth opus depicts a slowly spreading strike by businessmen, scientists, musicians, and other geniuses, who will take lofty refuge in a Rocky Mountain retreat

and thereby bring about the malfunction and collapse of the entire social order. Strong and attractive yet regular-guy industrialists and inventors, they had found themselves overly set upon by convoluted, infra-human altruists (of course) beyond counting. Hence their Olympian withdrawal.

The book's climactic, seventy-page chapter (which took Rand two years to write) is entitled "'This Is John Galt Speaking.'" It features a nationally broadcast radio address by its eponymous hero-of-heroes, the inventor of a machine that could revolutionize man's existence but that he has chosen not to share with a nation thoroughly sick and infected with you-know-what. Galt's resounding final words—"I will never live for the sake of another man, nor ask any other man to live for me"—would in time become the proud motto of many a would-be John Galt around our college and corporate corridors.

Three chapters later, on the last page, Rand's giants decide to come down from their mountain top.

And Galt says, "We are going back to the world."

And Rand says, "He raised his hand and over the desolate space he traced the sign of the dollar."

Lovers of Rand fiction invariably agree with or accept her teachings; they admire the work for its contents, not its art. Curiously, those who are put off by Rand's loud sermons are equally indifferent to her literary side. This is not one of those complex cases in which you reject an artist's repugnant world view yet admire her artistry—as we sometimes do with, say, Ezra Pound, D. W. Griffiths, and Leni Riefenstahl. *Fountainhead* in this regard qualifies as a competent middlebrow novel, neither better nor worse than dozens of such titles cranked out by commercial houses year after year. A suspenseful page-turner with a serviceable if not stunning prose style, it has able plotting (a skill Rand learned in Hollywood) and a highly charged eroticism. Story and doctrine, moreover, are ably integrated, though of course what cultists revere is the latter. These modest virtues cannot compensate for the book's principal vice, which is Rand's "allegorical" tendency to make every character into an ideological or moral type, a mouthpiece for this philosophical position or that. Oh, yes, and, unlike you and me, dear reader, as people her cast members are all either heroic or villainous, grand or puny, awesome or just awful. Cyrus lives.

In *Atlas* Rand's vices win out. This is a narrative inordinately made up of relentless speechifying and counter-sermonizing, the contents of which are thoroughly predictable and lacking in subtlety of any sort. The big brown book of Chairman Rand's thought is, quite simply, a very bad long novel that nonetheless has moved and inspired countless true believers out there, and still does. It became the fantastical, race-neutral *Gone with the Wind* of pitiless adolescents, tin-ear ideologues, and illiterate entrepreneurs, wannabe or actual. Rand, incidentally, admired Margaret Mitchell.

Sales aside, *Atlas* failed to garner the intellectual prestige and respect Rand so hungered for, and she fell into a blue funk. Never completing another novel, she turned instead to writing essays for a series of journals churned out by members of "the Collective," and also had a passing phase as syndicated columnist for the *Los Angeles Times*.

We are faced, then, with a truculently ideological author whose mindset calls for a brief look. Where does it all come from? Personal experience plays a major role. In a virulent reaction to the state socialism of which the Rosenbaums were economic victims, Rand would summarily reject any philosophic conceptions that inclined to the "social" or the "humane." Accordingly, her fiction and essays show an unrelenting hatred of trade unions, socialists, the New Deal, labor laws, family ties, charitable works, and anything tainted with the sin of caring about others. Whenever a Rand character is introduced as being "from Washington," you can be sure he's a tyrannical, obtuse New Dealer or a commie successor. And anytime somebody in Rand invokes family responsibilities or the general welfare, he's invariably portrayed as manipulative or vicious or just plain dumb. Significantly, there are no children to be found in Rand's work (other than in her economic arguments in favor of child labor), given that parenting is, ipso facto, an altruistic task.

Still, as a "thinker," Rand was well aware of the attractions offered by Marxism as a means of explaining historical and cultural change. From there she envisioned the need for a comparably broad and encompassing non-Marxist alternative. Her writing and life projects would be marked by this motive. It's not by chance that each of her

grandiose fictions has as its climax a protracted speech, in which Roark/Galt sets forth an entire philosophy of history, starting with the savage, cave-dwelling brutes of our dark past and leading us by steps to the bright utopia of man's free, capitalist future.

Countering the pernicious collectivist tide are those great heroes whom Rand made no secret of seeking to glorify. They're inevitably tall, square-jawed, handsome (of course), stouthearted, fiercely independent, and alone. Men of absolute genius, they are unfailingly right about *everything*. Their enemies, by contrast, are despicable sub-humans who live "second-hand lives"—a typically Randian phrase of scorn, and indeed the originally proposed title for *Fountainhead* (which she dropped on the advice of her editor).

If much of this smacks of Nietzsche's cult of the *Übermensch* and his contempt for "the herd," it's not coincidental. The first book bought by immigrant Rand was an English translation of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. Recent scholarship, moreover, has identified major influences from the German philosopher on the Russian-American pop-philosopher-to-be. D. Barton Johnson—a Slavacist at the University of California-Santa Barbara—observes that, during Alyssa Rosenbaum's youth, the best-selling novelists in her native land were Anastasia Verbitskaya and Mikhail Artsybashev, authors whose "ideological potboilers featured socially and sexually emancipated heroes and heroines spouting half-baked Nietzscheanisms." Jeff Walker in turn notes that the original 1936 version of *We the Living* contains Nietzschean passages, expunged from newer editions published at the height of Rand's fame. Furthermore, Walker indicates, the typescript of *Fountainhead* included epigraphs and other materials taken from Nietzsche which, for reasons of space, she chose to cut.

The *Überfrau* never owned up to her debt to Nietzsche, and she publicly repudiated his anti-rationalist and relativist tendencies. Actually, the only philosopher Rand claimed to respect was Aristotle; most other thinkers (such as Descartes, Kant, and Wittgenstein) did not, in her view, believe in objective reality—though she'd also scarcely read them, as some close fans have since granted. Whatever the case, Nietzsche's aphoristic irony and wit were well beyond this solemn didacticist to whom humor reportedly seemed both strange and pointless. (What humor there

is in Rand's fictions is of the unintentional, campy variety.) Still, much like Nietzsche, the empress cared mostly about "the great and the exceptional," not to mention the struggles of Greatness against fools and looters who deny it its due. Throughout *Atlas* the only victims we see are rich businessmen, who suffer more than all the "so-called underdogs" put together. Nevertheless, at the end, Rand's victorious Superbeings emulate wise Zarathustra and descend from the heights.

Along with her Nietzsche-through-Russian-eyes, Rand poured her potent American brew into a very Russian vessel: the novel of ideas. The grand debates that breathe life into *The Brothers Karamazov* have long moved and excited many a college youth, and Rand indeed acknowledged in Dostoevsky a kindred literary (if not philosophic) spirit. Even Tolstoy, formidable realist though he was, felt called upon to insert those essays on historical determinism that freeze the flow of events in *War and Peace*. No major Anglo-American author has so passionately evoked *intellectual* battles as do the Russians, both the canonized and the lesser fry. What Rand wrote to a great extent, then, was Russian novels with U.S. settings.

Fighting your enemies, it's sometimes said, can lead you to resemble them; and the anti-Soviet urge that drove Rand's writing did just that. In a perverse way, Rand's orthodoxies and the Randian personality cult present a mirror image of Soviet dogmas and practices. Her hard-line opposition to *all* state intervention in the economy is a stance as absolute and unforgiving as was the Stalinist program of government planning and control. Her aesthetic follows the same convergent pattern. Soviet propaganda notoriously glorified the heroic, committed worker who—as the *Encyclopedia Britannica* entry on "Russia" puts it—"overcomes various saboteurs, spies, or other obstacles in order to get the factory, farm, or construction site up and running." Rand's "capitalist realist" novels similarly glorify the heroic, committed entrepreneur who overcomes those same obstacles, and at the end of *Fountainhead* the Roark construction site is "up and running." The godhead of Objectivism once characterized the aim of her work as "the projection of an ideal man;" for Soviet apparatchiks the explicit goal of art, by the same token, was to foster "the positive hero." (As D. Barton Johnson tellingly points out, Rand's formula "sounds quite at home in the context of Socialist Realism.") Also, says Rand, "Art is the

technology of the soul,” a notion uncannily close to Stalin’s conception of artists as “engineers of human souls.” The breathless descriptions of chugging factories in *Atlas Shrugged* are the sort of thing we might expect to find in Soviet novels or films that mythify the tempering of steel.

Rand’s anti-socialist demons ultimately had her disputing the claims of any major forces outside a man’s personal will. On more than one occasion she varyingly asserts that there’s no society, there are only individuals. And the external world does not shape us; Barbara Branden refers to Rand’s staunch “commitment to the idea that human beings are in no sense inevitably the creatures of their environments.” In her dogged anti-determinism Rand went so far as to deny the existence of biological drives, seeing physical illness as the (deserving) consequence of philosophic errors and “bad premises.” Flagrantly defying medical researches she sported a long cigarette holder, smoked like a power plant, and exhorted the same of her young followers as an expression of their liberty. The fire goddess eventually contracted lung cancer. While under treatment and in convalescence she alienated many of her friends, making their lives miserable with her endless monologues about her terrible state. So much for the creator of bulwark John Galt, who asks no man to live for him.

The Randian legacy is considerable. Libertarian journalist Jerome Tuccille, in *It Usually Begins with Ayn Rand* (1972), starts out by reflecting on the many U.S. youths who fall under the spell of Rand’s tracts and become conservative converts, though some might later feel embarrassed by their early enthusiasm about her. As a novelist and thinker, Rand may have been third- and fourth-rate, but she nonetheless took free-market ideology beyond its narrowly economistic confines and made it into a larger moral cause for zealous, bright right-wingers who were still smarting at the New Deal.

Through the work of Rand evangelists, what came to be known as the “libertarian” idea would grow into a visible feature of the U.S. political landscape. (No Rand, no Libertarian Party—so goes the speculation.) Again, it’s an exclusively “American” ideal. In much of Europe, “libertarian” actually means “anarchist,” whereas “liberal” is the term that

serves to designate the nineteenth-century liberal tradition of which Randian thought is both vulgarized revival and melodramatic heir. Meanwhile, Rand's unabashed 1930s isolationism could be conveniently ignored. There is no known anti-fascist statement of hers from before or during Hitler's war, despite her being nominally Jewish. Later she would collaborate with the McCarthyite purges in Hollywood and defend the U.S. intervention in Vietnam, while claiming to be equally against Nazism and Communism as examples of "collectivism."

Rand is dead; but her followers are living well. Among the most prominent is Alan Greenspan, who showed up at Rand's apartment in his mid-twenties, joined the circle, and became one of her star disciples. He never disowned the relationship. Michael Milken, who served time in prison for insider trading, confessed to keeping some twenty-six copies of *Atlas Shrugged* in his jail cell. In yet another instance, Governor Gary Johnson (R-New Mexico) has affirmed in public that America needs more politicians who're like Ayn Rand characters. Dinesh D'Souza, the conservative pamphleteer, entitled one of his recent volumes *The Virtue of Prosperity* (2001), clearly an echo of Rand's *Virtue of Selfishness* (even if he criticizes Rand here and there). More than a few nouveaux cyber-billionaires are avowed Randians. In a climax to the canonization process, the U.S. Postal Service issued in 1999 a commemorative stamp honoring Ayn Rand, as part of its "Great American Authors" series. (No such stamp for Nabokov; *Lolita* still ruffles feathers.)

Self-help. The self-made man. These are among the most treasured folk ideas in the American civil religion. They predate Rand and would have remained as a force with or without her, but she brought to them the combined allure of science, theory, and sex—the vision thing, to quote the father of a certain entrepreneur. How valid are such notions, though?

The first chapter's title of *Atlas* asks, "Who Is John Galt?" The enigmatic query functions as a kind of proverb that recurs throughout and will be answered in the course of the narrative. In reply, I've a question of my own, to wit: Who is Ayn Rand? The real Ayn Rand? In her postscript to *Atlas* she writes, "No one helped me, nor did I think at any time that it was anyone's duty to help me." A wondrous claim, the most charitable interpretation of which is that wealth and position may have been blurring

Rand's selective memory at the time. We have already seen the enormous amount of *help* Rand received from her mother (those jewels), her Chicago relatives (free room and board, money, a train ticket, a letter of reference), the Studio Club in Hollywood (subsidized housing), Cecil B. DeMille (that fateful ride), her husband Frank (green card and much more), her courageous editor at Bobbs-Merrill (who stuck his neck out for her). And that's just for starters. At the Studio Club, where she lived three years, she often got behind in rent payments but was never kicked out. In the '30s, when times were tough, moreover, a friend named Albert Mannheimer lent her \$500. The list goes on and on; as Jeff Walker pointedly and eloquently notes, "In these and so many other respects Rand was the beneficiary of the charitable impulses of others. Once she had exhausted their use to her, she wrote novels and essays which downgraded such impulses and deprived them of justification." In the 1,200 pages of *Atlas Shrugged*, then, there is at least one crucial and objective falsehood.

Given Rand's flagrant dishonesty regarding so fundamental an autobiographical truth—a truth that undermines everything advocated and argued for within her magnum opus—it is hard for me not to be deeply skeptical of anyone who boasts, "I made it on my own! Nobody helped me!" Self-made manhood is, quite simply, a reigning myth that we should best put behind us, if only because every successful man or woman has been helped by someone, perhaps by many someones—whether parents, teachers, relatives, friends, colleagues, romantic partners, or even casual strangers, not to mention government programs such as schools, roads, water supplies, the postal system, the G. I. Bill, and more recently, satellites in space and the Internet (brought to you by the friendly Feds). If the success was in business, surely there were also employees, whom we sometimes refer to, let's not forget, as "the help." By way of analogy, try to imagine an army officer proclaiming, "I took Normandy Beach on my own. No one helped me." Or a baseball club owner bragging, "I won the World Series on my own. No one helped me." Such notions seem absurd, inconceivable, and yet we readily accept comparable rhetoric from individuals in less glamorous or less media-worthy walks of life—and from Ayn Rand, Inc.

Rand's work will most likely go unread fifty years from now, though her name will probably linger on and stand for something. Remember Samuel Smiles, or Horatio Alger? Literary curiosities, their

pulp fictions are now known mostly to cultural historians; yet we also know that millions once devoured the recipes for success dished out by those two scribes. Rand had much vaster intellectual pretensions, and through sheer drive and chutzpah plus lots of help from her apostles she won a niche for herself on the fringes of political respectability. As an artist, however, her contribution is nil. The novel of ideas was not her invention, and there is nothing that a self-respecting writer might learn specifically from her screeds other than how *not* to write. Rand's twofold compatriot Nabokov, by contrast, stretched the limits of fiction, and you needn't like the wizard's chilly aestheticism to appreciate his formal artifice and prose beauties. A. S. Byatt's *Possession*, D. M. Thomas's *The White Hotel*, and Ariel Dorfman's *Widows* simply could not exist without the dazzling example of Nabokov's *Pale Fire*. Rand has no such writerly heirs.

"Pure" Randism is now in some odd way an accidental victim of capitalism's post-Cold War success (and of its outrageous, twenty-first century failures as well). While the atheist Rand personally loathed candidate Reagan for courting religious votes, in great measure the "Reagan Revolution" went on to co-opt many of the elements (including the romanticism) of Randian thought without going as far as Libertarian party-line utopists would have wished. In an analogous pattern three-score and ten years ago, Franklin Roosevelt in his New Deal absorbed some of the rhetoric and programs of the socialist left even as he sidelined the Socialists themselves. That's our two-party system for you.

Rand's style of thinking, meanwhile, has been selectively institutionalized. As an instance, *Commentary's* web page now bills that conservative monthly as "libertarian." And a libertarian sort of agenda was aggressively revived in the first nine months of the Bush II presidency. Rand cultists could thus no longer feel like the revolutionists of yore. Sales of Rand's books remain high, though. I know of young students who've found salvation in her preachments, and I'm acquainted with others who have read her simply because, like Mount McDonald's, she happened to be there. A school year seldom goes by without an eager undergraduate or two listing Ayn Rand to me among their very favorites. But the movement, the shock troops, and the excitement are no longer what they were during the forty years' Cold War. No matter, though. Greed doesn't need Rand to be a driving force in our world.