

Introduction

“What Is Good for Me Is Right”

It usually begins with Ayn Rand.

The young crusader in search of a cause enters the world of *The Fountainhead* or *Atlas Shrugged* as though he were about to engage in unheard-of-sexual delights for the first time. He has been warned beforehand. There is no need to search any further. The quest is over. Here is all the truth you’ve been looking for contained in the tightly packed pages of two gargantuan novels.

Jerome Tuccille, *It Usually Begins with
Ayn Rand*, 1971¹

Before we get to the sexual delights, we must begin with murder.

William Edward Hickman was a forger, armed robber, kidnapper, and multiple murderer. In 1927, at the age of nineteen, he appeared at a Los Angeles public school and lured twelve-year-old Marion Parker into accompanying him, supposedly to visit her father, hospitalized after a car accident. Over the next few days he sent her parents a series of taunting ransom notes. Marion’s father collected the ransom money and delivered it to Hickman. As he delivered the cash he could see his daughter in the

passenger seat of Hickman's car as he drove off, only to dump her body at the end of the street. The killer had dismembered her body, drained it of blood, cut her internal organs out, and stuffed her torso with bath towels. He had wired her eyes open to make her seem alive and propped her body upright in his car, swathed in clothing. Pieces of her body were found all over LA.²

In her journal, the young Ayn Rand began outlining the character of the imagined hero of her first planned (but never completed) novel in English, titled *The Little Street*. Her hero, a nineteen-year-old boy she named Danny Renahan, was based on William Hickman. Rand composed a long paragraph listing all the things she liked about Hickman: "The fact that he looks like a bad boy with a very winning grin, that he makes you like him the whole time you're in his presence." She confessed her "involuntary, irresistible sympathy for him, which I cannot help feeling . . . in spite of everything." About the slogan he announced at trial, "I am like the state: what is good for me is right," Rand wrote, "Even if he wasn't big enough to live by that attitude, he deserves credit for saying it so brilliantly."³

Rand noted that Renahan was not simply a copy of Hickman: "It is more exact to say that the model is not Hickman, but what Hickman suggested to me." She drew from Hickman's "wonderful 'sense of living'" and his "brazenly challenging attitude," which can be seen in

his utter remorselessness, his pride in his criminal career and in things that are considered a "disgrace"; his boasting of more and more crimes and his open joy at shocking people, instead of trying to implore their sympathy; his utter lack of anything that is considered a "virtue"; his strength as shown in his unprecedented conduct during his trial and sentencing; his *calm, superior, indifferent, disdainful countenance* [emphasis added], which is like an open challenge to

society—shouting to it that it cannot break him; his immense explicit egotism—a thing the mob never forgives; and his *cleverness*, which makes the mob feel that a superior mind can exist entirely outside its established morals. (emphasis added)

Renahan was not the only notoriously antisocial figure to serve as a model for Rand's fiction. Her 1934 play *Night of January 16th* (premiered as *Woman on Trial* at the Hollywood Playhouse) was based on the career and possible 1932 murder of Swedish financier and notorious swindler Ivar Kreuger, whom John Kenneth Galbraith named the “Leonardo of larcenists.”⁴ Later in her career Rand made it quite clear that she did not admire their crimes; what she admired was certain criminals who were hounded by “the mob” for their exceptional qualities.

In her notes on *The Little Street*, Rand compared Hickman/Renahan to a Nietzschean “Superman.” Although her journals are replete with such superficial vulgarizations of Nietzsche (whom she later repudiated), the “Superman” she references may have more in common with the comic book character invented a few years later, in 1933. As popular economics writer Michael Goodwin notes, Ayn Rand's books, “like Superman comics[,] are fantasies,” and “fantasies are powerful.”⁵

Beginning with Danny Renahan, Rand started work on her most powerful fantasy, the profile for the heroes who would appear in future novels, with their starkly stylized “sense of life.” In *The Romantic Manifesto* (1969) she explained that “the motive and purpose of my writing is the projection of an ideal man . . . *as an end in himself*—not as a means to any further end.”⁶ Her ideal man morphs from novel to novel, carrying with him the core characteristics of passionate creativity and an unconflicted sense of superiority. He showcases contempt for lesser beings and cool indifference to their suffering—even to their very existence. He is

guiltless. He can be recognized by his strongly masculine physical beauty, manner, and gait. His sexual magnetism is tied to his surly, casual cruelty. His special, enabling skill is his ability to alienate himself from the people around him. He is her fantasy consort, her leading man, the Mean Boy who goes beyond contempt for and indifference to weak, inferior others. He conveys, like William Hickman, an erotic investment in death and destruction. He is the avatar for optimistic cruelty.

There is of course nothing original in this profile. Rand's ideal man shares many key characteristics with the heroes of romantic fiction and adventure tales, from nineteenth-century melodramas to twenty-first-century romance novels. Rand determinedly appropriated a version of this romantic hero from European graphic fiction that she read as a child. She incorporated the fantasy figures of European empire that she found there—domineering, manly adventurers and conquistadors—into her own defenses of nineteenth- and twentieth-century individualist capitalism.⁷

It is sorely tempting to ridicule Ayn Rand's work, her cartoonish characters and melodramatic plots, her rigid moralizing, her middle- to lowbrow aesthetic preferences (she preferred Rachmaninoff to Beethoven, Mickey Spillane to Eugene O'Neill) and philosophical strivings. It is difficult to resist rather crudely psychoanalyzing or otherwise diagnosing her, explaining her body of work as the compensatory fantasy life of a tortured soul who was perhaps a sociopath, but at least a malignant narcissist. It is nearly inevitable that those who do not become fans are appalled by Rand's celebration of cruelty and inequality. But these responses will not help us understand the enormous impact of Ayn Rand's oeuvre. If we are interested in careful expositions of Milton Friedman's economic theories, and in historical analyses of the operations of the International Monetary Fund—both

crucial to the rise and spread of neoliberal capitalism—then we should be pressed into serious consideration of the work of Ayn Rand. Her influence on the world that neoliberalism made has been profound. Engaging her writing rather than dismissing it is crucial to grasping where we are now.

It might be objected that Ayn Rand's ideas—expressed in her fiction and philosophy—are too crude and derivative to matter. But Rand's core contributions to neoliberal political culture do not consist of ideas. Rand's novels, especially, are conversion machines that run on lust. They create feelings of aspiration and desire in readers, who often encounter *The Fountainhead* or *Atlas Shrugged* in high school. They feed fantasies of the Good Life, a future of adventure and achievement against all odds. They engender a Randian sense of life that leads many readers (though certainly not all) into conservative or right-wing politics with the passion and energy of a convert, of a true believer. They provide a structure of feeling—optimistic cruelty—that morphs throughout the twentieth century and underwrites the form of capitalism on steroids that dominates the present.⁸

Ayn Rand defines her “sense of life” as “a pre-conceptual equivalent of metaphysics, an emotional, subconsciously integrated appraisal of man and of existence. It sets the nature of a man's emotional responses and the essence of his character.”⁹ This sense of life underlies the eventual rational integration of a philosophy of living; reason and emotion are fully, seamlessly integrated in the properly functioning Randian man and woman. Their sense of life is individual and ahistorical. But if we reinterpret Rand's sense of life through Raymond Williams's structure of feeling (see preface), we can find a way to historicize her representations of emotional life. Williams describes “social experiences in solution” as markers of living processes

that are widely perceived.¹⁰ This view helps us see Rand's sense of life as a concentrated, individualized representation of historical experience. The wide appeal of her fiction confirms that her sense of life resonates within a social context. Following Lauren Berlant's gloss on Williams, we might see Rand's sense of life as like Berlant's *affect*, registering "the conditions of life that move across persons and worlds, play out in lived time, and energize attachments."¹¹

Ayn Rand's person and world began in 1905 in St. Petersburg, where she was born with the name Alissa Rosenbaum. Along with many other secular urban Jews in the turn-of-the-century Russian empire, she grew to identify strongly with European imperial centers. This devotion to European "civilization" was complicated for the daughter of Russian Jews in a male-dominated, anti-Semitic context. Her profound ambivalence toward Jewish and female subjects deeply marked her entire professional career and private life. During the 1917 Bolshevik revolution her father's pharmacy was seized, and the family never recovered their relatively privileged social and economic position. This dispossession was formative for Alissa Rosenbaum, generating a lifelong feeling of outraged entitlement flowing from her belief that the life she deserved had been stolen from her. It also shaped her decision to migrate to the United States in 1926. She made her way to Hollywood, where she changed her name to Ayn Rand, worked as a junior script writer for Cecil B. DeMille, and began to both elaborate and live her fantasies—in film scripts, novels, and plays, and in her marriage to handsome film extra Frank O'Connor. She transferred her dreams of guiltless empire and glittering capitalism from Europe to the U.S., moving to New York in 1951 to build the philosophical movement called Objectivism.

But life was not exactly a dream for Ayn Rand. Although she did publish a series of novels and a play—*We the Living* (1936), *Night of January 16th* (1936), *Anthem* (1938), *The Fountainhead* (1943), and *Atlas Shrugged* (1957)—and her writing was increasingly successful over time, attracting a devoted following, there were also years of bitter struggle, sharply critical reviews, and elite opprobrium, followed by depression and self-medication with benzedrine. Objectivism was riven with conflict and often identified by critics as a cult. The group nearly dissolved in 1968 in the wake of her bitter split with a younger acolyte with whom she had a secret affair. The handsome husband she touted as her real-life hero, described by friends as a sweet and passive man who loved flowers and peacocks, deteriorated and died of alcoholism and despair.

In the 1960s and '70s, Rand abandoned fiction writing and put out a series of collections of excerpts, essays, and polemics outlining the philosophy of Objectivism and her goals as a thinker and writer: *For the New Intellectual* (1961), *The Virtue of Selfishness* (1964), *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal* (1966), *The Romantic Manifesto* (1969), *The New Left: The Anti-Industrial Revolution* (1971), and *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology* (1979). Many of the essays and segments in these collections were originally published in the *Objectivist Newsletter*, later to become the *Objectivist*, a magazine. Taken together, these publications constituted a kind of footnote to her fiction; she regarded *Atlas Shrugged* as her signal achievement and the prime expression of her views.

Also during the 1960s and '70s, Ayn Rand became a recognizable figure on campuses, in popular culture, and in conflict-ridden libertarian political circles. She lectured widely, scored a *Playboy* interview with futurist Alvin Toffler in 1964, appeared on television interviewed by Mike Wallace in 1959 and by Johnny Carson in 1967. In 1974, she was photographed with disciple Alan

Greenspan and President Gerald Ford in the Oval Office, during Greenspan's swearing in as chairman of Ford's Council of Economic Advisors. The *Playboy* editors provided a respectful but pointed introduction to her interview that outlines Rand's contradictory reputation at the time:

Ayn Rand, an intense, angry young woman of 58, is among the most outspoken—and important—intellectual voices in America today. She is the author of what is perhaps the most fiercely damned and admired best seller of the decade: *Atlas Shrugged*, which has sold 1,200,000 copies since its publication six years ago, and has become one of the most talked-about novels in the country. Ayn Rand discussion clubs dot college campuses. Professors debate her ideas in their classrooms. More than 2,500 people in 30 cities from New York to Los Angeles attend courses given by the Nathaniel Branden Institute, in which they listen to live speakers and taped lectures expounding the principles set forth in the book. Thousands more subscribe to *The Objectivist Newsletter*, a monthly publication in which Miss Rand and her associates comment on everything from economics to aesthetics. And sales of her previous best seller, *The Fountainhead*, have climbed to almost the 2,000,000 mark. That any novel should set off such a chain reaction is unusual; that *Atlas Shrugged* has done so is astonishing. For the book, a panoramic novel about what happens when the “men of the mind” go on strike, is 1168 pages long. It is filled with lengthy, sometimes complex philosophical passages; and it is brimming with as many explosively unpopular ideas as Ayn Rand herself. Despite this success, the literary establishment considers her an outsider. Almost to a man, critics have either ignored or denounced the book. She is an exile among philosophers, too, although *Atlas* is as much a work of philosophy as it is a novel. Liberals glower at the very mention of her name; but conservatives, too, swallow hard when she begins to speak. For Ayn Rand, whether anyone likes it or not, is *sui generis*: indubitably, irrevocably, intransigently individual. She detests the drift of modern American society. She doesn't like its politics, its

economics, its attitudes toward sex, women, business, art or religion. In short, she declares with unblinking immodesty, “I am challenging the cultural tradition of two-and-a-half-thousand years.” She means it. . . .

... Miss Rand spoke clearly and urgently about her work and her views. Answering question after question with a clipped, even delivery, her deep voice edged with a Russian accent, she paused only long enough between words to puff on a cigarette held in a blue-and-silver holder (a gift from admirers) engraved with her initials, the names of the three heroes of *Atlas Shrugged*, and a number of diminutive dollar signs. The dollar sign, in *Atlas Shrugged*, is the symbol of “free trade and, therefore, of a free mind.”¹²

Rand’s complicated notoriety as popular writer, leader of a political/philosophical cult, reviled intellectual, and kitschy public figure (often posed in photos with a cape and huge dollar-sign pin as well as cigarette holder) followed her past her death in 1982. But she has been resurrected in the twenty-first century as a seriously regarded reference point for mainstream figures, especially (but not only) those on the political right. She is reborn and ubiquitous in the neoliberal pantheon especially.

Ayn Rand’s integrated philosophy is not the basis for this resurgence of political and cultural influence; her ideas matter primarily as the framework for her fictional universe. Her Objectivist philosophy is starkly basic enough that she easily summarized it for a Random House salesman who asked her to present the essence of her views while standing on one foot. According to Rand, “I did as follows: 1) Metaphysics: Objective Reality; 2) Epistemology: Reason; 3) Ethics: Self-interest; 4) Politics: Capitalism.” She elaborated by asserting that reality exists as an objective absolute (she credits this to Aristotle), reason is the only means of perceiving reality and acquiring knowledge, every man is an end in himself, and the ideal political-economic system is

laissez-faire capitalism.¹³ These ideas took shape initially as anti-Bolshevism, then expanded into the basis for her bitter opposition to the welfare state. They then energized the postwar anti-communist commitment that motivated her to testify eagerly before the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1947. All along the way Rand drew on the defenses of empire, capitalism, and inequality around her—including civilizational discourses, possessive individualism, and social Darwinism. She claimed status as an Aristotelian philosopher of the first rank, but only her most devoted followers shared that view. Her particular gift was not for philosophical elaboration, but for stark condensation and aphorism. She deployed this gift to create a *moral economy of inequality* to infuse her softly pornographic romance fiction with the political eros that would captivate a mass readership.

Rand's alignment with neoliberal thinking began in the 1940s and '50s. Ludwig von Mises, the prominent Austrian School economist and founder of the neoliberal Mont Pelerin Society, admired *Atlas Shrugged*. He wrote to Rand in 1958 to invite her to attend his seminar at New York University as an honored guest and commented, "You have the courage to tell the masses what no politician told them: you are inferior and all the improvements in your conditions which you simply take for granted you owe to the effort of men who are better than you."¹⁴

Rand's posthumous appeal has not been limited to the fractious overlapping company of neoliberals, libertarians, conservatives, and right-wing politicians, however. Voluminous commentary testifies to the appeal of Rand's novels to adolescents who grow into adults with a wide variety of political commitments. Mimi Gladstein's anthology *Feminist Interpretations of Ayn Rand* collects a stunning array of feminist responses to Rand's novels, from enthusiasm (Billie Jean King) or revulsion (Susan

Brownmiller) to the camp appropriations outlined by Melanie Jane Hardie in “Fluff and Granite: Rereading Ayn Rand’s Camp Aesthetics.”¹⁵ Mary Gaitskill’s 1991 feminist novel *Two Girls, Fat and Thin*, bases the character of Anna Granite (founder of Definitism) on Rand. The Definitist follower and the journalist who are the central characters (the “two girls”) are shaped by Gaitskill’s interviews with Rand disciples. Her characterizations are at once nuanced and sympathetic overall, yet critical to the point of hilarious parody at moments.¹⁶

Despite Rand’s widely known description of homosexuality as “immoral” and “disgusting,” her complex influence is also reflected in LGBT and queer commentary on Rand. The novelist’s libertarian rages against the strictures of family, church, and state appeal to many LGBTQ readers, many of whom also enjoy searching for unconventional sexual arrangements and homoerotic exchanges between characters. In his online blog post “Queer Themes in Ayn Rand,” Gabriel Mitchell delightfully notes that “non-monogamy is prevalent in both of her major novels. . . . [Dagny Taggart in *Atlas Shrugged* finds herself] passionately loving multiple partners without concern for labels or exclusivity. . . . Homoerotic tension is also ripe between the male heroes.”¹⁷ Queer fans go on to make varying investments in Rand’s broader political or philosophical framework.¹⁸

Prominent Belgian theater director and self-identified gay social democrat Ivo van Hove fell in love with *The Fountainhead* when he received it as a gift in 2007. He wrote and directed a four-hour play based on it that debuted in 2014 to excellent reviews. Neither a parody nor simply a dramatic cartoon, van Hove’s production emphasizes the struggle of a creative artist, architect Howard Roark, against the forces of conventionality and mediocrity.¹⁹ This kind of focused, selective emphasis is

available to all interpreters of novels for the stage (or film). But Rand's novels are particularly prone to reading in the manner of "cult novels" as described by Umberto Eco, with sections or isolated themes excerpted as the text is broken apart by readers for divergent purposes.²⁰ Even the readers most loyal to Rand's overall political vision often fiercely advocate some of her views while ignoring others—especially her atheism.

The particular alchemy of influence varies widely among readers, fans, and followers, but Rand's novels nonetheless operate primarily as conversion machines for our contemporary culture of greed. The following chapters of *Mean Girl* trace that work from the Russian revolution through some of the major social conflicts of the twentieth century to the dilemmas we face in the political present.