

Epilogue

An Interview with Leonard Peikoff

On October 12, 2005, I interviewed Leonard Peikoff on The Fountainhead for more than an hour. Dr. Peikoff read the transcript, which I edited, but he has not read all of the essays in this collection, so the inclusion of this interview in it should not be taken to imply his approval of any of the other contributions.

—Robert Mayhew

RM: When did you first read *The Fountainhead*?

LP: I think it was the summer of '49, in which case I was 16 at the time.

RM: What was your initial reaction?

LP: I was spellbound. I had a date to meet someone and I'm usually very reliable about showing up on time. But when reading Roark's trial it was impossible for me to care about the hour. I knew he was waiting for me on a downtown street and would be angry, but I just could not put the book down until I finished it.

Of course, I was just a kid at the time and did not understand the novel's deeper meaning. I didn't know it contained a whole philosophy of life. I thought only that it was a wonderful novel that made some important points.

RM: How long after that did you first meet Ayn Rand?

LP: I met her in the spring of '51.

RM: I assume you discussed *The Fountainhead* with her?

LP: Oh, absolutely. I went with one burning question: Is Roark an idealist or a realist? My father had told me for years that you can't be both, which tortured me because he seemed to be right. But I couldn't determine which one Ayn intended Roark to be: he was obviously an uncompromising idealist; yet I could also see that in long-range terms he was the practical man, whereas Keating had to fail. I was completely baffled. You can imagine how she reacted, because the issue went to the heart of her conception of morality.

Moreover, when I met her, she had earlier that day begun Part Three of *Atlas Shrugged*, so morality was very much on her mind. She gave me a lengthy answer—15 or 20 minutes—without interruption. She told me in detail what the answer to my question was, why it was a crucial issue, and what thinking-errors had led me to hold the wrong view. It was a breathtaking performance. The other main question I asked that evening was: Is there nothing wrong with pursuing only your own happiness? Of course, that's self-evident in the novel, but it wasn't to me at that age. And she replied: "More than that, you are *obligated* to pursue your own happiness, that's the purpose of life." That astonished me. She was so powerful intellectually, and so eloquent; if you showed the slightest frown—any indication of not understanding her—she would provide further elaborations, or question you about what wasn't clear, so that by the time she finished, it was as if you grasped the point through sense perception; you couldn't imagine a time when you didn't know it.

RM: Was there much of a gap between your first meeting and when you saw her again? Did you return to her with other questions about *The Fountainhead*?

LP: I saw her a week later. I was visiting Los Angeles, where she lived at the time, and staying with relatives. I started to espouse her ideas—ineptly, because I did not know what I was talking about—and my relatives buried me with objections, which I dutifully copied down. I got an appointment with Ayn for the following week (which amazed me, because I thought I'd never see her again). I went over every objection with her, and she gave me the answers, and told me how to figure out these issues on my own, and what I should read in order to be clear on certain points. It's been over 50 years, so it's hard to recall all the questions I asked then. I know we discussed reason and emotion, and whether intuition is a source of knowledge. I had a completely wicked cousin-by-marriage, who said the essence of life is dying: you start to die the moment you're born and get closer to death with each passing moment. I asked Ayn what was wrong with this, and she was indignant and tore it to shreds. But I can't remember any details. By the way, as I was leaving, she asked me if I believed in God. When I replied that I didn't know, she told me to find out, because "it's an important issue."

RM: Aside from the question of whether Roark was moral or practical, were you confused about any of the other characters at that first reading, and did that come up in conversation?

LP: I was confused about some characters, but for the most part simply eager to discover more about them. We discussed

Dominique, who, incidentally, was the character with whom I most closely identified when I first read the novel. If you remember the scene where she tells Alvah Scarret about her dropping a classical sculpture down the airshaft—I had much the same attitude in essence: the idea that in life it's everything or nothing. She couldn't accept compromise, but, she thought, one can't succeed in this world without it. So she gave up the world. That aspect of Dominique was a lot like me. In essence, we were both idealists, embittered by the belief that ideals are impractical.

I also asked about Wynand, because I wanted to separate out what was good about him and what wasn't. I was also interested in Toohey and whether such a person was possible—somebody who was that conscious of the evil of his philosophy and nevertheless acted on it.

RM: What did she say about that?

LP: She said that her characterization of Toohey involved a certain degree of poetic license—that in real life, Toohey would have had to evade more and be less explicit to himself about his corrupt ideas. He couldn't act on them, she noted, if he said to himself: "All I want is destruction, as an end in itself; I am depraved." This *is* what Toohey thought, but she brought it out into the open, without evasions and defenses; so in that sense it was a literary device. Her view is that if you know the good, you do have to act on it—*unless* you evade it.

I also wanted to hear how the different strands of the story were brought to a climax in the dynamiting of Cortlandt—how that single event was the culmination of the life-courses of Roark, Wynand, Dominique, Toohey, and Keating. We discussed this stunning feat of plot-construction, and I remember that she said that she had found it difficult, because she needed a *physical event* that would integrate all the different storylines and characters. It couldn't be a speech or mere conversation; as a Romanticist, she needed a dramatic, physical action. She told me that for quite some time she couldn't get anywhere with the problem. All I recall now of what she said about reaching the solution is this: she was in a diner, sitting at the counter eating lunch, and the climax suddenly struck her, and she rushed out to get it on paper. That one integrating flash came to her after a long, seemingly futile struggle.

I wish I could remember more of our discussions of *The Fountainhead*. Part of the problem is that when I met her, she was in the midst of writing *Atlas Shrugged*. So after some general discussion of *The Fountainhead*, my focus shifted with her to *Atlas Shrugged*. I began reading her new writing on *Atlas*, with her in the same room or nearby, and we would discuss my reactions, questions, etc. For the first few chapters of *Atlas*, *The*

Fountainhead was still my frame of reference. I would say to her about some scene she had just written: “Isn’t that just like such-and-such in *The Fountainhead*?” And she would smile and reply: “Yes, there’s a similarity.” But after I read the scene with Rearden and Dagny riding on the John Galt Line, she asked me: “Do you see a parallel to *that* in *The Fountainhead*?” I replied that it was definitely a different novel. She was pleased with that.

RM: I heard that you used to read the novel repeatedly, to the point where you pretty much knew every line. Could you talk about that?

LP: I had virtually memorized the entire book. Some of us used to play a game in which someone would read any line from *The Fountainhead* (with the exception of “he said” or “she said”), and the others would try to say, e.g., which character said it and in what context. I could rarely be stumped. Give me even only a clause, or sometimes a single word, and I could usually quote the entire line.

RM: How many times do you think you’ve read *The Fountainhead*?

LP: It’s been 56 years since I first read it. I’ll take a wild guess and say 30 to 40 times. I haven’t read it for 5 or 6 years now, because I got to the point where I *couldn’t* read it anymore. I knew it inside out.

RM: I heard you say in a lecture that you went back to *The Fountainhead* when you were having trouble with the section on integrity in your book *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand* [OPAR], and that that proved to be very helpful. Is that correct?

LP: Yes, but it’s misleading to single out integrity. In *OPAR*, I tried to reproduce exactly Ayn Rand’s essential thought on everything relating to philosophy. So I steeped myself in her work, including *The Fountainhead*, for every topic. *The Fountainhead* doesn’t offer an explicit epistemology, but I certainly returned to it many times for the sections in *OPAR* on independence, sex, selfishness versus altruism, physical force, and the like. I milked *The Fountainhead* of everything I thought essential. For instance, at the end of the section on productiveness, I quote from a scene with Austen Heller and Roark, which contains one of my favorite lines in the novel. Heller says: “After all, it’s only a building. It’s not the combination of holy sacrament, Indian torture and sexual ecstasy that you seem to make of it.” Roark answers: “Isn’t it?” That’s a wonderful way to describe in condensed form the three components of genuine creative work—the three essential

elements of the inner state of a creator. I just wish that in my work I'd had less Indian torture and more sexual ecstasy.

RM: What other scenes and lines are your personal favorites?

LP: It's hard to say, because there are far too many. But at random, without claiming that this is exhaustive or in any order of importance: I liked the scenes with Wynand and Roark on the yacht, because it gave me an idea of what it would be like to have a real friend. I love the section on the strike against the *Banner* and Wynand's holding out. The single line in *The Fountainhead* which had the greatest suspense for me was during the strike, when the Board of Directors says to Wynand that they can save the paper if he gives in to the union's demands, but if not, it's over; and then they say to him: "Yes or no?" When I first read *The Fountainhead*, I hoped so intensely for Wynand, and I put my hand over the page and was afraid to go on and read what she wrote. This is one of my top scenes, and now I see why it had to end as it did.

Of course, the "rape" scene—who could omit that? I suppose that should be number one. I like all the love scenes. I reacted strongly to the scene where Dominique visited Roark in Clayton, Ohio, and he was walking her back to the train, and a piece of old newspaper blew against her legs, and she picked it up and started to fold it, and he said, "What are you doing?" "Something to read on the train," she said. Then he grabs the paper and throws it away because it was clear that she wanted something, anything, that pertained to him, even trash—that it would take on the glow of a supreme value because of its connection to him. I loved both characters as impassioned valuers. Of course, he wouldn't allow an empty symbol, such as trash.

Another scene I like is the first time Roark and Dominique meet again after the "rape" scene, at a cocktail party, and Ayn writes that he knew how brutal it was for her and admired her strength. Then she describes how Dominique felt: "as if there were no floor around her but the few square inches under her soles and she were safe so long as she did not move or look down"—as though there was a precipice everywhere else. I thought it was such a vivid way of communicating her paralyzed, astounded inner state.

I love the way Dominique fought for the newspaper during the strike, and of course I love her columns. I also think Toohey's columns were excellent—very witty, very vicious. I could go on forever. But the implication I want to avoid is that because I mentioned *these* scenes, therefore I don't like many other scenes just as much. That's not true.

RM: With the understanding that the same disclaimer applies to this next question, what are some of your favorite lines?

LP: I can quote a couple, but it's like asking about a symphony, "What's your favorite bar?" If I re-read the book from the point of view of my favorite lines, and had to underscore them, there would be thousands. But here are a few that occur to me now: When Dominique and Peter are at home alone and she never expresses an opinion on anything, and he explains that the essence of being a person is judging and valuing, and asks her: "Where's your I?" She replies: "Where's yours, Peter?" It's so powerful. He made a speech that focused on her external behavior—on home decoration and going to parties and so on—and then in three words she said to him all the same things, but on a deeper, psychological level, and one which he could not help but see. That is brilliant writing.

Here's another line, which I think of whenever I hear a typical professor of philosophy, especially linguistic analysts, dismiss Ayn Rand's ideas: "The sound perception of an ant does not include thunder." This helps me to keep in proper perspective the kind of people in the intellectual world today; there's no use arguing with them, because they're ants and can't hear and that's it.

I love the fact that the novel starts and ends on the words "Howard Roark": "Howard Roark laughed" and "Then there was only the ocean and the sky and the figure of Howard Roark." That emphasizes that he is the core of the novel.

I once took a course in creative writing and was told that it's important to give some single touch to a lesser character that will stick in the reader's mind as: *this* is the type of person he is. Not a speech or whatever, but some little touch. Ayn did that perfectly.

Offhand, Ralston Holcombe comes to mind. She described his wonderful mane of hair that "rose over his forehead and fell to his shoulder" and then "left dandruff on the back of his collar." That touch made him memorable—and killed him, no matter what he did thereafter. Another one here pertains to Gus Webb. The touch I always remember is: Gus Webb at a party at Lois Cook's, with Jules Fougler saying that he doesn't like Gus Webb; when asked why, Fougler replies: "Because he doesn't wash his ears." Ever since, Gus Webb to me is the one who doesn't wash his ears—with all the dirt of soul this implies. The book is full of lines like that, where one touch or estimate after another is brilliantly expressed. Her descriptions are always so great—so clever or witty or economical or sarcastic (in the good sense).

RM: What is distinctive about *The Fountainhead*, compared to *We the Living* and *Atlas Shrugged*?

LP: It has a distinctive focus. The emphasis of *The Fountainhead* is that idealism is possible and practical on earth. Its focus is on man's capacity to achieve and succeed as an individual. *We the Living* is denunciatory: its focus is on those who *destroy* man's capacity to achieve and succeed—on the enemies of this capacity, rather than on its existence and glory. *Atlas Shrugged* is on a higher level, because it takes for granted that men of achievement and success are possible on earth, and then shows how they are making their own destroyers possible. So all three books are centered in one way or another on man's capacity to achieve values, but each with a different emphasis and perspective.

The Fountainhead is the most intimately personal of the three novels. *We the Living* is a social novel, in the sense that it describes Russia under Communism and how that system destroys the best among men. *Atlas Shrugged* is also, in its own way, a novel about the decay and collapse of a society. But *The Fountainhead* does not involve government, except at the very end, in regard to the Cortlandt project. The assumption of *The Fountainhead* is: we're living in a free (and for now politically safe) society, and these are the choices men make in it. The novel is concerned with the good choices and the bad choices. So it's on a personal level, not focused on society as a whole. It has political implications, of course, but that's not part of the theme, in the way politics *is* essential to the other novels.

Another difference is that in *We the Living*, Ayn was still on the premise of making the woman the protagonist. With *The Fountainhead*, however, a man is the hero, and the woman is essentially someone in love with him. In *Atlas Shrugged*, of course, Galt is the supreme hero.

If you could imagine the characters of *The Fountainhead* in *Atlas Shrugged* for a moment, I think Roark would be one of the strikers, like Rearden, but he would not be on the level of Galt. He's too young, he's learning throughout the novel what people are like, he doesn't have the philosophic mastery or understanding that Galt has. Even towards the end, he is naive enough to work with Keating on the Cortlandt project; Galt wouldn't have tolerated such an idea.

I think all this parallels Ayn's own growth. I hold, as a hypothesis, the view that any (or at least many) creative persons who work across time go through three stages in writing. The first stage is denouncing, ridding your subconscious of the evil background from which you sprung. That's *We the Living*. For the next stage, your mental slate is now clear, and you present without obstruction your positive vision of life, but in simple, essentialized terms, without any "higher mathematics": here's the hero, here's the villain, here's the conflict. That's *The Fountainhead*. Then, in

the final stage, you take the totality of the knowledge you've gained and present the positives in your *magnum opus*, synthesizing all of your knowledge of good and of evil, identifying fundamentals that are much more complex than was possible to you earlier. That's *Atlas Shrugged*.

RM: Let's move to the characters that give a lot of readers a hard time: Wynand and especially Dominique. Can you say something about what they have in common, and how they're different?

LP: Yes, I can. But I want to start by saying, without giving offense, that Ayn Rand felt a particular indignation against people who said they didn't understand Dominique's psychology. She could accept that they might have problems with Wynand or Toohey, but if they couldn't understand Dominique, then she concluded that they had no concept of idealism—because the essence of Dominique, as I said earlier, is an embittered idealism.

Dominique wants the ideal, she's in love with the good, she won't settle for anything less—however, she's convinced that, by the nature of people as she observes them, the good simply cannot be achieved. Since she won't settle for less, she chooses to want and take nothing from the world. To appreciate her character, you must be able to understand her passionate idealism and her complete despair.

Both Dominique and Wynand are valuers in despair; so far they are alike: they're both idealists who believe that ideals cannot be achieved in a world filled with rotten people. So he and Dominique were similar. On this point, Ayn has Dominique say to him: "I think we have a great deal in common, you and I. We've committed the same treason somewhere." But the difference between Wynand and Dominique is profound, because of how each acts in the face of his malevolence. Dominique withdraws from the world: she says people are irrational, so values are impossible, so I want nothing to do with the world. Wynand says: if that's the way people are, I'm going to become one of them, in effect, a super-powerful one, who can force them to obey my values instead of the other way around. She chooses in effect to enter a convent rather than to corrupt her soul; he chooses to enter a brothel in order to become a dictator, who survives by having power over people who sicken him. That is quite a difference between them!

RM: Why does Wynand have to fail, while Dominique can be redeemed?

LP: Because Wynand betrays and destroys his values *in action*. For example, whatever his motivation or rationalization, in actual fact his power-lust is the only thing really hurting Roark—both

professionally and personally. Whereas Dominique can be redeemed because, given her moral purity, all she needed was knowledge—that she was wrong about the universe being malevolent. She did give a few commissions to Roark’s competitors, but that was more symbolic than practically significant.

Dominique loved Roark and devoutly wished he could survive unbroken. But Wynand set out to prove that Roark *could* be broken; and when Roark shows that he can’t, Wynand says: “Don’t think it was one of those temptations when you tempt just to test your victim and are happy to be beaten. . . . Don’t make that excuse for me. . . . I’m not glad and I’m not grateful to you for this.” And that was true, for Wynand the power-luster—and thus Wynand the unredeemable.

RM: Why does Roark say that the man who seeks power is the worst second-hander?

LP: Ayn answers that in the book. She says that the other second-handers, such as Peter Keating, want to submit or live through others, at least for what they can get for themselves, like money, fame, etc. They have to sacrifice their soul and minds to do it, so that the things they get are no source of value or pleasure to them; but nevertheless, to that extent they are concerned with desires of their own. Whereas the man who seeks power, she explains in the novel, is living entirely through and for others—Toohey says this in his speech—for what he can do to others. His whole life is in others and how he can affect them. He doesn’t care about money, he doesn’t even care about titles, he doesn’t care if he’s poor and anonymous. What he wants is only the ability to shape the lives of others. So he is selfless in the most profound and all-inclusive way.

RM: Isn’t Toohey a much worse second-hander than Wynand?

LP: Of course, because Wynand does hold ideals, however perversely he acted on them. Toohey does not. Now, you could say that Wynand is worse precisely *because* he has values, and then betrayed them by going after power. But Wynand does not really understand the nature of power lust, and would not have chosen it if he had, as Toohey explains to him: “So you were after power, Mr. Wynand? . . . You poor amateur! You never discovered the nature of your own ambition or you’d have known that you weren’t fit for it.” Toohey is incomparably worse.

RM: Here’s another question on Wynand: Ayn Rand once described Wynand’s feelings for Roark as romantic love, an expression she usually reserved for a certain relationship between a man and a woman. What did she mean by this?

LP: Ayn distinguishes three types of relationships—friendship, love, and sexual love—and we’re speaking now in the context of your question relating to two men. In the case of friendship, the other person is a value—perhaps even a great value, but is not irreplaceable in your life. If something were to happen to them, or they moved to Brazil, you would miss them and want to talk to them, etc., but you could go on with your life ultimately just as happily, and make another friend, with whom you were also extremely close. This is not to say you would forget the lost friend, but he wouldn’t be an ongoing reality in your life.

Her definition of “love” is what you feel for the irreplaceable: the person loved is of such personal value to you that if lost, you could never again find someone of that value. You could never get your life back to the way it was. You could go ahead with your life, work creatively, meet other people, but there would always be a void and an ache in your person, because you so valued the uniqueness of this person, the combination of qualities that no one else has. That is what she calls love. This relationship, she holds, can exist between two men who are both healthy; it would not include sex—because, she thought, they won’t have the desire for that form of expression of their love. But such love can include admiration of the other’s body, and that’s why she included Roark standing naked on the deck of the yacht and Wynand commenting that Roark’s body should have been the model for the statue, not Dominique’s.

Finally, there is sexual love, between a man and a woman, in which the same irreplaceability exists, but with the additional and crucial form of expression of the sexual relationship.

RM: Let’s turn briefly from the novel to the film version of *The Fountainhead*: What is your opinion of it, and did you ever discuss it with Ayn Rand?

LP: I would say the film is okay, about 7 or so out of 10. The script was excellent—Ayn wrote it. But there were other aspects that left something to be desired. It was not Romantic enough in style; in fact, Ayn’s major objection was that the direction was Naturalistic and clashed with the novel. She also thought Gary Cooper’s acting was pretty shaky. She told me that she had been on the set throughout the filming, and she had tried to help him, repeatedly going over Roark’s speech with him, and he sort of got its meaning in the end, but not entirely. According to Ayn, after he saw the final cut, he said to her: “Now I understand how I should have delivered it.” Gary Cooper was a nice guy, but totally nonintellectual; he often played Westerns, for instance, and it was difficult for him to give a philosophical speech preaching unconventional ideas. He deserves a lot of credit, though, because I

understand he was under tremendous pressure from his agent and other associates not to do the movie—on the ground that its politics would harm him in Hollywood; but he was adamant. He liked the novel and was going to do this film, no matter what the consequences. That’s a rare phenomenon. Patricia Neal took the role of Dominique not out of courage, but because this was her entry into the big time—to star in a role like that with Gary Cooper (and, so it was said, have an affair with him at the same time). I thought she did very well—better than Cooper. On the whole, though, I didn’t like the casting. Greta Garbo, I should add, was Ayn’s choice for the part: but Garbo flatly refused to appear with Cooper as her lover—he wasn’t her type, she explained.

Ayn was moderately pleased with the film, though she thought the Italian version of *We the Living* was much better than the Hollywood version of *The Fountainhead*. It was more faithful to the book, and Alida Valli, she held, was *perfect* for the role of Kira. (She didn’t like Rossano Brazzi that much as Leo.)

RM: One last set of questions: What did *The Fountainhead* mean to you when you first read it and continued to re-read it? What does it mean to you now?

LP: What I get from *The Fountainhead* is the experience of a universe in which I want always to live: a world of ideas, passion, values, drama, creativity—of people of stature, brilliance, achievement. It is the exact opposite of the world I grew up in—a small town with ordinary people who were uninterested in ideas, and would dismiss philosophical questions with the comment: “Nobody knows, and what’s the difference?” There is no aspect of Winnipeg that I could consider heroic, with the possible exception of the fact that people regularly went out in –35 degree weather. Reading *The Fountainhead* was like going to another planet. That’s why I kept steeping myself in it. Now, once I was in New York and seeing Ayn regularly, I didn’t need *The Fountainhead* as much; because Ayn in person radiated the same universe. But the book could still bring back my youth and what it meant to me, and the astonishment of finding out what was possible in life. Reading *The Fountainhead* always took me out of the routine—even after being an Objectivist for decades—and brought me back to my beginning and to what is still possible. I kept at it until I got to know it too well.

RM: You continued reading *The Fountainhead* regularly *after* the publication of *Atlas Shrugged*?

LP: Are you kidding? I continued reading it as long as I felt the need, and I felt it often. I have a much more personal relationship to *The Fountainhead* than I ever did to *Atlas Shrugged*. I love and

admire *Atlas*. There's no question it's the greatest book Ayn wrote. But *The Fountainhead* was *to me* the opening up of reality. It was what hit me as a person, intellectually and emotionally, and changed my life. It was what made it possible for me to understand *Atlas*; *The Fountainhead* was always my ideal, my idealism, and my personal guide—and it has never lost that status.