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What Might Be and Ought to Be

Aristotle's *Poetics* and *The Fountainhead*

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In her 1945 letter “To the Readers of *The Fountainhead*,” Ayn Rand writes:

I decided to be a writer at the age of nine—it was a specific, conscious decision—I remember the day and the hour. I did not start by trying to describe the folks next door—but by inventing people who did things the folks next door would never do. I could summon no interest or enthusiasm for “people as they are”—when I had in my mind a blinding picture of people as they could be. . . .

This attitude has never changed. But I went for years thinking that it was a strictly personal attitude toward fiction writing, never to be discussed and of no interest to anyone but me. Later I discovered I had accepted as the rule of my life work a principle stated by Aristotle. Aristotle said that fiction is of greater philosophical importance than history, because history represents things only as they are, while fiction represents them “as they might be and ought to be.” If you wish a key to the literary method of *The Fountainhead*, this is it.¹

The historian, writes Aristotle in the *Poetics*, “speaks of events which have occurred,” the poet (fiction writer) “of the sort of events which could occur.”²

In going from “could occur” to “might be and ought to be,” did Ayn Rand misquote Aristotle? Perhaps in the most literalistic sense.³ But she is exactly right on the *implications* of Aristotle’s “could occur”—and of his central argument in the *Poetics*. It is to this argument that we must turn in order to see fully how the *Poetics* holds the key to the literary method of *The Fountainhead*.

THE PRINCIPLE OF NECESSITY OR PROBABILITY

When he says that the poet speaks of events that “could occur,” Aristotle does not mean simply that fictional events are possible, since this is equally true of historical events. As he himself puts it, “actual events are evidently possible, otherwise they would not have occurred.”⁴ Rather, “events which *could* occur” are events which “are possible by the standards of probability or necessity.”⁵

What Aristotle calls “the principle of necessity or probability” applies to both characterization and plot. “In characterization,” he says, “one should always seek [this principle], so that a necessary or probable reason exists for a particular character’s speech or action.”⁶ And

at the same time, the events “should arise from the intrinsic structure of the plot, so that what results follows by either necessity or probability from the preceding events.”⁷

These two points are inextricable aspects of one whole, for the following reasons.

First, Aristotle’s view of characterization is ethics-centered. His word for “character” is “*êthos*,” from which we get the English “ethics.” Stephen Halliwell notes, in *Aristotle’s “Poetics,”* that Aristotle

defines *êthos* (which is both “character,” an attribute of persons, and “characterisation,” a property of the work of art) twice in the course of the treatise . . . both times in very similar language. The first of these passages reads: “character (characterisation) is that which shows the nature of deliberate moral choice . . . consequently there is no character in those speeches in which there is nothing at all that the speaker chooses or rejects” (50b 8–10). The word which Aristotle uses here for choice, *prohairesis*, is not a casual ingredient in anything that people do or say, but a carefully delimited matter of conscious desire and intention, based on dispositions which are those of virtue and vice.⁸

As for the choice between presenting virtue or vice, Aristotle is clear: the “first and foremost” aim of characterization is “that the characters be good.”⁹

Second—although this is a point Aristotle does not make explicitly—no particular action follows with necessity from moral character, apart from context. For instance, productiveness is a virtue (at least in Ayn Rand’s moral philosophy, if not in Aristotle’s), and planting potatoes is a productive act, but it does not follow that if a man is virtuous, he will plant potatoes. “Productiveness” is an abstraction that subsumes an open-ended number of concretes. A virtuous man will take *some* productive action, but *what* action depends on his context—on the values, knowledge, and circumstances that are particular to him.

To show that a particular action follows from a man’s moral character, one must show that it follows from his character *in his context*. And the context for a fictional event is the preceding events of the story. Thus, a fiction writer can show an event as necessitated by moral character only by simultaneously showing it as necessitated by the preceding events.

The result is an event that, in Aristotle’s phrase, “could occur”—and also one which *should* occur, if the moral character in question is good.

For instance, the central event in *The Fountainhead* is Howard Roark’s dynamiting Cortlandt Homes. The foremost aspects of Roark’s moral character are his independence and integrity. In his own words, “The only thing that matters, my goal, my reward, my beginning, my end is the work itself. My work done my way” (579). But a man who is independent and has integrity will not necessarily blow up government housing projects. While Roark’s action does follow from his character, it does so only in the context of the novel’s preceding events.

First, Roark *designed* Cortlandt and made sure that the government agreed to build it exactly as designed. Then Gordon Prescott and Gus Webb, two second-hander architects with bureaucratic pull, disfigured Roark’s design. The disfigured design is now under construction; if Roark does nothing, it will stand forever. His achievement will have been desecrated, which is intolerable to a man of his character. It is made clear that he cannot sue the government. His only recourse is to blow up the project, so he dynamites the whole monstrosity.

Had the preceding events been different, e.g., had there been no breach of contract, Roark would have acted differently. (Earlier in the novel, he does not dynamite the disfigured Stoddard Temple.) And had Roark’s character been different, e.g., had he been Peter Keating, he would

have acted differently. Just as no particular action follows from character apart from context, so none follows from context apart from character. But given his character *and* his context, Roark necessarily acts as he does.

Note that Roark acts by *logical*, not deterministic, necessity. There is no implication of determinism in Aristotle's use of the word "necessity," and none in Ayn Rand's portrayal of Howard Roark.¹⁰ The point is that *if* Roark remains true to his premises, he will blow up Cortlandt. This action is not "what necessarily had to be," but what *could* be—and should be.

THE ROLE OF CONFLICT IN LITERATURE

Although a fictional event can follow from character only in the context of the preceding events, not all "preceding events" constitute a necessitating context. For instance, designing Cortlandt is difficult and exhausting for Roark (585). When the work is completed, he takes a vacation lasting several months. This is plausible: even before Cortlandt, Roark has been very busy for years, and he might well need a rest. But his vacation hardly follows by necessity from his character and the preceding events. Had no mention of a vacation been made in the novel, the reader would have sensed nothing amiss.

Nor is this an atypical case. On the contrary, it represents the ordinary pattern of human actions, which are motivated not by a few antecedent events in isolation, but by the full context of a man's values, knowledge, and circumstances. And this full context is too vast to be specified in a story, which can include only the partial context of the preceding events, plus some adjunct exposition. For instance, Ayn Rand writes the following to explain Roark's vacation: "The work in the office did not require Roark's presence for the next few months. His current jobs were being completed. Two new commissions were not to be started until spring" (601). This provides part of the relevant context, but not nearly enough to make Roark's vacation a logically necessitated action. All we are told is that Roark has some free time—which he might just as plausibly have used to take golf lessons.

This leads us to the following principle: to show an action as following logically from moral character, a writer must turn the *partial* context of the preceding events into the action's only *relevant* context.

The primary (but not exclusive) means to this end is the introduction of a *threat* to someone's important value.

Suppose a man is climbing toward the rim of an inactive volcano. Why does he do so, rather than any of the million other things one can do on earth? We cannot tell from the context. But now suppose the volcano erupts and molten lava streams down toward the man, who turns and runs. Why does he run? Because of the threat to his life.

This threat makes any other aspects of the man's *full* context irrelevant to his action. It doesn't matter whether he is married or single, carefree or troubled, interested in or indifferent to volcanic geology or Etrurian pottery; of all the actions possible to him, running from the lava moves right to the top of the list—if he values his life. In the *partial* context given, his action follows by necessity from the moral premise of self-preservation.

The same principle holds for Roark's dynamiting Cortlandt. The prospect of his achievement's permanent disfigurement is an intolerable threat to an important value of his. There is only one action Roark can take to counter the threat: blow up Cortlandt. This action thus follows logically from his character—in the partial context of the preceding events, and irrespective of any further particularities of Roark's full context. (A necessary condition is that

Roark's action is morally legitimate. For instance, he would not have dynamited Cortlandt if this had entailed a breach of contract, let alone the killing of innocent people.)

The heroine of *The Fountainhead*, Dominique Francon, also faces a threat to her values. She is a passionate idealist who believes that the overwhelming majority of men are corrupt and debased, and that the good has no chance among them. It follows from this viewpoint that *any* genuine value is a threat to the valuer: it makes him vulnerable to the onslaughts of an inimical world. In her own life, Dominique has countered this threat in the only way she thinks possible: by pursuing no serious existential values. In this manner, she has shielded herself and maintained her peace of mind.

Then she meets and falls in love with Roark.

Recognizing his genius, she thinks he is doomed, as true genius always is. The world will inevitably destroy him. In other words, another important value of hers is under threat. This time the threat comes not only from the world, but also from Roark himself, who disagrees with her viewpoint and refuses to give up his career, as she has given up pursuing serious values. Dominique thus faces the prospect of standing back and watching Roark rise—knowing that the higher he rises, the harder and more painfully he will be brought down.

But there is one way that she can counteract this threat: she can seize every opportunity to impede Roark's career and thus soften the blow she thinks is coming.

Dominique's campaign against Roark's career follows logically from her premises and her love for Roark. Given her character, no further particularities of her context could possibly be relevant to her—not so long as Roark is about to be crushed and she can act to protect him.

The examples given of necessitated action all involve *conflict*. Dominique is in conflict with the world and with Roark; Roark is in conflict with Prescott, Webb, and the government; and at least in a metaphorical sense, the volcano climber is in conflict with the streaming lava. Indeed, it is a commonplace observation that conflict is the essence of drama and storytelling.

Yet conflict is undesirable in life. A threat to one's values must be squarely confronted—but it would be better if no threat existed in the first place.

Why does one want to contemplate in fiction what one rationally hopes to avoid in life? We have indicated the answer. Conflict in literature posits a threat to someone's important value, a threat he can counteract only by some specific action. This action then follows by necessity from his moral premises, since the specified context neutralizes the potential relevance of any further particularities of his full (unspecified) context.

Paradoxically, conflict makes possible the literary presentation of that which might be and ought to be.

ETHICS-CENTERED CHARACTERIZATION VERSUS “PEOPLE AS THEY ARE”

An ethics-centered view of literary characterization rests on an ethics-centered view of human *character*. It is incompatible with the assumption, widespread in the modern world, that *emotions* are irreducible motivational primaries. On the modern view, abstract moral deliberation is more likely a mere rationalization of emotional impulses than the true arbiter of human action. Such an emotion-centered view of character in turn leads to a literary approach to characterization very different from Aristotle's.

Stephen Halliwell perceptively describes the difference:

A significant element in the divergence between Aristotelian and modern ideas of character lies in the contrast of the relative narrowness and determinacy of the former with the fluidity and uncertainty of the latter . . . Psychological inwardness is a major assumption in modern convictions about character, and this in turn leads to typical emphases on the uniqueness of the individual personality and on the potential complexities of access to the character of others. If character is thought of in strongly psychological terms, then the possibility readily arises that it may remain concealed in the inner life of the mind, or be only partially and perhaps deceptively revealed to the outer world; but, equally, that it may be glimpsed or intimated in various unintended or unconscious ways. Such ideas and possibilities . . . are by their very intricacy and indefiniteness the antithesis of the theory of dramatic character presented in the *Poetics*.¹¹

Consistent with their basic view of human character, modern writers present people who act, not on abstract moral premises, but strictly on emotion (or “psychology”). And in the absence of an abstract premise and a necessitating context, no amount of emotion-centered characterization can make an action follow with logical necessity. No matter how perceptively the emotional life of a “modern” literary character is delineated, the possibility always remains that crucial aspects of his psychology “remain concealed in the inner life of the mind” or are “only partially and perhaps deceptively revealed to the outer world.” Ultimately, one has to take as a *given* that the character simply felt like doing what he did.

By contrast, it is not a given that a character on the ethics-centered pattern acts as he does. He acts with *logical* necessity, given some premise, but he has to hold and apply his premises by choice. (I discuss ethics-centered, volitional characterization versus emotion-centered, deterministic characterization in “Conscious vs. Subconscious Motivation in Literature.”¹²)

Proponents of modern characterization say that it reflects “people as they are.” In real life, they say, people’s actions are normally determined by all kinds of factors of which onlookers lack knowledge. There *are* significant “complexities of access to the character of others.” Their motives may be “glimpsed or intimated” in various ways, but we rarely see logical necessity.

Proponents of ethics-centered characterization will answer that this is precisely the problem overcome by establishing a necessitating context. Such a context provides what is elusive in real life—transparent access to human motivation—by making specific actions follow by logical necessity from moral universals.¹³

Which side of this divide one falls down on ultimately depends on one’s view of the role of morality and emotion in human motivation. For instance, Halliwell shares all the modern presuppositions. Thus, after intelligently identifying Aristotle’s view of characterization, he describes it as “narrow” and implies that it is simplistic, as opposed to the “intricacy” of the modern approach.

I would reply that ethics-centered characterization may be highly complex, as in the case of Dominique. And as Halliwell himself notes, Aristotle’s “*êthos* is a matter of generic qualities (virtues and vices).”¹⁴ In other words, the ethics-centered approach deals with broad abstractions. It is the opposite of narrow.

THE UNION OF THE UNIVERSAL AND THE PARTICULAR

In the key passage of the *Poetics*, Aristotle writes:

It is [because the poet speaks not of events which have occurred but of events which could occur] that poetry is both more philosophical and more serious than history, since poetry speaks more of universals, history of particulars. A universal comprises the *kind* of speech or action which belongs by probability or necessity to a certain *kind* of character.¹⁵

How can poetry (fiction) speak more of universals than does history? The events of fiction are no less particular than those of history. Roark's blowing up Cortlandt is a *particular* action. It does concretize abstractions—*independence* and *integrity*—but so do historical events. A good historian does not merely list facts, but shows, say, how George Washington's courage, integrity, and loyalty to republican values made him a great general and statesman. (In this sense, good history writing does not show people "as they are" in the primacy-of-emotion way of modern literary characterization.)

However, the particulars of fiction do more than simply concretize abstractions.

To see the difference, take again the example of a man planting potatoes. This is a concretization of the virtue of *productiveness*; but as we have said, the fact that a man is virtuous does not mean that he will plant potatoes. A modern man has an almost limitless range of productive options, and his choice of any one of them depends on an enormously complex context. Conversely, the fact that a man plants potatoes does not mean that he is virtuous. Maybe he is a stagnant family traditionalist who works the farm he happens to have inherited—"because that's what my father and grandfather did." In other words, since the man has countless productive options, his specific choice might be governed by immoral premises.

But now suppose that a man is stranded on a desert island where potatoes are the only edible vegetation. In his context, planting potatoes is not one of a range of productive options, but the *only* such option. (Or nearly so, if we assume that the man can also fish and build a hut.) If this man holds *productiveness* as a virtue, he will plant potatoes.

Desert-island stories like *Robinson Crusoe* turn man's *productiveness*—the long-range material sustenance of his life—into necessitated particulars. The castaway's full context of knowledge and values is made irrelevant to his actions, not this time by a threat to his values, but by the radical constriction of his existential circumstances. However, the result is the same: just as the man running from lava has one option if he is to live, and Roark has one option if he is to protect the integrity of his work, so the castaway has one option if he is to produce (and survive long range).

The castaway's planting potatoes, the volcano climber's running, and Roark's blowing up Cortlandt are more than simple concretizations of abstractions: in the context in which these actions occur, they *become one* with the normative premises that necessitate them.

We can now see why "poetry speaks more of universals, history of particulars." This is not because fiction discusses universals as such and history is unconcerned with them, but because the particulars of fiction represent, in their context, the unique *union* of the universal and the particular.

Moral abstractions like *productiveness*, *self-preservation*, and *integrity* prescribe what men should do, but not what they should do concretely. But in a necessitating context, a moral

abstraction *does* prescribe a concrete. The castaway *should* plant potatoes. The volcano climber *should* run. Roark *should* blow up Cortlandt.

Ethics-centered characterization (and plotting) puts the *should* into concretizations of moral abstractions. This is an enormous literary virtue. A work of fiction is not a lecture on ethics. A reader or theatergoer does not primarily seek illumination about what a man should do abstractly, but wants to see him do it concretely. As Ayn Rand explains:

Although the representation of things “as they might be and ought to be” helps man to achieve these things in real life, this is only a secondary value. The *primary* value is that it gives him the experience of living in a world where things are *as they ought to be*. This experience is of crucial importance to him: it is his psychological life line.

Since man’s ambition is unlimited, since his pursuit and achievement of values is a lifelong process—and the higher the values, the harder the struggle—man needs a moment, an hour or some period of time in which he can experience the sense of his completed task, the sense of living in a universe where his values have been successfully achieved. It is like a moment of rest, a moment to gain fuel to move farther. Art gives him that fuel. Art gives him the experience of seeing the full, immediate, concrete reality of his distant goals.¹⁶

It does so by presenting the perfect union of the abstract and the concrete in the realm of human values.

WHAT OUGHT AND OUGHT NOT TO BE

The values concretized in fiction may be material or social, as in science fiction or utopias. Primarily, however, fiction is concerned with values of character. (This is a point missed by those who object that *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged* do not present “what ought to be,” since the heroes confront an inimical society.)

The character values presented in a story may be basic, as with the man running from lava, who is preserving his life but whose character is not further delineated. Or the values may be advanced ethical abstractions, as with Howard Roark’s pursuit of integrity and independence.

They may also be dubious.

For instance, Dominique Francon is wrong about the world—as she discovers by the novel’s end. The good is *not* doomed to defeat; a Howard Roark can succeed, triumphing over the worst of obstacles.

Insofar as Dominique’s actions to sabotage Roark’s career are based on a mistaken premise about the world, they are not “what ought to be.” But those same actions *are* what ought to be—insofar as they are based on Dominique’s passionate desire to protect the human ideal. And this last trait is Dominique’s real essence. In other words, a character’s actions are not always necessitated by a single, isolated premise but may be based on a *set* of premises. If these premises are inconsistent, it is by identifying what is morally essential that one decides whether the character is good, and to what extent his actions are admirable.

The best example is the famous scene in *Les Misérables* where the Bishop of Digne gives his silver candelabra to the thief Jean Valjean. In one respect, the Bishop’s gesture is the ultimate act of altruism. Yet this scene was greatly admired by Ayn Rand, the foremost philosophical opponent of altruism, who saw the essence of the Bishop’s gesture in the self-assertive grandeur

with which he acts on his convictions.¹⁷ (The author himself, Victor Hugo, would have agreed with Ayn Rand in regard to the grandeur, but would in addition have admired the element of altruism.)

When Dominique's actions against Roark's career fail to stop him, she realizes that to remain his mistress means being forever torn between her love for him and her fear of his destruction. Lacking the strength for this torture, she decides to leave him. But she concludes that to allow herself any measure of happiness thereafter would be a compromise with a world she despises. In effect, the possibility of such happiness constitutes a threat to her purity of soul—a threat she counters by the most effective means at hand. She marries Peter Keating.

Dominique's campaign against Roark constitutes a solid contradiction: an idealistic pursuit based on the premise that ideals are doomed. In marrying Keating, she resolves the contradiction by acting more consistently with the *mistaken* part of her mixed premises. Her marriage therefore does not represent "what ought to be" in the assertive, colorful way that her actions to protect Roark do—not if what ought to be is Dominique's essential idealism. From the viewpoint of that idealism, her marriage to Keating is a heartbreaking defeat (like a tragic ending, only in this case a temporary one).

On Keating's part, the marriage represents unqualified immorality.

Note first that Keating does not marry Dominique for love.¹⁸ He loves Katie Halsey. He is goaded into marrying Dominique by Ellsworth Toohey, who tells him:

"[L]ooking at you tonight, I couldn't help thinking of the woman who would have made such a perfect picture by your side."

"Who?"

"Oh, don't pay attention to me. It's only an esthetic fancy. Life is never as perfect as that. People have too much to envy you for. You couldn't add *that* to your other achievements."

"Who?"

"Drop it Peter. You can't get her. Nobody can get her. You're good, but you're not good enough for that."

"Who?"

"Dominique Francon, of course." (321)

Keating's marrying Dominique will impress others, Toohey tells him. (In the novel, he adds that a marriage to the socially awkward Katie will impress no one.) And Keating is a second-hander, a man who attempts to achieve self-esteem from the opinion of others. He himself states his primary motivating premise: "always be what people want you to be. Then you've got them where you want them" (261). Given this premise, and the context of the novel, Keating *necessarily* says yes when Dominique proposes.

Note that Keating faces no threat to his values that makes irrelevant his full context (which includes his love for Katie). His action is logically necessitated for two other reasons. First, his motivating premise enjoins him precisely to disregard the full context and heed only the partial context of fashionable opinion—which in this case has been expressed by the authoritative voice of Toohey. Second, Dominique is not just one rich and beautiful society girl

among others. She is (as Toohey correctly implies) in a class by herself, and marrying her is a *unique* opportunity for Keating to achieve his central goal of impressing others. So we need no more wonder why he says yes than why a man who values money abstains from tearing up a winning lottery ticket. In either case, it is hard to see what particularities of the full context could motivate a different choice.

As necessitated by a normative premise and the story context, Keating's decision to marry Dominique is an example of ethics-centered characterization and story construction. Yet his premise is immoral, and his action is that which ought *not* to be. Should we then speak in general of "what might be and ought *or ought not* to be"? No, for the same reason that Thomas Jefferson did not speak, in the Declaration of Independence, of the rights to "Life or Death, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness or Misery." The statement of a principle must focus on fundamentals, not derivative issues. And evil is a side issue in literature. What matters is the good; not Peter Keating, but Howard Roark.

Take Roark's reaction to Dominique's marriage:

Dominique, if I told you now to have that marriage annulled at once—to forget the world and my struggle—to feel no anger, no concern, no hope—just to exist for me, for my need of you—as my wife—as my property . . . ?

She answers, "I'd obey you." But Roark tells her:

If you married me now, I would become your whole existence. But I would not want you then. You would not want yourself—and so you would not love me long. To say "I love you" one must know first how to say the "I." The kind of surrender I could have from you now would give me nothing but an empty hulk. If I demanded it, I'd destroy you. That's why I won't stop you. I'll let you go to your husband. (376)

Dominique's marriage to Keating is obviously a threat to Roark's values. But the one thing he could do to make her reconsider would pose an even greater threat: it would turn Dominique into an unthinking appendage. So Roark necessarily *foregoes* the action.

This is what might be and ought to be—without qualification.

Aristotle, who says that the first aim of characterization is "that the characters be good," does allow for some portrayal of moral baseness if the poet "makes use" of it.¹⁹ And in *The Fountainhead*, Ayn Rand makes use of Keating's immorality. She makes it part of the necessitating context for the actions of the ideal man: Howard Roark.

ADVERSITY, CONFLICT, AND PLOT STRUCTURE

A work of fiction, Aristotle says, should be a whole.

By "whole" I mean possessing a beginning, middle and end. By "beginning" I mean that which does not have a necessary connection with a preceding event, but which can itself give rise naturally to some further fact or occurrence. An "end," by contrast, is something which naturally occurs after a preceding event, whether by necessity or as a general rule, but need not be followed by anything else. The "middle" involves causal connections with both what precedes and what ensues.

Consequently, well designed plot-structures ought not to begin or finish at arbitrary points, but to follow the principles indicated.²⁰

Plot is the principle of necessitated action applied to the *structure* of a story. An example is the progression in *The Fountainhead* from Dominique's meeting Roark—to her campaign against his career—to her leaving him—to Keating's accepting her proposal—to Roark's letting her go—to the climax of the novel, where Dominique sees that the world can never beat Roark, and she marries him. Their conflict is resolved and “need not be followed by anything else.”

In a plot, the events are connected by the principle of necessity or probability in that one action establishes the context which necessitates the next one. Such a structure presupposes a unifying element of *adversity*, which generates a series of linked value-threats across time, as does the conflict between Roark and Dominique.

Some stories present necessitated action without adversity, for instance, *Robinson Crusoe*. (Having to work to survive, even under primitive, desert-island conditions, does not constitute dramatic adversity, since no value-threats are involved.) But observe that Crusoe's necessitated productive actions are not linked in a *structure* of necessity. The novel has no plot.

Aristotle stresses the importance of adversity in literature. A tragedy, he says, presents “a probable or necessary succession of events which produce a transformation either from affliction to prosperity, or the reverse.”²¹ At one point, he says that a fine plot should “involve a change from prosperity to affliction (rather than the reverse).”²² Here he probably has in mind the main dramatic situation,²³ not the final resolution, since he later implies a preference for happy endings.²⁴ In any case, Aristotle is clear on the larger issue: a tragic hero must confront adversity. (The word translated above as “affliction” [*dustuchia*] also means “adversity.”²⁵)

Adversity is a somewhat wider term than conflict (which is one form of adversity). The literary role of both phenomena is to pose threats to values. But while the threats in a novel like *The Fountainhead* proceed from conflicts of values, adversity is the better term for the source of value-threats in the Greek tragedies Aristotle analyzed.

Consider one of his favorites: Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*.

The play opens as the citizens of the Greek city Thebes approach their king, Oedipus, in supplication. Oedipus greets them with these words:

What is the matter? Some fear? Something you desire?
I would willingly do anything to help you;
Indeed I should be heartless, were I to stop my ears
To a general petition such as this.²⁶

His subjects tell Oedipus that the city is stricken with famine and pestilence. Oedipus, who came to Thebes as a young man and became its king after he defeated a terrible monster, the Sphinx, is now asked to save the city again. He replies that he is aware of the current affliction and has already done something—“The only thing that promised hope.” He has sent his brother-in-law Creon to an oracle of Apollo, “to learn what act / Or word of mine could help you.”²⁷

Oedipus is a pious man faced with a mysterious disaster that implies the loss of divine favor. It is logical that an appeal to the oracle would seem to him “the only thing that promised hope.” Further, Oedipus is not “heartless” but, as he claims, a benevolent ruler who cares about the welfare of his subjects. Therefore, faced by the threat of the city's continuing affliction, he would necessarily *do* “the only thing” that can save the city.

By contrast, the emperor Nero, who fiddled while Rome burned, was not a benevolent ruler. Admittedly, Rome's burning was merely part of his context (and one aspect of his full context might well have been a keen interest in music). But if Nero had been a benevolent ruler, the threat to his values posed by the city's affliction would have made any lesser factors motivationally insignificant, and he would have been helping his subjects cope with the fire.

In *Oedipus Rex*, Creon returns with Apollo's answer: the unavenged killing of the city's previous king, Laius, is polluting Thebes. Oedipus is told that Laius was killed while traveling outside the city. Blood must be paid for his blood, but so far no one has found or punished the murderer. Oedipus swears to do so.

This is a necessary action for several reasons. First, the capture of Laius's killer is the only action that can save Thebes from affliction. Second, as a prudent man, Oedipus must catch the regicide, who (he says) might come for *him* next. Third, as a pious man, Oedipus *would* obey Apollo and the duty of blood revenge. (This "pious necessity" is not occasioned by a value-threat but is a matter of simple obedience to a supernatural authority.)

In fact, Oedipus is himself the killer, and the son, of Laius. He has also married Laius's widow, Jocasta—his own mother. When he starts to investigate Laius's killing, Oedipus does not know the truth. But clues soon surface, and others beseech him to let a sleeping dog lie. (They regard the truth as disastrous for Oedipus, since the blood duties he has transgressed, however unwittingly, are out-of-context, supernaturally ordained absolutes.) Jocasta tells him: "No! In God's name—if you want to live, this quest / Must not go on." Yet Oedipus is adamant. "I must pursue this trail to the end," he says. "I cannot leave the truth unknown."²⁸

Oedipus's investigative persistence follows from a trait of character: his absolute refusal to evade the truth about himself. As he puts it: "I ask to be no other man / Than that I am and *will know who I am*."²⁹ This premise necessitates his actions—in the implied context of *a threat to his pride*. Oedipus can abandon his quest but not erase from his mind the preliminary evidence and his suspicion about the facts. These would remind him constantly that he is guilty of evasion. And Oedipus is first and foremost a proud man—so he chooses the only course that can possibly save his pride: to press on and take his chances with the truth.

The plot of *Oedipus Rex* is a structure of necessitated action depending on a unifying element of adversity: divine disfavor. It is Apollo who causes the famine and pestilence, who demands blood revenge for Laius's death, and ultimately, who has engineered Oedipus's strange fate.

But observe that Apollo does not do any of these things because his moral premises differ from Oedipus's. And Oedipus, who bears no fault for having killed his father and married his mother, does not challenge the premise that his actions, as violations of blood taboos, place him outside the realm of moral values. The acts and decrees of the gods are treated as givens, to be accepted without evaluation; they simply strike Oedipus as disease or accident might strike another man. When Oedipus finally learns the truth and is asked what power has driven him to his tragic end, he answers, "Apollo, friends, Apollo / Has laid this agony upon me."³⁰

In *The Fountainhead*, Roark battles a different kind of adversity. The threats to his values are caused by the differences between his own values and those of his adversaries. He struggles in his romantic life because Dominique thinks that a man of integrity and independence is doomed. He struggles in his career because most men lack his dedication to integrity and independence. In other words, Roark faces *conflicts of values*.

Ayn Rand's reliance on such conflicts reveals her as a thoroughgoing *romantic*.

The distinguishing characteristic of the romantic era was its emphasis on the particular values of *individuals*, and thus on the importance of the differences among men's values. This emphasis represented a radical break with tradition, best illustrated by the rise in the nineteenth century of the ideal of romantic *love*. For the Greeks, in the words of Morton M. Hunt, love was "an amusing pastime and distraction, or sometimes a god-sent affliction."³¹ The same view dominated Western culture as late as the eighteenth century: love was a pleasant game or, in Jonathan Swift's words, a "ridiculous passion which hath no being but in play-books and romances."³² Romanticism swept aside this tradition, holding that a profound value-affinity between two individuals, as contrasted with all others, is not a form of madness, but the proper basis for love (and marriage).

The same break with tradition occurred in literature. While there is conflict in pre-romantic fiction, the idea of literary adversity as based primarily on differences of abstract values is the great romantic literary innovation.

We will examine the further significance of the difference between Greek adversity and romantic value-conflicts in the next section. Here we need only note that, while Aristotle does not discuss conflict in the *Poetics*, Ayn Rand, the romanticist, stresses its importance. In "Basic Principles of Literature," she writes:

Since a plot is the dramatization of goal-directed action, it has to be based on *conflict*; it may be one character's inner conflict or a conflict of goals and values between two or more characters. Since goals are not achieved automatically, the dramatization of a purposeful pursuit has to include obstacles; it has to involve a clash, a struggle—an action struggle, but not a purely physical one.³³

Here Ayn Rand offers a metaphysical justification for adversity and conflict in literature ("goals are not achieved automatically"). But elsewhere, in a more extensive but extemporaneous discussion (addressed to writers), she says:

To illustrate the achievement of a purpose, you have to show men overcoming obstacles. This statement pertains strictly to writers. Metaphysically—in reality—one does not need obstacles in order to achieve a purpose. But you as a writer need to *dramatize* purpose, i.e., you have to isolate the particular meaning that you want your events to illustrate—by presenting it in a *stressed* action form.³⁴

It is possible, she goes on, that in real life an architect like Howard Roark would achieve great success without any opposition. But that would be completely wrong artistically. Since my purpose [in *The Fountainhead*] is to show that a man of creative independence will achieve his goal regardless of any opposition, a story in which there is no opposition would not dramatize my message. I have to show the hero in a difficult struggle—and the worse I can make it, the better dramatically.³⁵

The essence of plot structure, she sums up, is "struggle—therefore, conflict—therefore, climax."³⁶

Here Ayn Rand offers an *esthetic* justification for adversity and conflict in literature: these are needed in order to isolate some particular meaning of the events, and thus to dramatize a message.

Or as I would argue: adversity and conflict, qua central generators of value-threats, create a structure of actions which embody specific (isolated) moral abstractions and dramatize moral values.

ADVERSITY, CONFLICT, AND THE ETHICS-CENTERED APPROACH

Discussing the difference between romantic and pre-romantic plots, Ayn Rand observes that

in Greek tragedies, although the events follow from each other once they start, both the start of a chain of events and particularly the ending are not determined by the characters of the drama. The actions of the characters follow from some event, some issue, over which they really have no control—an issue not of their choice. And the resolution ultimately comes from the gods, from fate, from an issue not of their choice. In other words, the characters are not motivated and concluded on the ground of *their* choices, *their* values. They are not started nor finished by their own hand.³⁷

Ayn Rand's point is demonstrated by *Oedipus Rex*, where the hero battles and is defeated by the disfavor of Apollo.

Stephen Halliwell makes a very similar point when he writes that

the universe portrayed in all the Greek tragedies we know—including those which Aristotle himself cites most frequently—is one in which significant human action is never regarded as wholly autonomous or independent of larger, non-human powers. By contrast with this, Aristotle's own understanding of dramatic action posits, it seems to me, nothing other than intrinsic and purely human criteria of plausibility and causal intelligibility.³⁸

This does not mean that Aristotle is unaware of the fatalistic aspects of Greek tragedy. But he cautions the poet against them. In regard to endings, he writes: "It is evident that the dénouements of plot-structures should arise from the plot itself, and not, as in *Medea*, from a *deus ex machina*." More broadly, he states that "No irrational element should have a part in the events, unless outside the tragedy (as, for example, in Sophocles's *Oedipus*)."³⁹ ("Outside the tragedy," I take it, refers to that which gives rise to the necessitated chain of events, but is not itself part of the chain.)

It is with this in mind that we should read an odd passage in the *Poetics*. Aristotle says that "good men should not be shown passing from prosperity to affliction, for this is . . . repulsive." The proper hero of a tragedy, he concludes, is a man "who is not preeminent in virtue and justice, and one who falls into affliction not because of evil and wickedness, but because of a certain fallibility (*hamartia*)."⁴⁰

Here Aristotle seems to be contradicting himself. The foremost aim of characterization, he has said, is "that the characters be good." He has also said that a plot should "involve a change from prosperity to affliction." Yet now he finds it repulsive if good men are shown passing from prosperity to affliction, and he concludes that tragedy should not present morally perfect men.

Aristotle's ambivalence toward the portrayal of adversity in fiction is best understood by comparing it to a somewhat similar attitude of Ayn Rand's. "I have to show the hero in a difficult struggle," she said, "and the worse I can make it, the better dramatically"; but this does not mean that she approved of all kinds of adversity. At age twelve, she was angered by the ending of Walter Scott's *The Bride of Lammermoor*, where the hero accidentally rides into quicksand and perishes. As an adult, she loathed Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, where the heroine dies in childbirth.⁴¹

In fiction, Ayn Rand held, *accidental* adversity and tragedy implies a profoundly malevolent metaphysical outlook: it conveys the message that moral values are irrelevant to human success or failure, and thus to human life. In an ethics-centered work, such an element obviously contradicts and wipes out the message of the rest of the story. Accidental adversity is less incongruous in an emotion-centered work like *A Farewell to Arms*. But in either case, a reader on the ethics-centered premise would justly regard such adversity as metaphysically repulsive.

By contrast, in Ayn Rand's own novel *We the Living*, the heroine dies at the end—but not accidentally. Kira Argounova is killed by an agent of the same communist state that she has been battling throughout the story. Similarly, the tuberculosis of her lover (a key part of the adversity governing her necessitated plot actions) is not an accidental affliction, but a consequence of the living conditions imposed under communism. Here, the adversity comes from moral premises and can be morally evaluated. The evaluation should be negative: the actions and premises of the communists in the novel are *morally* repulsive. But this kind of adversity does not contradict the ethics-centered approach of the rest of the story; on the contrary, it underscores the importance of moral values in human life. It is not *metaphysically* repulsive.

In Ayn Rand's view, "both adversaries [of a proper plot conflict] must have free will; two choices, two sets of values, must be involved."⁴² This, we can now see, is a requirement of a *consistently* ethics-centered approach to literature.

It is also a thoroughly *romantic* conception of literary adversity, resting on philosophical presuppositions not available in ancient Greece and certainly not reflected in its literature.

Thus Aristotle's dilemma: given the limitations of the literature familiar to him, he is left with divine affliction as the price for ethics-centered characterization. But he finds such affliction as repulsive as Ayn Rand found accidental tragedy, and for the same reason: it contradicts the ethics-centered approach on the deepest metaphysical level. Aristotle tries to solve this dilemma by requiring some kind of minor moral flaw or error in the hero that provides an *ethical* explanation for his falling into misfortune.⁴³ But I believe it is an indication of his commitment to this solution that he provides little concrete discussion of what exactly he has in mind.

Aristotle's dilemma was only solved with the advent of romanticism. And there is no greater testament to his genius than the fact that he identified the might-be-and-ought-to-be principle (i.e., the ethics-centered approach) from studying Greek tragedies, more than two thousand years before the rise of the literary school that consistently practices his principle.

CONCLUSION

Writes Aristotle in the *Poetics*:

Since the poet, like the painter or any other image-maker, is a mimetic [representational] artist, he must in any particular instance use mimesis to portray

one of three objects: the sort of things which were or are the case; the sort of things men say and think to be the case; the sort of things that should be the case.⁴⁴

Aristotle gives an example of the latter method from the field of painting: “it may be impossible that there are people such as Zeuxis painted them, but it is better so, for the artist should improve on his model.”⁴⁵ Lack of literal verisimilitude, he says, is not a failure of poetic art “if the poet *intends* to portray something which is erroneous, such as a horse with its two right legs simultaneously forward.”⁴⁶ In such a case, “if the charge is one of falsehood, a possible defence is that things are being portrayed as they *should* be.”⁴⁷

Ayn Rand held similar views. “There is a story told about Michelangelo,” she writes in a 1944 letter to a fan of *The Fountainhead*,

on one of his statues (that of David, I believe) he made a muscle which never existed on a real human body; when he was told that nature never created such a muscle, he answered that nature should have. *That* is the true artist.

Ayn Rand went on:

You said that some people told you that much of *The Fountainhead* couldn’t happen. Tell them for me that it happened in *The Fountainhead*.⁴⁸

NOTES

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1. Michael S. Berliner, ed., *Letters of Ayn Rand* (New York: Dutton, 1995), 669–70.
 2. Stephen Halliwell, *The “Poetics” of Aristotle* (London: Duckworth, 1987), 41 (*Poetics* ch. 9).
 3. And even this is not clear. Robert Mayhew comments that the “could occur” is “a translation of *an genoito*, a potential optative. The potential optative expresses possibility, but may also carry a normative flavor. As Herbert Smyth writes (§ 1824): ‘The potential optative with *an* states a future possibility, propriety, or likelihood, as an *opinion* of the speaker; and may be translated by *may*, *might*, *can* (especially with a negative), *must*, *would*, *should* . . .’ (*Greek Grammar*, rev. ed. [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956], 407). This combination of possibility and propriety is no doubt what [is aimed for] in translating the Greek ‘might be and ought to be.’” Robert Mayhew, “Ayn Rand as Aristotelian: Literary Esthetics,” paper presented before the Ayn Rand Society, at the December 2005 Eastern Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association. Mayhew notes that Ayn Rand probably borrowed her English version of Aristotle’s phrase from Albert Jay Nock’s *Memoirs of a Superfluous Man* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1943), 191. But her familiarity with and admiration for the *Poetics* was certainly not limited to what she might have gotten from Nock. In a 1960s lecture titled “The Esthetics of Literature” she said that “the only work of *major* value” in the field of esthetics “is Aristotle’s” (typescript in the Ayn Rand Archives). See also Robert Mayhew, ed., *Ayn Rand Answers: The Best of Her Q&A* (New York: New American Library, 2005), 218, 224.
 4. Halliwell, *The “Poetics” of Aristotle*, 41 (*Poetics* ch. 9).
 5. Halliwell, *The “Poetics” of Aristotle*, 40 (*Poetics* ch. 9).
 6. Halliwell, *The “Poetics” of Aristotle*, 48 (*Poetics* ch. 15).
 7. Halliwell, *The “Poetics” of Aristotle*, 42 (*Poetics* ch. 10).
 8. Stephen Halliwell, *Aristotle’s “Poetics”* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 150–
 51. See also Halliwell, *The “Poetics” of Aristotle*, 75–76.
 9. Halliwell, *The “Poetics” of Aristotle*, 47 (*Poetics* ch. 15).

10. See Halliwell, *"The Poetics" of Aristotle*, 99–100. Ayn Rand, discussing *Les Misérables*, says approvingly that "each event is necessitated by the preceding one—necessitated not deterministically, but *logically*. 'If A, then B logically had to follow.'" Ayn Rand, *The Art of Fiction: A Guide for Writers and Readers*, ed. Tore Boeckmann (New York: Plume, 2000), 25. She is here speaking extemporaneously. In her published writings she makes the same point exclusively in terms of "logical connections" and not "necessity," probably because the latter word now has connotations of determinism that it would not have had for Aristotle. (I owe this point to Harry Binswanger.)

11. Halliwell, *Aristotle's "Poetics"*, 150.

12. Tore Boeckmann, "Conscious vs. Subconscious Motivation in Literature," *Intellectual Activist* 7.4–5 (July and September 1993).

13. See Ayn Rand, "Basic Principles of Literature," *The Romantic Manifesto: A Philosophy of Literature*, revised edition (New York: Signet, 1975), 83–84.

14. Halliwell, *Aristotle's "Poetics"*, 151.

15. Halliwell, *The "Poetics" of Aristotle*, 41 (*Poetics* ch. 9).

16. Ayn Rand, "The Goal of My Writing," *The Romantic Manifesto*, 170.

17. I base this interpretation of Ayn Rand's views on comments she made in the question period to lecture 16 of her 1969 nonfiction-writing course. These comments are somewhat garbled in the existing tape recording, which is at the Ayn Rand Archives.

18. Actions flowing *directly* from love cannot be presented in fiction as necessary, since love always depends on one's *full* context. This is why stories dealing only with love as such are boring.

19. Halliwell, *The "Poetics" of Aristotle*, 63 (*Poetics* ch. 25).

20. Halliwell, *The "Poetics" of Aristotle*, 39 (*Poetics* ch. 7).

21. Halliwell, *The "Poetics" of Aristotle*, 40 (*Poetics* ch. 7).

22. Halliwell, *The "Poetics" of Aristotle*, 45 (*Poetics* ch. 13).

23. In chapter 18, he implies that the main transformation to prosperity or affliction occurs early in a play.

24. See Halliwell, *The "Poetics of Aristotle"*, 47 (*Poetics* ch. 14). A "tragedy," for Aristotle, is a serious drama, as opposed to a comedy, and can have a happy ending—as does one of his favorites, Euripides's *Iphigenia in Tauris*.

25. See Halliwell, *Aristotle's "Poetics"*, 204.

26. Sophocles, *The Theban Plays*, translated by E. F. Watling (London: Penguin Books, 1947), 25–26.

27. Sophocles, *Theban Plays*, 27.

28. Sophocles, *Theban Plays*, 55.

29. Sophocles, *Theban Plays*, 55. The emphasis is Watling's.

30. Sophocles, *Theban Plays*, 62.

31. Morton M. Hunt, *The Natural History of Love* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1959), 16.

32. Quoted in Hunt, *Natural History*, 255.

33. Ayn Rand, "Basic Principles of Literature," 86.

34. Ayn Rand, *Art of Fiction*, 22. She makes the same points in "Cyrano de Bergerac," taped radio interview, Ayn Rand Archives.

35. Ayn Rand, *Art of Fiction*, 22.

36. Ayn Rand, *Art of Fiction*, 23.

37. "Our Esthetic Vacuum: Questions and Answers with Ayn Rand," taped radio interview, the Ayn Rand Bookstore.

38. Halliwell, *The "Poetics" of Aristotle*, 13.

39. Halliwell, *The "Poetics" of Aristotle*, 48 (*Poetics* ch. 15).

40. Halliwell, *The "Poetics" of Aristotle*, 44 (*Poetics* ch. 13).

41. See Biographical interviews (Ayn Rand Archives) and Mayhew, *Ayn Rand Answers*, 202–3.

42. Ayn Rand, *Art of Fiction*, 23.

43. Halliwell provides a very similar interpretation in chapter 7 of *Aristotle's "Poetics"*, 202–37.

44. Halliwell, *The "Poetics" of Aristotle*, 61 (*Poetics* ch. 25). Turned into consistent creative *methods*, these three approaches lead to the three foremost schools of art in modern history: naturalism, classicism, and romanticism. See my "*The Fountainhead* as a Romantic Novel," in the present collection, 119.

45. Halliwell, *The "Poetics" of Aristotle*, 63 (*Poetics* ch. 25), revised following Richard Janko, *Aristotle: "Poetics"* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 40.

46. Halliwell, *The "Poetics" of Aristotle*, 61 (*Poetics* ch. 25).

47. Halliwell, *The "Poetics" of Aristotle*, 62 (*Poetics* ch. 25).

48. Berliner, *Letters of Ayn Rand*, 141. I am grateful to the Ayn Rand Institute for a grant that supported the writing of this essay, to Robert Mayhew for answering my questions on points of Aristotelian scholarship, and above all to Harry Binswanger for many enlightening conversations over the years on the topics treated here.