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## *Atlas Shrugged* and the Metaphysics of Values

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In *The Fountainhead*, Dominique Francon visits the construction site of the Enright House, a building designed by her lover, Howard Roark.

She thought, standing there in the heart of the building, that if she had nothing of him, nothing but his body, here it was, offered to her, the rest of him, to be seen and touched, open to all; the girders and the conduits and the sweeping reaches of space were his and could not have been anyone else's in the world; his, as his face, as his soul; here was the shape he had made and the thing within him which had caused him to make it, the end and the cause together, the motive power eloquent in every line of steel, a man's self, hers for this moment, hers by grace of her seeing it and understanding.<sup>1</sup>

As readers of *The Fountainhead*, and Ayn Rand's other novels, we can have nearly the same kind of experience that Dominique has in the Enright House. None of us is Ayn Rand's lover, as Dominique is Roark's—but here, in her novels, is the rest of her, accessible to all. “An artist reveals his naked soul in his work,”<sup>2</sup> wrote Ayn Rand—and so she did in hers.

She did so primarily by means of her themes and her plots.

### **THEME AND PLOT-THEME**

An art work's theme is the core of its abstract meaning.<sup>3</sup> And observe that Ayn Rand's themes express her personality.

The theme of *We the Living* is “the individual against the state.”<sup>4</sup> The theme of *Anthem* is “the meaning of man's ego.”<sup>5</sup> The theme of *The Fountainhead* is “individualism versus collectivism, not in politics, but in man's soul.”<sup>6</sup> The theme of *Atlas Shrugged* is

“the role of the mind in man’s existence.”<sup>7</sup> These themes address, each from its own angle, Ayn Rand’s main thematic concern: the sanctity of the individual, the ego, the sovereign mind—as opposed to any form of collectivism. On the basis of theme alone, a reader familiar with some of her novels would easily recognize any other as “a typical Ayn Rand novel.”

Such a main thematic concern, expressing the personality of the writer, is not unique to Ayn Rand. For instance, Friedrich Schiller is concerned with the preconditions of political liberty. Edmond Rostand is concerned with man’s quest for integrity in the face of the split he thinks exists between man’s mind and his body. This is partly why the authorship of a Schiller or a Rostand play is easily recognizable.

“The theme,” writes Ayn Rand, “sets the writer’s standard of selection, directing the innumerable choices he has to make and serving as the integrator of the novel.”<sup>8</sup> However, a theme, as an abstraction, has a major limitation: it yields only abstract integration, not the concrete unity an artist seeks. Suppose Ayn Rand tried to create *Atlas Shrugged* armed only with the abstract theme: “the role of the mind in man’s existence.” She might think of the first man who discovered how to make fire, the building of an American railroad, Aristotle writing the *Analytics*, and, by contrast, the backwardness of mystical India. But these concretes are separated by continents and millennia. They are a grab bag, impossible to combine into the unity of art.

To achieve concrete unity, a writer needs a concrete standard of selection. He or she needs a *plot-theme* (or its equivalent). “Plot-theme,” a concept originated by Ayn Rand, means “the central conflict or ‘situation’ of a story.”<sup>9</sup> This conflict isolates in the story’s subject matter a particular abstract meaning—the theme—and then, by virtue of its inner logic, unfolds into a unified progression of events in which the thematic abstraction remains highlighted.<sup>10</sup>

Ayn Rand stated the plot-theme of *Atlas Shrugged* as “the men of the mind going on strike against an altruist-collectivist society.”<sup>11</sup> This is the essence of the central conflict, and it isolates the thematic meaning: “the mind’s role in man’s existence.” It does not, however, unfold in a logical progression of events; all it leads to is one person going on strike, and another, and another. On its own, Ayn Rand’s essentialized formulation is too general to do the work of a plot-theme. To reach a full plot-theme, she had to expand her idea into a complex conflict between specific individuals.

Let us put ourselves in her situation. We start with the idea of “the men of the mind going on strike against an altruist-collectivist society.” This indicates two obvious categories of

characters: the men of the mind, and the looters against whom they go on strike. Less obviously, a third category is indicated: those men of the mind who are not *yet* strikers.

We now have looters, strikers, and scabs—but no individuals. However, if there is a strike, somebody must have called the strike. This would be the novel's hero. Let us call him John Galt. Also, if there are scabs, one particular scab must be the last holdout and the hero's most formidable antagonist. Let us call her Dagny Taggart. And if these two characters fall in love, we have an even more complex central conflict.

The conflict depends on the premises of the characters. The looters uphold altruism and collectivism, and so claim the right to enslave man's mind. The strikers uphold a new morality of rational self-interest which condemns such enslavement as evil. Dagny is against enslaving the mind, but also against the strike, since she thinks that the looters might yet be swayed by an appeal to reason and self-interest. Galt knows that this is impossible, since the looters' attack on the mind is caused, fundamentally, by their hatred of life.

Like its rudimentary precursor, this expanded conflict situation isolates the abstract meaning "the mind's role in man's existence"—but *now* the conflict is complex enough to generate a logical progression of events. For instance, if Dagny comes to suspect the existence of a "destroyer" who is draining the minds of the world, and if she can somehow predict which man of the mind the destroyer will remove next, she will logically try to reach him in order to convince him to remain. In the actual novel, this happens when Dagny flies to Afton, Utah, to reach Quentin Daniels, and then follows Galt's plane to the valley.

These derivative events convey the same abstract meaning that was isolated in the plot-theme: the role of man's mind. Dagny follows Galt's plane in order to stop the destroyer from removing the world's minds—because she recognizes the importance of the mind and how much the world needs it. At the same time, Galt is taking Daniels to the valley—because he recognizes both that the mind cannot work under compulsion and that the looters, who set the terms of society, hate the mind and will never stop enslaving it until they are utterly crushed.

By means of the plot-theme, the theme of *Atlas Shrugged* is carried from the novel's inceptive idea onward to every derivative part. The theme becomes like an aspect of the DNA of a living organism. Present in the first cell, it is carried on intact through every cell division, and thus to every part of the organic unity that it helps to shape and build.

## EXTRA-THEMATIC VALUES

Just as a writer may have a main thematic concern, so he may have favorite fields of human action from which he draws his concrete subject matter. Schiller's plays deal with matters of politics, statesmanship, and warfare. Rostand's plays deal with poetry, swordsmanship, and love. Ayn Rand's novels deal with productive work and love.

In *The Fountainhead*, Howard Roark battles for his building career against a collectivist public, and as a result is thrown into romantic conflict with Dominique, who thinks the collective will win. In *Anthem*, Equality 7-2521 discovers his ego primarily through his reinvention of the electric light, but partly also through his love for Liberty 5-3000. In *We the Living*, the two highest values that the totalitarian state denies Kira are her engineering career and the man she loves. In *Atlas Shrugged*, the men of the mind go on strike—that is, leave their professions—so the novel obviously deals with productive work. And as noted, it is also a love story.

Ayn Rand's focus on work and love conveys a premise: that these are the two crucially important fields of human values. This premise is not unique to Ayn Rand, but it is characteristic of her. Its projection is part of what makes an Ayn Rand novel "an Ayn Rand novel."

Yet the premise of "the primacy of work and love" is (usually) not an aspect of Ayn Rand's themes. It is an *extra-thematic* premise.

To grasp the role of extra-thematic premises, or values, observe first that *any* concretization of an abstraction will have aspects that are incidental to that abstraction. Take the character of Howard Roark. He concretizes the abstraction of "individualism," because he consistently goes against collective opinion. He also is described as having a body of long, straight lines and angles, which has nothing to do with individualism. But as a concrete human being, he must have *some* appearance; Ayn Rand's only choice is whether to leave his description partly up to chance or make it reflect values of hers other than the theme—that is, extra-thematic values. Since nothing in art should be chance, she does the latter: the long lines of Roark's body reflect Ayn Rand's image of her ideal man. (For evidence of this, see any photograph of her husband.)

The same pattern holds for the construction of a story's plot-theme. The plot-theme corresponds to the theme but is itself a concrete and as such has many thematically incidental characteristics. And a good author will make these express extra-

thematic values and premises—as Ayn Rand does in featuring love and productive work as the main fields of plot action.

## GOOD-VERSUS-GOOD CONFLICTS

Now take another thematically incidental characteristic of the plot-theme of *Atlas Shrugged*: the most important conflict strand puts in opposition two morally good persons, Galt and Dagny. Their conflict is not the most fundamental—it is derivative of the conflict between strikers and looters, which sets good against evil—but the Galt-Dagny conflict is the most emotionally intense, the most difficult to solve, and the most dangerous. For instance, it is only because Galt loves Dagny that he follows her from the valley and back to the world, risking capture by the looters. As he tells her: “My actual enemies are of no danger to me. *You* are” (961).<sup>12</sup>

The same pattern holds for the other good-versus-good conflicts in *Atlas Shrugged*, such as that between Hank Rearden and Francisco d’Anconia, and for Roark’s conflict with Dominique in *The Fountainhead*, and Kira’s conflict with Leo and Andrei in *We the Living*. These are good-versus-good conflicts which depend on, but supersede in importance, the clash of good and evil.

The supremacy in her novels of good-versus-good conflicts expresses definite premises of Ayn Rand’s. First, the relegation of the good-versus-evil conflicts to secondary status projects the relative impotence of evil, the view that evil is a minor concern in human life. Second, on the positive side, the supremacy of good versus good projects a benevolent view of life. Since the good is the rational, the good but mistaken person can always come to see the truth, which means that the most difficult and painful of life’s conflicts can potentially be resolved—and resolved not merely through the victory of one party and the defeat of the other, but through the ultimate spiritual victory of both.

The premises of the impotence of evil and the benevolence of life are extra-thematic to Ayn Rand’s fiction. Yet the concrete material that projects these premises is not added on to the dramatization of the theme. Ayn Rand does not “throw in a love affair” in order to convey the importance of love, and neither does she throw in, say, the arrest of a criminal to convey the impotence of evil, or a trip to an amusement park to convey benevolence. Rather, all of these extra-thematic premises are projected through the characteristics of the central conflict which dramatizes the theme.

In this plot-theme, the extra-thematic premises join the theme to become part of a story’s DNA, and thus in turn are carried forward to every limb and feature of the full-grown whole.

## ROMANTIC TESTS OF STRENGTH

Ayn Rand's novels are love stories, but so are the novels of many other writers. Her fiction projects her individual personality not merely by the fact that it deals with love, but by virtue of the distinctive Ayn Rand *approach* to the issues of love and sex.

Consider the following two passages from *We the Living*, featuring the heroine, Kira.

Victor's arm slowly encircled Kira's shoulders. She moved away. Victor bent close to her and whispered, sighing, that he had waited to see her alone, that he had known romances, yes, many romances, women had been too kind to him, but he had always been unhappy and lonely, searching for his ideal, that he could understand her, that her sensitive soul was bound by conventions, unawakened to life—and love. Kira moved farther away and tried to change the subject.<sup>13</sup>

Later, Kira meets Leo, the love of her life.

He was tall; his collar was raised; a cap was pulled over his eyes. His mouth, calm, severe, contemptuous, was that of an ancient chieftain who could order men to die, and his eyes were such as could watch it. . . .

He stopped and looked at her. "Good evening," he said.

And Kira who believed in miracles, said: "Good evening."

He stepped closer and looked at her with narrowed eyes, smiling. But the corners of his mouth did not go up when he smiled; they went down, raising his upper lip into a scornful arc.<sup>14</sup>

It is no coincidence that Kira, an Ayn Rand heroine, responds to Leo and not to Victor. Victor is pleading, manipulative, and weak; Leo is masterful and strong. And to Ayn Rand, masculinity is strength, while femininity is hero worship—the desire to look up to man.

A woman is not an inferior human being; intellectually and morally, she ought to be the equal of the man she worships. What she desires to look up to is specifically his masculinity—his strength, physical and mental.<sup>15</sup> (Generally, men are physically stronger than women, but they do not have any superior mental capacity. If they have greater mental fortitude, it is, in my view, an

issue of living up to a greater responsibility posed by their superior physical strength.)

Now consider this description of Dagny, the heroine of *Atlas Shrugged*:

She stood as she always did, straight and taut, her head lifted impatiently. It was the unfeminine pose of an executive. But her naked shoulder betrayed the fragility of the body under the black dress, and the pose made her most truly a woman. The proud strength became a challenge to someone's superior strength, and the fragility a reminder that the challenge could be broken. (154)

Note Dagny's psychology here. As a woman, she expects to look up to a lover's superior strength—and therefore she expects of a potential lover that he demonstrate his strength in some appropriate way—and therefore she posits a *challenge* to such a man. A similar psychology is at work when young lovers run along a beach, the woman trying to avoid capture by the man. And it is at work in a classic erotic motif in art: nymphs fleeing from a pursuing satyr.

A writer who shares (at least in essence) Ayn Rand's view of masculinity and femininity can project that view in his story. He can project it in isolated touches of characterization, as in Kira's encounters with Victor and Leo. Or he can project it much more forcefully through the nature of his plot conflicts. He can turn a conflict of lovers into a romantic test of strength.

A famous example is *Turandot*, the play by Gozzi and adapted by Schiller on which the libretto for Puccini's opera is based. Turandot, princess of China, regards any yielding of control to a man as an intolerable breach of her independence. She therefore demands of any suitor that he solve three riddles, and the price of failure is death. When she finally falls in love with one of her suitors, her extravagant challenge becomes a romantic test of strength.

*Turandot* was a favorite of Ayn Rand's. And in her own fiction, she presents equally grand test-of-strength conflicts: between Roark and Dominique in *The Fountainhead*, and between Galt and Dagny in *Atlas Shrugged*.

Dagny first meets Galt when she crashes in the valley. She learns that he is the destroyer who has been draining the minds from the world, and from her railroad. She learns that he loves her; and she falls in love with him. And as soon as they are in love, their conflict over the issue of the strike turns into a romantic test of strength.

Consider the scene where Dagny refuses to claim the money in her account at the Mulligan Bank—the gold Ragnar Danneskjöld has seized on her behalf from the looters. Galt tells her: “If you don’t claim it, some part of it—a very small part—will be turned over to me in your name.” “Why?” “To pay for your room and board.”

Galt explains that he intends to hold Dagny in the valley for a month.

“There’s no rule demanding that I hold you, but by forcing your way here, you’ve given me the right to any choice I make—and I’m going to hold you simply because I want you here. If, at the end of a month, you decide that you wish to go back, you will be free to do so. Not until then.”

She sat straight, the planes of her face relaxed, the shape of her mouth softened by the faint, purposeful suggestion of a smile; it was the dangerous smile of an adversary, but her eyes were coldly brilliant and veiled at once, like the eyes of an adversary who fully intends to fight, but hopes to lose. . . .

“I shall comply with your terms,” she answered; her voice had the shrewd, confident, deliberating slowness of a trader. “But I shall not permit the use of that money for my debts.”

“How else do you propose to comply?”

“I propose to earn my room and board.”

“By what means?”

“By working.”

“In what capacity?”

“In the capacity of your cook and housemaid.” (759–60)

In this conflict scene, Dagny is acting to preserve her integrity as a non-striker, and even an antistriker—and from this perspective, her actions project thematic meaning. But at the same time, and as an additional aspect of the same conflict, she is challenging Galt romantically—which projects Ayn Rand’s extra-thematic values in the field of love and sex.

Now compare this conflict with that between Kira and Leo in *We the Living*. Kira falls in love with Leo at first sight—because of the strength she reads in his face. And she is not mistaken: there are scenes in the novel where Leo shows tremendous strength. But his strength is not evidenced in the central conflict. The Kira-Leo conflict arises because of her actions to save his life—actions she takes only because he himself has given up the struggle. So in



regard to the central problem and conflict of the novel, Kira is in fact stronger than Leo.

Leo is not unworthy of Kira's love. He has given up, not from weakness, but from disgust. When Kira tells him, "One can fight," he answers: "Fight what? Sure, you can muster the most heroic in you to fight lions. But to whip your soul to a sacred white heat to fight lice!"<sup>16</sup>

Leo's giving up might be understandable, but it prevents the novel's hero-heroine conflict from being a romantic test of strength. And thus Ayn Rand's view of the essence of man-woman relationships, while present in many smaller touches, is absent from the central conflict. It is not part of the novel's DNA.

As a result, *We the Living* is not as characteristic of Ayn Rand as are her later novels.

## THE SPIRITUAL NOBILITY OF MATERIAL PRODUCTION

It is a common view that romanticism, which evokes a quest for the ideal, may be congruous to medieval romances but not to the modern world of capitalism and industrial production. One exponent of this view was the nineteenth-century German writer Theodor Fontane, who said that "romanticism is finished on this earth; the age of the railway has dawned."<sup>17</sup>

Another exponent of the same view is Lillian Rearden in *Atlas Shrugged*. Her husband, Hank Rearden, gives her the first thing made from the first heat of the first order of Rearden Metal. "He did not know that he stood straight and that the gesture of his arm was that of a returning crusader offering his trophy to his love, when he dropped a small chain of metal into her lap." Her reaction? "You mean it's fully as valuable as a piece of railroad rails?" (36).

Unlike Fontane and Lillian, Ayn Rand upholds the spiritual nobility of material production, including the railroad industry. She is both a romantic novelist—and in perfect sympathy with her greatest heroine, Dagny, who feels that the concourse of the Taggart Terminal "looked like a temple" and its "vaulting held the solemn peace of a cathedral" (59).

Or take the description of John Galt as he lies strapped to the torture machine:

His naked body looked strangely out of place in this cellar. . . . The long lines of his body, running from his ankles to the flat hips, to the angle of the waist, to the straight shoulders, looked like a statue of ancient Greece, sharing that statue's meaning, but

stylized to a longer, lighter, more active form and a gaunter strength, suggesting more restless an energy—the body, not of a chariot driver, but of a builder of airplanes. And as the meaning of a statue of ancient Greece—the statue of man as a god—clashed with the spirit of this century’s halls, so his body clashed with a cellar devoted to prehistorical activities. The clash was the greater, because he seemed to belong with electric wires, with stainless steel, with precision instruments, with the levers of a control board. (1141)

Like a Greek statue, Galt’s body represents the idea of “man as god”—but in a form appropriate to the post-Industrial Revolution world, where man is God-like specifically in his mastery of the power of reason; in his ability, not to drive chariots, but to build airplanes.

For Ayn Rand, material invention and production belong on the most exalted level of human values. This premise is a distinctive aspect of her personality—and of her fiction, where it is reflected in the *professions* of her heroes. They are engineers, inventors, businessmen—men who translate the theoretical products of reason into the practical requirements of human life.

Kira in *We the Living* studies engineering. Equality 7-2521 in *Anthem* reinvents the electric light. Howard Roark in *The Fountainhead* is an architect. The most important strikers in *Atlas Shrugged* are an inventor (Galt) and a copper magnate (Francisco). The most important scabs are a railroad executive (Dagny) and a steel magnate (Rearden).

The material-production professions of Ayn Rand’s heroes are not generally directed by the themes of her novels. The theme of *We the Living* is “the individual against the state,” but the totalitarian state is opposed to *any* private career, not just an engineering career. The theme of *Anthem* is “the meaning of man’s ego,” which the hero discovers through engineering; but as far as the theme is concerned, he could as well have discovered it through a pursuit of art (as his friend International 4-8818 starts to do). The theme of *The Fountainhead* is “individualism versus collectivism, not in politics, but in man’s soul,” but the individualist in any field, not just architecture, confronts the social obstacle of psychological collectivism.

In other words, the professions of Ayn Rand’s heroes project the nobility of material production as an *extra-thematic* premise.

However, the mere fact that a fiction character has a material-production profession does not convey spiritual grandeur. A naturalistic author like Sinclair Lewis could write a novel about

“a typical American architect of the nineteen-twenties and thirties” and yet convey little sense of nobility. Why, then, does the fact that *Roark* is an architect convey nobility? Only because he is presented as a hero of individualism and individual integrity—which *in combination* with the fact that he is an architect logically implies that such exalted moral concepts apply just as much to a practical field like architecture as it does to, say, art or science.

The extra-thematic projection (of the nobility of material production) is a function of a theme-incidental characteristic of the plot (Roark’s profession) but only within the context of the novel’s dramatization of its theme (individualism).

Similarly, *We the Living* projects the view that engineering can be a sacred calling only because the *theme* of *We the Living*—the sanctity of the life and values of the individual—is dramatized by the heroine’s loss of her engineering career. And *Anthem* projects the view that practical invention springs from the source of spiritual values, man’s ego, only because the *theme* of *Anthem*—the importance of the ego—is dramatized by means of the hero’s reinvention of the electric light. In all these cases, we see essentially the same extra-thematic premise (“the spiritual nobility of material pursuits”) being projected by a thematically incidental characteristic of the story—in the context of the dramatization of the theme.

Now observe that Ayn Rand’s view of material production is projected in somewhat different forms, and with varying strength, in her novels.

Ayn Rand said about *We the Living* that “it is as near to an autobiography as I will ever write.” Yet she did not follow the time-honored convention of writers of making their fictional alter ego a painter. Nor did she make Kira a student of history, as she herself had been. She made her an engineering student. Why? Her explanation is found in the following statement: “My view of what a good autobiography should be is contained in the title that Louis H. Sullivan gave to the story of his life: *The Autobiography of an Idea*. It is only in this sense that *We the Living* is my autobiography and that Kira, the heroine, is me.”<sup>18</sup> And what is the *idea* that Ayn Rand shared with Kira and that directed her choice of Kira’s profession? The spiritual nobility of material production.

In the first draft of *We the Living*, Kira did study history at university. Ayn Rand later changed her subject to engineering, for the reason given above; but note that in doing so, she would have had to make no major plot changes. It does not really matter for the story what Kira studies in college. Her profession is incidental to the nature of the central conflict.

*We the Living* is the story of a girl who happens to study engineering. By contrast, *The Fountainhead* is the story of an

architect. Roark's profession could not be changed without the whole novel changing. The extra-thematic premise of the nobility of material production is here projected by an aspect of the story—Roark's being an architect—that is crucial to the central conflict, even though incidental relative to the theme. This adds strength to the projection of the nobility of architecture.

*Atlas Shrugged* is a more complex case. The theme—the idea that man depends on his mind—applies to all legitimate fields, including science, philosophy, medicine, law, and art. Accordingly, the strikers in the novel include professors of philosophy, economics, history, and psychology, a doctor, a judge, a composer, several writers, a sculptor, and an actress. A novel about the mind on strike—demonstrating the importance of the mind—could be told from the perspective of any of them. And observe that Ayn Rand's statement of the plot-theme, "the men of the mind going on strike," mentions no particular professions. Even if one expands the plot-theme to include the Galt-Dagny conflict, no professions need be specified. As far as the essence of their conflict is concerned, Dagny could have been a historian and Galt a sculptor.

Yet the fact that the main heroes are industrialists, inventors, businessmen, and so on, clearly projects the nobility of material production—as a central motif of the novel.

Is this motif extra-thematic? I would say no.

The reason is that the novel's actual plot-theme consists of more than the Galt-Dagny conflict strand. There are at least two adjunct strands. The first of these is the battle for the industrial economy of America, a battle that pits Dagny and Rearden (struggling to keep the economy afloat) against the looters (looting the economy) and the strikers (withdrawing from the battle). The second adjunct conflict strand is the Rearden-Dagny-Lillian triangle. Both of these adjunct strands have their own themes, which are *aspects* of the overall theme of the novel. The overall theme is "the mind's role in human existence." The theme of the battle for America's industrial economy is "the mind's role in material production." The theme of the Rearden-Dagny-Lillian triangle is "the mind's role in love and sex."

The spiritual stature of material production is in turn an aspect of the theme "the mind's role in material production" (since that role is crucial). The importance of love is an aspect of the theme "the mind's role in love and sex" (since love is an expression of the mind's highest values). Furthermore, these aspects of the novel's adjunct themes are issues on which the characters disagree, which is crucial to their conflicts with one another. If the looters had upheld production as a noble endeavor, or if Lillian had upheld the importance of romantic sexual love, the

adjunct plot strands would have been impossible. This is what makes the importance of love and the nobility of production *thematic* premises in *Atlas Shrugged*.

In Ayn Rand's last and greatest novel, certain premises of hers that were extra-thematic in her earlier fiction are lifted to thematic status. But the fact that a premise is made thematic does not diminish the power of its projection in a novel. Quite the contrary: this means that the value-projection involved is firing on all engines—which is one reason why *Atlas Shrugged*, more than any of her previous novels, represents the quintessence of Ayn Rand.

## THE GLORY OF AMERICA

In her introduction to Victor Hugo's *Ninety-Three*, Ayn Rand wrote that “[t]o a Romanticist, a background is a background, not a theme. His vision is always focused on man—on the fundamentals of man's nature, on those problems and those aspects of his character which apply to any age and any country.”<sup>19</sup>

This statement of Ayn Rand's notwithstanding, a novel's setting can relate to its abstract message in different ways. At one end of the spectrum are novels where the setting is an aspect of the theme itself, in which case the theme directs that particular setting. For instance, the theme of *Quo Vadis* is “the rise of Christianity,” which virtually directs the setting: Rome under Nero. The theme of *Gone with the Wind* is “the passing of the old South,” which directs the setting: the old South. You could not have *Gone with the Wind* set in Maine.

At the other end of the spectrum is a novel like *Anthem*, which is set in the future, in some place unrecognizable to contemporary readers. The reader does not know whether the City is really Chicago, Paris, Moscow, or whatever—nor does it matter.

Between these extremes, we find Ayn Rand's other novels.

*We the Living*, she herself said, “is *not* a novel ‘about Soviet Russia.’ It is a novel about Man against the State.”<sup>20</sup> Yet the Russian postrevolutionary background is presented in great detail; and in conjunction with the dramatization of the theme, that background does project the extra-thematic premise “the misery and horror of Communist Russia.”

This projection is not the fundamental purpose of the book, but it is *one* purpose. When Ayn Rand left Soviet Russia, a guest at her farewell party said to her: “If they ask you, in America—tell them that Russia is a huge cemetery and that we are all dying slowly.” Ayn Rand said, “I'll tell them.”<sup>21</sup> *We the Living* is her fulfillment of that promise.

In her first novel, Ayn Rand was obligated to tell the truth about where she happened to come from. Later, in her two greatest novels, she would tell the truth about where she chose to go. In both *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*, the American setting is used for the extra-thematic projection of *positive* values, making them more fully Ayn Rand novels than *We the Living*.

The theme of *The Fountainhead*, “individualism versus collectivism,” is neutral in regard to setting: this clash is found in any country. But when the plot concretizes the virtue and triumph of individualism, the fact that this plot is set in America opens the way to the extra-thematic projection of the premise “America as the glorious country of individualism.”

As Howard Roark says in his courtroom speech: “Now observe the results of a society built on the principle of individualism. This, our country. The noblest country in the history of men. The country of greatest achievement, greatest prosperity, greatest freedom.”<sup>22</sup> To this country, Roark says, “I wish to give the ten years which I will spend in jail if my country exists no longer. I will spend them in memory and in gratitude for what my country has been. It will be my act of loyalty, my refusal to live or work in what has taken its place.”<sup>23</sup>

But the America of *The Fountainhead* is still ruled by the principle of individualism, at least as far as politics and law is concerned, and Roark is acquitted at his trial.

Throughout the novel, Roark faces social opposition, but this opposition is not backed by the power of a gun. When his first building is completed, the distinguished architect Ralston Holcombe remarks: “It’s a disgrace to the country that a thing like that Heller house is allowed to be erected. It’s a blot on the profession. There ought to be a law.”<sup>24</sup> But Holcombe’s attitude is satire on Ayn Rand’s part. None of Roark’s enemies has the political power to stop him.

The theme of *Atlas Shrugged*, “the role of the mind in man’s existence,” is similarly neutral in regard to setting: the mind’s role is the same in any country. But when the plot concretizes the role of the mind, the fact that this plot is set in America opens the way to the extra-thematic projection of the premise “America as the country of the mind.” As Francisco puts it: “This country was the only country in history born, not of chance and blind tribal warfare, but as a rational product of man’s mind. This country was built on the supremacy of reason—and, for one magnificent century, it redeemed the world. It will have to do so again” (771).

Part of the mind’s role is to make possible the values required for man’s survival. This role is dramatized in *Atlas Shrugged*, which is why the novel’s American setting opens the

way to the projection of yet another extra-thematic premise: “America as the country of wealth creation.” In Francisco’s words: “To the glory of mankind, there was, for the first and only time in history, a *country of money*. . . . For the first time, man’s mind and money were set free, and there were no fortunes-by-conquest, but only fortunes-by-work, and instead of swordsmen and slaves, there appeared the real maker of wealth, the greatest worker, the highest type of human being—the self-made man—the American industrialist” (414).

The American setting of both *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged* is accidental relative to each novel’s theme—and the premises this setting helps project are extra-thematic. But is this extra-thematic projection of the strong or weak kind? In other words, is the American setting of these two novels comparable to Roark’s being an architect (crucial to the plot) or to Kira’s being an engineering student (incidental to the plot)?

This is a debatable issue. My own view is that the novels could have been set outside America with no change in basic plot-themes—but only with a loss of plausibility. In *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*, the characters—especially the morally good secondary characters like Kent Lansing and Ken Danagger—are much more American than European. They have a particularly American independence and indifference to social status, which makes it convincing that they would fight for their own judgment and give a commission to Roark, or follow Galt when he goes on strike. Conversely, a European or Asian jury would not be likely to acquit Roark.

Roark and Galt, as Ayn Rand’s projections of the ideal man, could have been given any nationality. They depend only on her personal vision. But they could not realistically have found the various minor allies that would enable them to *win* in any culture. Only in America.

## THE METAPHYSICS OF VALUES

The essential attribute of romanticism in literature, Ayn Rand wrote, is “the independent, creative projection of an individual writer’s values.”<sup>25</sup> Having seen a variety of ways in which Ayn Rand accomplishes this task, we can now draw certain lessons relevant to the nature of art in general and to romanticism in particular.

Let us start with art as such. Art, in Ayn Rand’s definition, “is a selective re-creation of reality according to an artist’s metaphysical value-judgments.”<sup>26</sup>

A man’s metaphysical value-judgments are his answers to such questions as: Is the universe intelligible to man or not? Does

man have the power of choice or not? Can he achieve his goals in life or not? Is he a harmonious unity of mind and body, or is he by nature torn between spirit and matter? Can he find happiness on earth or is he doomed to frustration and despair? “These are *metaphysical* questions,” writes Ayn Rand, “but the answers to them determine the kind of *ethics* men will accept and practice; the answers are the link between metaphysics and ethics.”<sup>27</sup>

Take Ayn Rand’s evaluation of America. America is great, she holds, because it is the country of the mind. But why is it *good* to be “the country of the mind”? Only because the universe is intelligible to man—which conclusion is a metaphysical value-judgment. If reason were impotent, a mystical country like Russia would more logically be considered great. Observe that someone like Dostoevsky might agree that America is the country of the mind, but since his metaphysics would reject the efficacy of reason, his evaluation of America would not be positive.

Or take Ayn Rand’s admiration for the professions of science, engineering, and business. Her evaluation is based on her metaphysical premise of mind-body union, her view that “man is an indivisible, integrated entity—and his place is here, on earth.” She rejects the belief in an opposition between man’s spiritual aspirations and his material existence—a view which to her “represents the debasement of man and of this earth.”<sup>28</sup> These metaphysical value-judgments direct Ayn Rand’s evaluation of specific professions as especially worthy of admiration.

Or take Ayn Rand’s view of love as a crucial human value. This premise, too, rests on deeper foundations. Most immediately, it rests on the premise that the unique values of individual human beings are of crucial importance.

Consider a story told by Morton Hunt in *The Natural History of Love*. An anthropologist who lived among the Bemba of Zambia in the 1930s once “related to a group of them an English folk-tale about a young prince who climbed glass mountains, crossed chasms, and fought dragons, all to obtain the hand of a maiden he loved. The Bemba were plainly bewildered, but remained silent. Finally an old chief spoke up, voicing the feelings of all present in the simplest of questions: ‘Why not take another girl?’”<sup>29</sup>

The old chief viewed human beings as interchangeable. He did not regard the unique values of individuals as important—and therefore he did not grasp the idea of an irreplaceable spiritual bond between individuals—and therefore he did not regard love as important—and therefore he did not understand love stories.

John Galt has a different outlook. Consider the nature of his response when he first sees Dagny on a passenger platform of the Taggart Terminal. He later tells her:



You wore an evening gown. You had a cape half-slipping off your body—I saw, at first, only your bare shoulders, your back and your profile—it looked for a moment as if the cape would slip further and you would stand there naked. Then I saw that you wore a long gown, the color of ice, like the tunic of a Grecian goddess, but had the short hair and the imperious profile of an American woman. You looked preposterously out of place on a railroad platform—and it was not on a railroad platform that I was seeing you, I was seeing a setting that had never haunted me before—but then, suddenly, I knew that you *did* belong among the rails, the soot and the girders, that that was the proper setting for a flowing gown and naked shoulders and a face as alive as yours—a railroad platform, not a curtained apartment—you looked like a symbol of luxury and you belonged in the place that was its source—you seemed to bring wealth, grace, extravagance and the enjoyment of life back to their rightful owners, to the men who created railroads and factories—you had a look of energy and of its reward, together, a look of competence and luxury combined—and I was the first man who had ever stated in what manner these two were inseparable—and I thought that if our age gave form to its proper gods and erected a statue to the meaning of an American railroad, yours would be that statue. (778–79)

Galt falls in love with Dagny because of his values—and hers. What are these values?

First, he upholds mind-body union and the spiritual nobility of material production. This is the deeper meaning of his comment that Dagny seems “to bring wealth, grace, extravagance and the enjoyment of life back to their rightful owners, to the men who created railroads and factories.”

Second, there is something god-like in Galt’s image of post-Industrial Revolution man—or in this case woman: not merely does Dagny wear a gown “like the tunic of a Grecian goddess” but, Galt thinks, “if our age gave form to its proper gods and erected a statue to the meaning of an American railroad, yours would be that statue.”

Third, Galt specifies “an American railroad,” and earlier he notes that while Dagny resembles a Grecian goddess, she has “the short hair and the imperious profile of an American woman.” In

other words, Galt values Dagny's Americanness—and regards it as fitting her other qualities.

The values Galt sees in Dagny obviously match those of Ayn Rand herself, as projected through her novel's central conflict. But the more immediately relevant point is the fact that these values—which are what Galt's love for Dagny is all about—are individual in nature.

An individual value is one that is characteristic of a human being qua individual, as opposed to, say, the generic values of social conformity. Both kinds of values can be observed in actual human beings. But what decides which kind someone will regard as important, as representing the essence of a human being? The premises of free will or determinism.

If one sees man as a volitional being, capable of *choosing* his values, one will naturally regard as important those values of his which bear the mark of individual choice. By contrast, if one sees man as a determined being, one will regard as important only those of his values which seem to represent, not individuality, but the impersonal powers of fate.

Thus the metaphysical premise of man's power of choice directs the premise of the importance of individual values, which directs the premise of the crucial value of love, which directs the treatment of love in a novel like *Atlas Shrugged*.

And thus, in reverse, the treatment of love in a novel like *Atlas Shrugged* projects the metaphysical premise of man's power of choice.

So does the treatment of all the *other* values individual to the author. Individual values are front and center in a romantic artwork—and the importance given to them projects the premise of choice. It is no coincidence that Ayn Rand defined "romanticism" as "a category of art based on the recognition of the principle that man possesses the faculty of volition."<sup>30</sup>

Except for choice, romantic art is not limited to the projection of any *given* individual values or metaphysical value judgments. Walter Scott portrayed medieval knights; Ayn Rand portrayed railroad executives. Edmond Rostand upheld the mind-body dichotomy. Joseph Conrad disliked America, the country of "the silver dollar" (or in other words the country of money, which for Conrad was not a compliment). However, in regard to *method*, as opposed to any given value-content, all of these writers are romanticists, upholding individual values and choice.

The romantic method is more specific than a general injunction to "feature individual values." For one thing, a collection of unrelated values of an artist's would not be a standard of selection for the creation of a unified whole. What the romantic artist needs is a single standard that contains within itself a

spectrum of his own values, beyond those implied by the theme. And this kind of standard cannot be found ready-made in the world, but has to be *created* by the artist.<sup>31</sup>

Compare a romantic novel like *Atlas Shrugged* to a naturalistic one like Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. The theme of the latter is "New York City in the 1980s." Wolfe's method is simple: he records certain characteristic patterns of valuing and acting that he observed in New York in the '80s. These patterns are his standard of selection, and although he is acutely perceptive in recognizing them, they are in effect found ready-made in reality. They are not *creative* standards of selection. But then they do not have to be, since Wolfe is concerned with presenting other people's values, not his own.

By contrast, in *Atlas Shrugged* Ayn Rand was concerned with presenting her own values—a set of values which formed a unique and unprecedented personality. Therefore, no ready-made standard of how to present them was to be found. Ayn Rand had to create her own standard.

She did so in the form of the plot-theme of *Atlas Shrugged*.

I do not mean that she constructed her plot-theme with the conscious, laborious assignment of filling in the theme-incidental cracks with extra-thematic values chosen from a list like "material production, hero-worshiping femininity, America, and romantic love." No, her immediate standard (alongside the theme) was a simpler and more general one. As she herself put it: "My basic test for any story is: Would I want to meet these characters and observe these events in real life? Is this story an experience worth living through for its own sake? Is the pleasure of contemplating these characters an end in itself?"<sup>32</sup>

But the answers to such questions depend on individual values, which in turn imply metaphysical value judgments. This is the reason why an artist reveals his naked soul in his work—and why, reading Ayn Rand's novels, we can experience the equivalent of Dominique's feeling in Howard Roark's Enright House.

The conflicts and the characters and the logical progressions of events are Ayn Rand's and could not have been anyone else's in the world; hers, as her face, as her soul; here is the shape she made and the thing within her which caused her to make it, the end and the cause together, the motive power eloquent in every line of dialogue, a woman's self, ours for a while, ours by grace of our seeing it and understanding.<sup>33</sup>

## NOTES

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1. Ayn Rand, *The Fountainhead* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1943; Signet fiftieth anniversary paperback edition, 1993), 287.
  2. Ayn Rand, "Art and Sense of Life," *The Romantic Manifesto: A Philosophy of Literature*, revised edition (New York: Signet, 1975), 44.
  3. See Ayn Rand, "Basic Principles of Literature," *Romantic Manifesto*, 85.
  4. Ayn Rand, *For the New Intellectual* (New York: Signet, 1963), 60.
  5. Rand, *New Intellectual*, 64.
  6. Rand, *New Intellectual*, 68. The word "versus" is italicized in the original.
  7. Rand, "Basic Principles of Literature," 85.
  8. Rand, "Basic Principles of Literature," 81.
  9. Rand, "Basic Principles of Literature," 85.
  10. See my "What Might Be and Ought to Be: Aristotle's *Poetics* and *The Fountainhead*," in Robert Mayhew, ed., *Essays on Ayn Rand's The Fountainhead* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2007), 155–75.
  11. Rand, "Basic Principles of Literature," 85.
  12. See Ayn Rand, *The Art of Fiction: A Guide for Writers and Readers*, Tore Boeckmann, ed. (New York: Plume, 2000), 41.
  13. Ayn Rand, *We the Living* (Sixtieth anniversary paperback edition, New York: Signet, 1996), 59.
  14. Rand, *We the Living*, 61.
  15. See Ayn Rand, "About a Woman President," *The Voice of Reason: Essays in Objectivist Thought*, Leonard Peikoff, ed. (New York: New American Library, 1989), 268.
  16. Rand, *We the Living*, 65
  17. Quoted in William Vaughan, *German Romantic Painting* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 239.
  18. Rand, *We the Living*, xvii.
  19. Ayn Rand, "Introduction to *Ninety-Three*," *Romantic Manifesto*, 156.
  20. Rand, *We the Living*, xiii.
  21. Quoted in Nathaniel Branden and Barbara Branden, *Who Is Ayn Rand?* (New York: Random House, 1962), 171.
  22. Rand, *Fountainhead*, 683.
  23. Rand, *Fountainhead*, 685.
  24. Rand, *Fountainhead*, 137.
  25. Ayn Rand, "What Is Romanticism?" *Romantic Manifesto*, 111.
  26. Ayn Rand, "The Psycho-Epistemology of Art," *Romantic Manifesto*, 19. Italics removed.
  27. Rand, "Psycho-Epistemology of Art," 19.
  28. David Harriman, ed., *Journals of Ayn Rand* (New York: Dutton, 1997), 551.
  29. Morton M. Hunt, *The Natural History of Love* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1959), 10.
  30. Rand, "What Is Romanticism?" 99.

31. I explore the nature of such created standards, or what I call “core combinations,” and their function in romantic art, in “The *Fountainhead* as a Romantic Novel” in Mayhew, *Essays on Ayn Rand’s The Fountainhead*, 119–53, as well as in “Caspar David Friedrich and Visual Romanticism,” *Objective Standard*, 3.1, Spring 2008.

32. Ayn Rand, “The Goal of My Writing,” *Romantic Manifesto*, 163.

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