

4

Reviews of *Anthem*

Michael S. Berliner

The unusual publishing history of *Anthem* resulted in an unusual history of reviews, covering more than sixty years.¹ The first edition was published in England by Cassell and Co. in 1938 and was widely reviewed in the United Kingdom. Not until 1946 was the novella published in the United States, a substantially revised softcover edition brought out by a small pro-freedom group calling themselves the Pamphleteers. Seven years later, Caxton, a small Idaho publisher, released a hardcover edition. The first edition by a major U.S. publisher came in 1961, with a mass-market paperback by New American Library, whose (later) parent company, Penguin, issued, in 1995, both hardcover and paperback editions that included a facsimile of the 1938 edition with the handwritten changes Ayn Rand made in preparation for the 1946 version.

The 1938 British edition was the only edition of *Anthem* to attract significant attention from reviewers. The print run of the first U.S. edition was small and the publisher minor, and because the first major release of *Anthem* came fifteen years after its initial publication (or twenty-three years if one counts the British edition), it was no longer a publishing “event.”

1938 BRITISH EDITION: CASSELL AND CO.

With the peril of National Socialism looming in Europe, Ayn Rand’s novella warning against collectivism was reviewed in major publications throughout the United Kingdom. Surprisingly, almost all of the reviews were highly positive. The *Sunday Times* (May 8, 1938; reprinted in the *Montrose Review*, May 27) assigned the book to noted film critic and classicist Dilys Powell, who, calling it “a curious little novel,” accurately recounted the story and ended her review: “This parable against the submergence of the individual in the State has the merits of simplicity and sincerity.”² The *Times Literary Supplement* went further, their unnamed reviewer terming *Anthem* a “fantasia” with the moral that “the collectivist tyranny threatening us, whether labeled Communism or Fascism, will kill not only freedom but it will kill most of man’s power to guide nature.” In the context of both criticism and the history of ideas, this is a most unusual identification, for it recognizes what most intellectuals still deny: that philosophically, Communism and Fascism are essentially the same and that technology (i.e., the application of reason to nature) depends upon freedom. The *Birmingham Post* (May 3) reviewer described the story as a “short, imaginative fantasy” and “the author’s profession of faith in the individual and a striking counter to the modern ideas of race.” (One can only speculate that by “modern” the reviewer was sarcastically referring to the racial views of Nazism.)

In the *Daily Telegraph* (May 10), *Anthem* was reviewed by Malcolm Muggeridge, the renowned cynic who became editor of *Punch*. Muggeridge called the book a “grisly forecast of

the future,” where collectivization and mechanism are carried to their limits. It is, wrote Muggeridge, “a cri du Coeur after a surfeit of doctrinaire intolerance.” *Anthem*, he acknowledged, “has its charm; but the weakness of all these nightmare Utopias reversed, as of beautiful Utopias, is that they are inconceivable, since experience shows that no tendency ever is carried to its limit, that man remains man in spite of everything.” Muggeridge’s cynicism and implicit anti-intellectualism are apparent: since ideas are basically irrelevant, it is of no value to identify essentials and what they would mean if acted on consistently. But another reviewer, with the pen name Fidus Achates, writing in the Church of England newspaper (May 13), understood what Muggeridge didn’t:

Ayn Rand, who gave us *We the Living*, has written . . . a tribute to the meaning and value of finite individuality and the vindication of the unique status of man. . . . [C]ertain tendencies and forces now at work amongst us and certain ideologies have been allowed to work themselves out to their logical conclusion in the complete elimination from the earth of the rights and liberties of the individual.

A short review in the *East Anglian Daily Times* (May 16) notes merely that the book “contains much food for thought. It is original and powerful, and the author has made good use of the theme.” However, the reviewer fails to mention what that theme is. The *Edinburgh Citizen* (June 10) considered the story “a fine piece of imaginative work.” Its neighbor, the *Edinburgh Evening News* (May 16) was more philosophical, describing the world of *Anthem* as a place “where the right of the individual is non-existent.” The hero’s determination, continued the reviewer in a passage highlighted by Ayn Rand’s underlining, “overcame all obstacles and he finally discovers the full glory of individuality—the word Ego and its meaning—and the beauty of true love. The writer explains that the book is his (sic) own profession of faith which accounts for the sincerity of its telling.” The *Eastern Daily Press* in Norwich (June 15) found *Anthem* to be “very ingenious” and—unaware of Ayn Rand’s life under the Soviets—thought it to be merely “anti-Fascist” but “less knowledgeable” and “more emotional” than Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*.

Young Marlow (likely a pseudonym derived from a character in Oliver Goldsmith’s *She Stoops to Conquer*), writing in the *Reynolds News* of London (May 22), correctly identified the theme: “if the totalitarian State developed without check, a time might come when individuality would be altogether crushed, no thought permitted which is not the thought of all.” “The intention,” he wrote, “is to declare that individuality is the only thing that makes life worth living. Ayn Rand makes this declaration in an impressive way. The [hero’s] fight against conditions of mass slavery is vividly pictured.” In *The Weekly Review* (formerly *GK’s Weekly*, the “GK” referring to G. K. Chesterton), Michael Burt wrote that at its beginning, *Anthem* reads like a satire—“but a satire with no laughter in it.” Rather, it is a “strikingly conceived dream of the world in the very distant future,” when man “has thrown away his most precious attribute—his individuality.” “This is,” wrote Burt,

a strange little hook, and manifestly the product of an unusual mind. It is written with vigour and sincerity, and it may be regarded as a timely warning to a generation that seems intent on doing its best either to procure or to ignore the extinction of individual liberty. All such considerations apart, however, “*Anthem*” is to be commended as an outstandingly beautiful piece of pure literature.

1946 AMERICAN EDITION: THE PAMPHLETEERS

It wasn't until eight years later that *Anthem* was published in America, by the Pamphleteers. This is the standard, authorized edition. There were few reviews. In fact, *Anthem* did not even come to the attention of *Book Review Digest*, which excerpts major reviews every year. The only major and lengthy review appeared in the *Columbia Missourian* (February 14, 1947), whose reviewer, "A. F.," summarized both the story and the new preface, and concluded:

Miss Rand's forceful dramatization of the principles of collectivism and the ultimate consequences to which they lead, is challenging. She has no patience with people who seek to excuse their acceptance of what is actually serfdom by hiding behind the mask of ignorance. A ruder awakening is her medicine for them, and in 'Anthem' she pours it on bitterly.

A brief review in the *Los Angeles Herald Examiner* (September 22, 1946) advised the reader that "What might happen in a world in which collectivism has reached its ultimate is dramatically told by Ayn Rand, Los Angeles author, in 'Anthem.'" A Bombay newspaper, *India International*, highly praised the book, urging that it be read by "the wisest and most humanized" people, the "humblest and meekest" and even the "most wicked and the most crooked," who should "be able to understand the utter insignificance of their own miserable lives."

Most of the reviews of *Anthem* among Ayn Rand's papers were from small, conservative publications. In the June 1946 issue of the "Economic Council Review of Books," Rose Wilder Lane wrote:

it is unlike anything ever written before. It is a projection, nominally into the future but actually out of space and time, of the basic principle of collectivism. I can't call it a work of imagination; it is pure abstract thought, an idea presented in terms of action, imaginatively. I can't say it's fiction, though ostensibly a masculine atom of a collective tells his life experience, which includes meeting a feminine atom, and their escape from the social whole to a discovery of human personality. I give up; read it yourself. It is unique; it is remarkable. And if you think of books in this way, someday this first edition will be a collector's item; Ayn Rand is a phenomenon in literature.³

In his September 1946 issue of "Analysis," a four-page broadsheet later merged into *Human Events*, conservative Frank Chodorov understood Ayn Rand's moral message, writing:

It takes a strong imagination, and a considerable amount of intransigence, to conjure up a society in which men are without sense of individual dignity. Ayn Rand has both, plus a vigorous style, and in her story, *Anthem*, she shows what happens to the human being who is coerced, under pain of extinction, into becoming a social means rather than an end in himself. Pride, hope and even the striving for better things is crushed. The first-person singular ceases to have meaning; all life is described in terms of "we." The collectivity wipes out the person; the two cannot live together.

1953 AMERICAN EDITION: CAXTON

Seven years later, in 1953, the first hardcover edition was published by Caxton, a small right-wing publishing house. Apparently, the only full-scale newspaper review was in the *Buffalo Evening News* (July 25, 1953) by G.G., who had the insight to realize that “Ayn Rand saw in 1937 that Nazism, Fascism and Communism are all manifestations of totalitarianism and the subjugation of the individual.” *Anthem* was also publicized by Dr. Ruth Alexander (a long-time supporter of Ayn Rand) as part of a story about the publisher in her syndicated column (New York *Sunday Mirror*, December 9, 1951).⁴ Wrote Alexander:

Among our great Libertarians is the Russian-born Ayn Rand, who knows about communism first hand and whose earlier novel, “The Fountainhead,” was a brilliant dramatization of individualism. [Jim] Gipson has just brought out a tender and terrific short novel by Miss Rand, entitled “Anthem.” It crystallizes the belief of all true Americans—“Depend upon it, the lovers of freedom will be free.”⁵

A lengthy review of Caxton’s 1953 reissue appeared in “Facts Forum News” (August 1955), a conservative newsletter. Reviewer Joan DeArmond compared *Anthem* to other dystopias, opining that

Anthem is different—inspiringly different. Most satires [on the evils of mass conformity] have presented the collectivized society in terms of its physically brutal aspects. These writers have done little more than parody twentieth century tyrannies. Ayn Rand portrays the mental state that lies beyond the tyranny, beyond slavery. Gone is the physical brutality, the purges, and the tortures—yet the Collective of *Anthem* is intellectually more repellent, even, than the cruelty and inhumanity that must have gone before. The stagnation has become voluntary, the transition to the peaceful Collective apparently complete. Lost is all sense of individual worth and identity. . . . As all individual thought and action are forbidden, the fruits of individual inspiration are unknown. . . . This is the most beautiful, the most inspiring novel this reviewer has ever read. It is an ethical and philosophical rather than a religious dedication to freedom and the individual.

In “All-American Books” (“A Quarterly Review of Books Every American Should Read”), the unnamed reviewer contrasts *Anthem* favorably with George Orwell’s *1984* (published in 1948): *Anthem*, wrote the reviewer, goes “a good deal beyond” Orwell’s book and, unlike *1984*, *Anthem* is “a hopeful story,” in which the hero’s “rebellion brought hope for the redemption of the human race from the slough of despondence into which it had fallen.”

Finally, there was a positive 250-word review by Rand’s associate, Nathaniel Branden, in *The Freeman* (September 21, 1953). Branden identified the nature of the on-going conflict between individualism and collectivism as “the struggle between those who assert that man’s duty is to exist for others and those who uphold his right to exist for his own happiness.”

THE FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY AND BEYOND

After 1953, the number of reviews of subsequent versions continued to dwindle. I could find no reviews of the first major publication in the U.S., a 1961 paperback by New American Library. The fiftieth anniversary edition (in 1996) merited a brief mention in *Library Journal* (August 1995), where Michael Rogers referred to it as a “dark portrait of the future.”

Upon the release of the unabridged audio book in 2002, *AudioFile*'s DB opined that “its allegory is crudely transparent, and the ideas have lost their political urgency.” Apparently he believes that political philosophy is of no relevance now that the Soviet Union had collapsed. The audio book also received a negative review from *Library Journal* (November 2002), whose Mark Pumphrey—reflecting the relativist's fear of absolutes—criticized the “extremist tone” compared to other dystopias and branded *Anthem* a “long-forgotten exercise in paranoia.” Pumphrey is wrong on at least two counts: Given the millions of people slaughtered by the Nazis and Communists (and now by their Muslim descendants), a warning about the evils of collectivism is far from paranoid. Second, nearly seventy years after it was written, this “long-forgotten” book sells more than 100,000 copies per year and is the subject of more than 8,000 entries submitted annually in a high school essay contest sponsored by the Ayn Rand Institute.

Anthem, like its hero, prevails despite the opposition.

NOTES

1. For more on Ayn Rand's attitude toward reviews generally, see Michael S. Berliner, “Reviews of *We the Living*,” in *Essays on Ayn Rand's We the Living*, ed. Robert Mayhew (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004), 145–46.

2. Most of the reviews cited reside in the Ayn Rand Archives. Some reviews she had clipped herself, while others, e.g., those of the British edition, were sent to her by a clipping service.

3. As of the completion of this essay, this edition of *Anthem*—originally \$1.00—ranges in price from \$85 to \$1,250 at used and rare bookstores.

4. The 1951 date for this column is indeed correct, although the Caxton edition carries a 1953 copyright. Alexander was likely given an advanced copy of the book, and perhaps publication was delayed.

5. At this time, “libertarian” was honorific and referred to supporters of individual rights; the term was later taken over by anarchists and others whom Ayn Rand characterized as “hippies of the right.” See Ayn Rand, *Philosophy: Who Needs It* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1982; Signet paperback edition, 1984), 13 and 202.