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Adapting *Anthem*: Projects That Were and Might Have Been

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Anthem has a long history as the inspiration for derivative works. From the 1940s to the mid-1960s, twenty adaptations were proposed, including several live action and animated films, ballets, and an opera. Only one project, a 1950 radio drama, was realized. While the evidence of these actual and possible uses is fragmentary, the proposals demonstrate *Anthem*'s impact on a small group of artist-readers. And the first of these artists may have been Ayn Rand herself.[1]

Anthem was first envisioned as a stage play in Soviet Russia during the 1920s. The story remained an unrealized idea until it was written as a novella in America in 1937. Little is known about the early theatre origin of *Anthem.* It was conceived as a four-act play, probably during Ayn Rand's college years at the University of Leningrad. The story was to have taken place entirely within a city of the future. The hero would lead a revolt against a society that had lost all memory of the word "I." There was no Uncharted Forest. One item remaining from this early version is a reference to a citizen who breaks down and cries out in the night. The original Russian title is not known. However, as indicated on the earliest existing draft, the first English title was "Ego." The work was eventually published in Great Britain as *Anthem.* The genesis of the novella is, perhaps, the first example of its "adaptation."[2]

ANTHEM AS FILM

By the mid-1940s, Ayn Rand was the successful author of *The Fountainhead* and working in the second phase of her Hollywood screenwriting career. One goal was to promote awareness of *Anthem* in Hollywood as material for film adaptation. A total of ten parties considered *Anthem* as a film project. None of these projects was made and the reasons are not currently known.

Interest surfaced shortly after the novella's 1946 American publication. Two companies that discovered the work through the Pamphleteer edition were Vanguard Films (David O. Selznick's production company) and Columbia Pictures. At times, Rand's own appeals to various Hollywood film producers displayed her concern with the *visual means* of translating *Anthem* onto the screen.[3]

In a letter to Walt Disney, she writes that *Anthem*

> would be a complete departure from the conventional Hollywood film, and that is why I thought it worthwhile to call it to your personal attention. You might see it as I do, because you have never been afraid to venture into new fields and to do

> the different and the unusual. . . . If this story can be translated to the screen, I would like to see it done in *stylized drawings*, rather than with living actors.[4]

Anthem’s potential as an animated film was also suggested in a brief proposal received some fourteen years later from Charles Dee Emmert, a “Motion Picture Consultant” and producer who had amassed a collection of two thousand artworks. The assembly of these works into either a one-hour or a ninety-minute television presentation of *Anthem* would be accompanied by the music of composer Leon Kirschner.

Warner Bros. considered *Anthem* as a short film. Ayn Rand’s attorney Bert Allenberg related that Jack Warner had sent the novella to the Warner Bros. short-subject producer Gordon Hollingshead. Hollingshead’s report was negative. *Anthem* would be too expensive to make. Its revenue, he claimed, would not justify the investment.[5]

Ayn Rand communicated personally with Henry Blanke, another Warner Bros. filmmaker and the producer of the forthcoming film adaptation of *The Fountainhead*:

> The enclosed is a personal present to you, rather than a submission of a story for pictures, but you might be one of the few who would like it as a picture possibility.
>
> It is, in a way, an ancestor of THE FOUNTAINHEAD. I wrote it in 1937, when I was working on THE FOUNTAINHEAD, and it has the same theme, though in an entirely different form and on a much smaller scale. This is its first publication in America.
>
> So I thought you might be interested in it, and I wanted you to have it, to put on your bookshelf next to its child.[6]

Ayn Rand also wrote to Hal Wallis, a former Warner Bros. producer and her employer at Paramount Pictures: “I don’t suppose you will be interested in this for pictures, but I want you to see it, so that you won’t accuse me of disloyalty if someone else decides to buy it.”[7] One other “solicitation” included Richard Mealand, a one-time story editor for Paramount Pictures and former supervisor during Rand’s employment as a professional film reader. She writes: “I don’t want to rush you about reading *Anthem*—I know that reading is the hardest of all jobs for a writer, I hardly have time to read anything myself.”[8]

Perhaps the most intriguing inquiry came from outside of Hollywood entirely. As relayed to Ayn Rand by a Hollywood friend, screenwriter Albert Mannheimer, the U.S. State Department appeared interested in filming *Anthem* for use as “pro-capitalist propaganda.”[9]

As a rule, these inquiries and responses are brief and cryptic. Rand left no notes or journal entries expanding upon these discussions. One remaining letter, however, does provide additional insight into the nature of the visual stylization Rand sought.

In 1946 Rand wrote to director Cecil B. DeMille, her first American employer, about a possible joint venture. Her reasons were political and esthetic.

Both DeMille and Rand were prominent voices in Hollywood anti-communist circles. Rand saw *Anthem* as a possible “contribution to the cause of freedom.” In a previous conversation, DeMille had asked her how America might be saved from collectivism. She replied (in her letter) that filming *Anthem* was the answer:

> we have a tremendous medium such as the screen at our command—we should use it, if we want to serve our cause and our country. We should use it openly,

> dramatically, full blast. Organizations, speeches or editorials are almost futile, when compared to the power of the screen in presenting ideas and reaching the conscience of people.

Rand's letter reveals significant clues as to her vision:

> I see it as a picture on the grand scale, as a dramatic fantasy, on the order of the magnificent spectacles which you made in the silent days. It would be completely different from any picture made now. . . . I would have to expand the story into greater detail, and give it a more complex plot; perhaps, add a modern story to it, running parallel, showing our present day trends and their ultimate counterparts in the story of the future—using the method you used in *The Ten Commandments*.[10]

The first part of *The Ten Commandments* (1923) was filmed in an early version of Technicolor. The story adapts the biblical story of Moses, who leads the Israelites from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land. After Moses climbs Mt. Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments from God, he returns and finds that the Israelites, having forsaken the true God, are now worshipping a Golden Calf. The second part of the motion picture, shot in black and white, is a contemporary treatment of the same issue: the initial rejection yet ultimate triumph (and therefore relevance) of the Ten Commandments to modern life.[11] DeMille's film exhibited "[t]heatricality . . . on the grandest scale, with masterly lighting and art direction sustaining large gestures."[12]

Despite Ayn Rand's obvious enthusiasm, her personal papers contain no conclusive evidence of DeMille's reaction to her film proposal, other than the fact that DeMille had enjoyed the work as literature. As with the previous film proposals, a film project did not materialize. Ultimately, Hollywood did not provide the opportunity for her ideas that the medium promised.[13]

ANTHEM AS RADIO DRAMA

Despite the failure of Hollywood to adapt *Anthem*, an adaptation did occur as a result of her time in Hollywood. In 1950 *Anthem* was presented as a radio drama, and she was pleased with the production.

In August 1950 she received a letter from Howard M. Conner, Director of Radio for Spiritual Mobilization, a conservative pro-American educational organization funded by the First Congregational Church of Los Angeles.[14] Conner was writer and producer of Spiritual Mobilization's weekly radio program called *The Freedom Story.* Fascinated by *Anthem*, he discovered the novella on the library shelf of Herb Cornuelle, a mutual friend of Conner and Rand. Conner contacted Rand to suggest a radio adaptation of *Anthem.*[15]

By August 21 an agreement had been drawn up and the conditions were favorable to the author. Ayn Rand would have approval over the script, the words of all the actors, the announcer, including those of Dr. James W. Fifield. During production on the program, she would have final authority to approve the casting, direction, and the master copy of the program.[16]

The broadcast opened with Dr. Fifield's introductory comments, and featured an announcer as well as actors portraying "Equality," "Teacher," and "Collective." The production included a musical accompaniment. The script was eight double-spaced pages in length. Approximately six of those pages comprised the drama while two pages were devoted to opening and closing remarks. The story dramatizes Equality's "great crime" of working alone, his rediscovery of electric light and his subsequent rejection by the Collective. The script ends with a highly condensed version of the last two chapters of the novella, where Equality rediscovers the word "I" and celebrates the "sacred" word "ego." Interestingly, the closing remarks delivered by Fifield bear a strong resemblance to "The Individualist Manifesto": "All wonders of our modern age, all the material benefits which you now enjoy, have come from one source—from the work of a free human mind. The mind does not and cannot work under compulsion. If you destroy the freedom of the mind, all its achievements will vanish too, and mankind will fall back into primitive savagery."[17]

Ayn Rand expressed her personal evaluation of the final result in a letter to actor Tony Barrett concerning his portrayal of Equality:

> Thank you for your wonderful performance in *Anthem.* I feel that I want you to know that this was the first time I have ever heard my own words read by an actor in a manner which made me proud to hear them. . . . If you remember, I said to you that you would have to supply the emotional element which the script could not provide in view of its brevity. I did not expect to hear it provided as perfectly as you have done—and for this I am very grateful.[18]

As to the program's impact, a September 1950 letter to Rand from Conner mentions a favorable reaction throughout the country. The broadcast was provoking much discussion. This venture would be her first and only public involvement with American religious conservatives. It would also be the only *authorized* adaptation of *Anthem* during her lifetime.

THE MUSICAL *ANTHEM*: OPERA AND BALLET

The most fragmentary evidence concerns *Anthem* as the basis for derivative musical works. Interest began shortly after the 1946 publication of the American edition of the book and continued well into the 1960s.

At some point during 1946–1947, Rand exchanged letters with Franklin Brewer, a librettist described as a "long-time friend." Brewer was interested in writing an opera libretto for *Anthem.* Apparently this proposed project had been preceded by the idea of *Anthem* as subject matter for a ballet. An undated letter from Brewer mentions Rand's view that expressing the idea of *Anthem* in ballet form would be impossible. However, he does express his own opinion that *Anthem* would make a "magnificent" opera. On librettos in general, Rand would later write: "In operas and operettas, the esthetic base is music, with the libretto serving only to provide an appropriate emotional context or opportunity for the musical score, and an integrating line for the total performance. (In this respect, there are very few good librettos.)" Once again, the proposed opera failed to move ahead.[19]

The idea of *Anthem* as the basis of an original ballet was revisited briefly four more times.

In 1947 Donald Hayne, executive assistant to Cecil B. DeMille, wrote to Rand, acknowledging the receipt of her novel. Hayne also relayed the reaction of DeMille's daughter, who suggested that *Anthem* would make a "wonderful" ballet and she recommended that Rand discuss the idea with her cousin, choreographer Agnes DeMille. No record of such a discussion exists.[20]

In 1964, after a period of fifteen years, two admirers of *Anthem*, Sharon Kopsky and Yvonne Hudlow, submitted separate requests for permission to adapt the work into a ballet. Both requests were declined. A letter to Hudlow from Rand's secretary at the time gives a brief, somewhat vague explanation as to the reason why:

> In reply to your letter of November 24, 1964, Miss Rand has asked me to inform you that she does not give you permission to write a ballet on a theme from *Anthem.* She does not consider such a request appropriate to the nature of her story.[21]

Rand's answer is unusual in view of a completely separate request received—and actually entertained—during the same period. Writing in his "Introduction" to the fiftieth anniversary edition of *Anthem*, Dr. Leonard Peikoff, Rand's literary executor, writes:

> in the mid-1960s, as I recall—she received a request from Rudolf Nureyev, who wanted to create a ballet based on *Anthem.* Ordinarily, Miss Rand turned down requests of this kind. But because of the special nature of *Anthem* (and because of her admiration for Nureyev's dancing), she was enthusiastically in favor of his idea. (Unfortunately . . . a ballet [never] materialized.) (viii)

The details of this request are unknown. However, because of Rand's respect for Nureyev, she was apparently willing to make an exception. In an unpublished 1965 letter to the *New York Times*, she defended Nureyev against criticisms expressed by Allen Hughes in an article entitled "Shadow and Substance." Hughes compared Nureyev's esthetic choices unfavorably with those of dancer-choreographer Martha Graham, criticizing the Russian dancer's outmoded nineteenth-century esthetic ideals and lack of contemporary relevancy. Protesting Hughes's "gratuitous abuse on a superlative artist," Rand describes her personal view of the performance in question as an "incomparable aesthetic experience," which provoked an "authentic, spontaneous and exultant" ovation from the audience.[22]

UNAUTHORIZED ADAPTATION

The final entry in this survey of adaptations of *Anthem* is also the first evidence of unauthorized use. Material from *Anthem* appeared in a concert phonograph album entitled *Stuarti Arrives at Carnegie Hall* and featured in a musical spoken prelude to "The Exodus Song" ("This Land Is Mine").

A memo to Ayn Rand dated May 4, 1964, relates that *Exodus*, a film dealing with the effort to establish a Jewish homeland in Israel, had recently appeared in theatres with a musical score by composer Ernest Gold. Shortly thereafter, the film's popular theme music was set to lyrics and performed by singer Pat Boone in "The Exodus Song" ("This Land Is Mine"). The song and the musical prelude were included in the concert phonograph and Enzo Stuarti implies that Boone was also the composer of the music for the prelude, the words "inspired" by Stuarti's friend, Frank Lovejoy.

The words of the prelude begin: "I know not if this earth on which I stand is the core of the universe or if it is but a speck of dust lost in eternity." This is identical to a line in *Anthem* (95). After approximately 150 words the lyrics conclude: "And my treasures, I guard my treasures: my thought, my will, my land, and my freedom. And the greatest of these is freedom."

In *Anthem* the line reads: “I do not surrender my treasures, nor do I share them. The fortune of my spirit is not to be blown into coins of brass and flung to the winds as alms for the poor of the spirit. I guard my treasures: my thought, my will, my freedom. And the greatest of these is freedom.”[23] Among Rand’s remaining papers there is no record of any attempt to contact the principals involved.

CONCLUSION

The twenty proposed adaptations of *Anthem* reveal the novella’s attention-grabbing impact on a tiny fraction of the 2.5 million readers to date. Those who proposed these adaptations were concerned with translating the literary work into media as varied as dance, music and film. Among all of Ayn Rand’s works, *Anthem*’s appeal to potential adapters is unusual. Perhaps this appeal is explained by *Anthem*’s condensed form, or its poetic style. Or maybe it is the dramatic tension produced in the reader by the ubiquitous “We” and its subsequent release in the affirmation of “I”—or all the above.

To underscore, one last time, *Anthem*’s susceptibility to adaptation: late in life Ayn Rand herself borrowed from another medium to explain her work. In 1979 when asked by a high school class why she chose *Anthem* as a title, she answered with a *musical* metaphor:

“Because this story is my *hymn* to man’s ego.”[24]

NOTES

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1. This paper describes proposed adaptations, summarizing such esthetic intentions as are known. It is limited to the evidence contained in the Ayn Rand Papers (ARP) at the Ayn Rand Archives, a special collection of the Ayn Rand Institute. Also cited are reproductions of original manuscripts of Ayn Rand’s novels located at the Manuscript Division, Library of Congress (available at the Special Collections [SC], Ayn Rand Archives). Whenever possible, the earliest dated literary typescripts or earliest handwritten versions will be cited.

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2. Biographical interviews (Ayn Rand Archives).

3. Ayn Rand to Bert Allenberg, November, 15 1946, and October 23, 1946, ARP 122-26-11-A, Ayn Rand Archives.

4. Ayn Rand to Walt Disney, September 5, 1946 (emphasis added). Michael S. Berliner, ed., *Letters of Ayn Rand* (New York: Dutton, 1995), 317. Rand observed the integrity of the film medium by adjusting the form through which her vision would be realized.

5. Ayn Rand to Bert Allenberg, October 23, 1946, Ayn Rand Archives.

6. Ayn Rand to Henry Blanke, September 5, 1946. Berliner, *Letters*, 315.

7. Ayn Rand to Hal Wallis, September 5, 1946. Berliner, *Letters*, 316.

8. Ayn Rand to Richard Mealand, January 20, 1947. Berliner, *Letters*, 358. Mealand replied that he liked *Anthem* for its “explosive parable” and disliked it for “its too extreme simplicity. . . . I think it should not have been a story but a poem.” (Richard Mealand to Ayn Rand, Feb. 11 [1947?], ARP 149-33-M-D) Rand responded: “In your comment on *Anthem* you said it should have been a poem. Well, that is exactly what it is.” Ayn Rand to Richard Mealand, July 31, 1947. Berliner, *Letters*, 371–72.

9. Albert Mannheimer to Ayn Rand, October 20, 1951, ARP 149-33-M-B, Ayn Rand Archives.

10. Ayn Rand to Cecil B. DeMille, September 5, 1946. Berliner, *Letters*, 316–17.

11. The device of mixing historical periods continued to hold Rand's fascination. After the publication of *Atlas Shrugged*, she lost interest in contemporary story settings due to the increasing irrationality of twentieth-century culture. Towards the end of her life, she had considered a story on the theme of self-sacrifice, set in the Middle Ages. The final chapter of the story would jump centuries ahead to the present—its characters' modern dress thinly disguising their persisting philosophical errors. (Leonard Peikoff, interview by Richard Ralston, tape recording, Special Collections, Ayn Rand Archives.)

12. As quoted in John Wakeman, ed., *World Film Directors*, vol. 1, 1890–1945 (New York: The H. W. Wilson Company, 1987), 215. Paul Iribe, DeMille's chief art director on the film (throughout the 1920s as well) was a French-born painter, stage designer and illustrator. A member of the French *avant-garde* associated with Jean Cocteau, Iribe is described as the chief architect of the "continental" visual style associated with Paramount Pictures for the next two decades. Iribe combined biblical and modern elements in his production design. His own pictorial style was akin to Art Nouveau. The combination of modern and oriental influences is also a feature of the fashion illustration of Rand's younger sister Eleanora Rosenbaum, an aspiring artist, set designer, and later exhibit designer. Known as "Nora," she and Rand shared an early interest in the "glamorous" silent films of DeMille. For samples of her work, see Jeff Britting, *Ayn Rand* (New York: The Overlook Press, 2005), 32.

13. In "Art and Cognition," Rand writes: "Potentially, motion pictures are a great art, but that potential has not as yet been actualized, except in single instances and random moments. An art that requires the synchronization of so many esthetic elements and so many different talents cannot develop in a period of philosophical-cultural disintegration such as the present. Its development requires the creative co-operation of men who are united, not necessarily by their formal philosophical convictions, but by their fundamental view of man, i.e., by their sense of life." In Ayn Rand, *The Romantic Manifesto: A Philosophy of Literature*, revised edition (New York: Signet, 1975), 72.

14. Howard Conner to Ayn Rand, August 3, 1950, ARP 143-33-C-5, Ayn Rand Archives.

15. Rand also had an association with Spiritual Mobilization's vice president, James C. Ingebretsen, an early admirer of *The Fountainhead.* They first met in 1943 at a dinner in Los Angeles hosted by future publisher of *The Freeman*, Leonard Read. Read's best friend was Ingebretsen, who at the time was general counsel of the United States Chamber of Commerce. Ingebretsen was also an associate of Pamphleteers, the American publisher of *Anthem.* (Leonard Read to Ayn Rand, December 17, 1943, ARP 144-33-F-l, Ayn Rand Archives.)

16. Howard Conner to Ayn Rand, August 21, 1950, ARP 53-10-07, Ayn Rand Archives.

17. "The Freedom Story," Script #46-B "Anthem" (*The Ayn Rand Papers*), ARP 54-10-09, Ayn Rand Archives. See also: Jeff Britting, "*Anthem* and 'The Individualist Manifesto,"' in the present volume, p. 70.

18. Ayn Rand to Tony Barrett, August 25, 1950. Berliner, *Letters*, 475–76.

19. Rand, *Romantic Manifesto*, 71. Also during this period, a letter from Rand to Brewer reveals another potential venture involving Edmond Rostand's play *Chantecler* (1910). Rand thought the fable would make a good libretto and considered writing one. Unfortunately, an opera based on this material had already been composed and produced. Rand writes: ". . . this shows, at least, that I had a good idea."

20. Donald Hayne to Ayn Rand, March 10, 1947, ARP 109-24-12-C, Ayn Rand Archives.

21. Daryn Kent to Sharon Kopsky, September 3, 1964, ARP 42-07-06-D, Ayn Rand Archives. Daryn Kent to Yvonne Hudlow, September 3, 1964, ARP 42-07-07-H, Ayn Rand Archives.

22. Rand to editor, Sunday Theatre Section, *New York Times*, May 20, 1965, ARP 107-24-05, Ayn Rand Archives. Hughes's article contrasts Martha Graham's visionary voice of "our time" with Nureyev's desire to "resign from the twentieth century." In reply, Rand writes: "Here, it must be stated that Martha Graham represents a static, tired, semi-private cult of anti-Romanticism—a fad of no greater significance than 'modernistic' furniture or theosophy. Her followers are entitled to their 'fun' and deserve it—but to elevate *that* into the voice of the century is worse than absurd."

23. "The Exodus Song" performed by Enzo Stuarti from *Stuarti Arrives at Carnegie Hall*, Jubilee JGM-2-5055 (1964), two record set. (Memo to Ayn Rand [author unknown], May 4, 1964, ARP 54-10-21, Ayn Rand Archives.)

24. Ayn Rand, "Questions and Answers on *Anthem*," in *The Ayn Rand Column*, ed. Peter Schwartz (New Milford, CT.: Second Renaissance Books, 199), 123 (emphasis added).