

# Epilogue

## *Anthem*: An Appreciation

*Harry Binswanger*

[On April 11, 1998, The Ayn Rand Institute held an event in New York City to celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of the publication of *Anthem*. For the occasion, Harry Binswanger prepared informal remarks, which are reproduced here with only light editing, to preserve its character as an oral presentation. —Editor]

*It is a sin to write this.*

This has to be one of the most intriguing, attention-grabbing first lines ever written. It presents a paradox: the hero is writing that writing is wrong. And how can it be a sin to write down one's thoughts? Unless those thoughts are themselves sinful. And if some thoughts are sinful, then isn't man's mind in a straitjacket? Doesn't that make thought itself sinful?

*It is a sin to write this.* Seven short and simple words whisk us into the hero's conflict with the world—and within himself: his conflict with a world that holds thought to be sinful, his internal conflict deriving from his acceptance of, yet rebellion against, that world's standards.

When he finally solves his conflict, learns what sin and greatness really are, he is ready to carve into stone the word “ego.” So, *Anthem* begins and ends with an act of writing. And the path of the book is the hero's tortured and ecstatic passage from “It is a sin to write this” to “The sacred word: EGO.”

Once I had the rare pleasure of using *Anthem* in teaching a course on philosophy at Hunter College. One theme of the course was individualism vs. collectivism, so *Anthem* was an inescapable choice for an assigned reading. Sometimes we learn from our students, and in this course I was startled by a comparison one of my students asked about. He asked if *Anthem* was conceived as an answer to Plato, specifically to his “Myth of the Cave” in *The Republic*. I never asked Miss Rand if she had intended it that way—I suspect not—but it makes a marvelous comparison. In Plato's myth, a group of people live chained underground, in a cave; they have always seen only shadows on the cave wall, which they mistake for true reality, of which they know nothing. One of them gets free, goes above ground and sees the real world and the sun that lights it. He returns underground, is rejected by the ignorant many, and is ultimately killed by them. In *Anthem*, the many are above ground, enchained by their collectivist ideas and values; the hero goes down into an abandoned tunnel to discover the truth, invents his own sun—an electric light—returns above ground to enlighten the others in his society, is declared evil and imprisoned; but he breaks free and goes on to found a new individualist society.

For Plato, the moral is that true knowledge comes from a passive revelation of a higher reality, and that the masses, who cannot comprehend it, will destroy the individual who does. For Ayn Rand, the moral is that true knowledge comes from an active, selfish investigation of this world, immersed in matter, and that the many who choose not to think are impotent before the

individual who does. For Plato, the moral is the need to turn away from the material world; for Ayn Rand, the moral is the need to embrace and conquer the material world.

Let me turn now to style, perhaps *Anthem*'s most prominent virtue. The story is told in the first-person, through the hero's diary. A diary is addressed to oneself. It is written for objectification, not communication. The form presents both a difficulty and an opportunity. The difficulty is that it has to read as if it had been written in installments, almost contemporaneous with the events being related. The mood of the writing, therefore, has to change with the mood of the protagonist. Thus, the beginning of each chapter has to establish its—that is, the hero's—mood. For instance, Chapter V begins: "We made it. We created it. We brought it forth from the night of the ages." But Chapter VII begins: "It is dark here in the forest."

The opportunity the form of a diary offers is personal immediacy. Contrast the following two ways of writing expressing the same idea: "What—even if we have to burn for it like the Saint of the pyre—what is the Unspeakable Word?" (51). Now here's the same thought, expressed in the third-person: "Despite the risk of being burnt at the stake, like the Saint of the pyre, he wished he knew the Unspeakable Word." Through the diary form, we see the events through the hero's eyes, know only what he knows at that time, and have access to his innermost thoughts and feelings.

Further on style: ironically, *Anthem*'s "we" language, which dramatizes the basic evil the hero must overcome, has a positive value, literarily: it adds a certain timeless quality to the writing—similar to the "thou" and "thee" in biblical language; Ayn Rand wrote that the style was deliberately "archaic."<sup>1</sup> This enhances the timeless, non-journalistic, nature of the story. *Anthem*, of all Ayn Rand's writings, is the most metaphysical in style. *Anthem* grabs you from its first sentence and sweeps you into Ayn Rand's spirit. By its rhythms and cadences it reaches, immediately, a metaphysical level, a level where the mundane and accidental have dropped away, leaving a solitary man facing existence. "It is dark here. The flame of the candle stands still in the air. Nothing moves in this tunnel save our hand on the paper. We are alone here under the earth. It is a fearful word, alone" (17). It is this metaphysical, almost surreal, setting that makes the hero's conflict translatable into one's own personal terms. The universal meaning is contained in the uniquely stripped-down particular, and that universal—man alone facing existence—resonates with any sensitive reader; it speaks to his deepest, inescapable, life-shaping concerns: how to confront existence, the meaning of life, man's relationship to man. *Anthem* speaks to these concerns whether the reader has reached their explicit formulation or holds them only implicitly as what Ayn Rand called "metaphysical value-judgments."

But the amazing thing about *Anthem* is its unalloyed benevolence. Not benevolence as mere cheeriness or gaiety, but as a fundamental conviction that life does have meaning, that the shackles can be thrown off—as the hero easily escapes from his prison cell by simply pushing on the rusty locks that have no power to hold him. It is the benevolence of recognizing that great things can be accomplished, and that, ultimately, nothing can hold one back but one's own errors—errors that cannot stand the light of the will to understand, maintained over the years of one's life. One feels that the hero of *Anthem* wins because he has to win, that the world of collectivism has no power to stop him once he realizes his own power. This is the precursor of the point in *Atlas Shrugged* when John Galt says to the world:

I saw that there comes a point, in the defeat of any man of virtue, when his own consent is needed for evil to win—and that no manner of injury done to him by others can succeed if he chooses to withhold his consent. I saw that I could put an

end to your outrages by pronouncing a single word in my mind. I pronounced it. The word was “No.”<sup>2</sup>

In 1938, Ayn Rand wrote to her British publisher to ask for the right to review the design of the book, a right that is not ordinarily granted to authors.

I would not ask for this [right] if this story were not more precious to me than anything I have ever considered writing. It is so very personally mine, it is, in a way, my manifesto, my profession of faith, the essence of my entire philosophy.<sup>3</sup>

What, then, is the philosophic message of *Anthem*? It is that man’s ego is sacred. One’s ego, one’s life and self-awareness, is something wonderful, something to hold as infinitely precious, something to kneel before, the source of all the value in existence.

In this regard, I will close with my own favorite two brief passages from *Anthem*:

For in the temple of his spirit, each man is alone. Let each man keep his temple untouched and undefiled. (96)

I wished to know the *meaning* of things. *I* am the meaning. I wished to find a warrant for being. I need no warrant for being, and no word of sanction upon my being. *I* am the warrant and the sanction. (94)

Thank you, Ayn Rand.

## NOTES

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1. See Leonard Peikoff, introduction to fiftieth anniversary American edition of Ayn Rand, *Anthem* (New York: Signet, 1995), x.

2. Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged* (New York: Random House, 1957; Signet thirty-fifth anniversary paperback edition, 1992), 960.

3. Unpublished material (Ayn Rand Archives).