Chapter Fourteen

The Sacred in *We the Living*

By Robert Mayhew

In his courtroom speech, toward the end of *The Fountainhead*, Howard Roark says: "From this simplest necessity to the highest religious abstraction, from the wheel to the skyscraper, everything we are and everything we have comes from a single attribute of man—the function of his reasoning mind."[1] Wishing to clear up a possible misunderstanding in this line, Ayn Rand wrote in her introduction to the twenty-fifth anniversary edition of the novel:

> What I was referring to was not religion as such, but a special category of abstractions, the most exalted one, which, for centuries, had been the near monopoly of religion: *ethics*—not the particular content of religious ethics, but the abstraction "ethics," the realm of values, man's code of good and evil, with the emotional connotations of height, uplift, nobility, reverence, grandeur, which pertain to the realm of man's values, but which religion has arrogated to itself. . . . Religion's monopoly in the field of ethics has made it extremely difficult to communicate the emotional meaning and connotations of a rational view of life. Just as religion has preempted the field of ethics, turning morality *against* man, so it has usurped the highest moral concepts of our language, placing them outside this earth and beyond man's reach.

For example: "'Sacred' means superior to and not-to-be-touched-by any concerns of man or of this earth." She adds, with such concepts in mind, that "It is this highest level of man's emotions that has to be redeemed from the murk of mysticism and redirected at its proper object: man."[2]

Nine years earlier, in her introduction to the revised, 1959 edition of *We the Living* (two years after the publication of *Atlas Shrugged*), Ayn Rand had written, in the same spirit: "Its basic theme is the sanctity of human life—using the word 'sanctity' not in a mystical sense, but in the sense of 'supreme value'" (xiii).

Note that this concern to rescue exalted moral concepts from the monopoly of religion is not some post–*Atlas Shrugged* identification applied to her older novels—nor is the 1959 characterization of *We the Living*'s theme as the sanctity of human life. Ayn Rand took this approach to religion very early on, before writing *We the Living*, originally objecting to theism and religion on the grounds that they place sacred values (including the concept "sacred" itself) in another, nonexistent realm. I believe there are important signs of this in *We the Living*, and that one can better appreciate the theme of the novel by focusing on them.

What evidence is there that Ayn Rand had this view of religion prior to writing *We the Living*? First, in biographical interviews that she gave in the early 1960s, she described her first journal, which she wrote in Russia at age thirteen, when she and her family were in the Crimea.

(She said she later destroyed it, before returning to St. Petersburg, because of its anti-Soviet content.)

> I remember this one entry: "Today I decided to be an atheist." And then I proceeded to list why. . . . I had decided that the concept of God is degrading to man. . . . I had decided this: since they say that God is perfect and men can never be *that* perfect, the idea necessarily makes men low and imperfect and places something above him, which is totally wrong and untenable and I don't know of any proof. Nobody has ever told me why God exists and nobody *can* tell me. It is obviously an invention, and since it's rationally untenable and degrading to man, I am against it. It was all decided in one day.[3]

The fact that there are no satisfactory arguments for the existence of God was a factor in Rand's early atheism; but the thrust of her objection to theism is the degrading effect it has on man: it places the perfect, the ideal (including moral ideals) beyond the reach of human beings.

It is not surprising that when Ayn Rand later read Nietzsche, she thought she was encountering an intellectual comrade in arms. One of her (many) favorite passages from *Thus Spake Zarathustra*—one of those she underlined—is: "I conjure you, my brethren, *remain true to the earth*, and believe not those who speak unto you of superearthly hopes! Poisoners are they, whether they know it or not."[4]

Further early evidence of this approach to religious ethics comes in her notes (written in the late 1920s) for the novel *The Little Street*, a project she later abandoned. After describing religion as "The great poison of mankind," she writes:

> *Morals* (as connected with religion) are the real reason for all hypocrisy. The wrecking of man by teaching him ideals that are contrary to his nature; ideals he has to accept as his highest ambition, even though they are organically hateful and repulsive to him. And when he can't doubt them, he doubts himself. He becomes low, sinful, imperfect in his own eyes; he does not aspire to anything high, when he knows that the high is inaccessible and alien to him.[5]

The most obvious indication or manifestation in *We the Living* of this approach to religion occurs in the first philosophical conversation between Kira and Andrei. She asks him whether he believes in God (he does not), and then explains why she asked the question:

> Well, if I asked people whether they believed in life, they'd never understand what I meant. It's a bad question. It can mean so much that it really means nothing. So I ask them if they believe in God. And if they say they do—then, I know they don't believe in life. . . . Because, you see, God—whatever anyone chooses to call God—is one's highest conception of the highest possible. And whoever places his highest conception above his own possibility thinks very little of himself and his life. It's a rare gift, you know, to feel reverence for your own life and to want the best, the greatest, the highest possible, here, now, for your very own. To imagine a heaven and then not to dream of it, but to demand it. (117)[6]

It is noteworthy that there was no such discussion in the first draft of the novel; a version of it (much like the published one) appears for the first time in the second draft, and so was added

sometime after March 9, 1934 (the date written at the end of the first draft).[7] This important addition may have been the result of her further philosophical reflection on the nature of religion—reflection which returned her to her earlier rejection of theism. This time, fortunately, she did not destroy the journal in which she recorded her thoughts. The following passage is from the first entry in her extant philosophical journal, dated April 9, 1934:

> I believe—and I want to gather all the facts to illustrate this—that the worst curse on mankind is the ability to consider ideals as something quite abstract and detached from one's everyday life. The ability to *live* and *think* quite differently, thus eliminating thinking from your actual life. This applied not to deliberate and conscious hypocrites, but to those more dangerous and hopeless ones who, alone with themselves and to themselves, tolerate a complete break between their convictions and their lives, and still believe that they have convictions. To them, either their ideals or their lives are worthless—and usually both.
>
> I hold religion mainly responsible for this. I want to prove that religion breaks a character before it's formed, in childhood, by teaching a child lies before he knows what a lie is, by breaking him of the habit of thinking before he has begun to think, by making him a hypocrite before he knows any other possible attitude toward life. If a child is taught ideals that he knows are contrary to his own deepest instincts, [ideals] such as unselfishness, meekness, and self-sacrifice, if he is told he is a miserable sinner for not living up to ideals he can never reach and *doesn't want* to reach, then his natural reaction is to consider all ideals as out of his reach forever, as something theoretical and quite apart from his own actual life. Thus the beginning of self-hypocrisy, the killing of all desire for a living ideal. . . .[8]

In what follows, I show the ways in which Ayn Rand, while writing *We the Living*, was already working to break the monopoly of religion, by using the language of the sacred in describing Kira's values. Ayn Rand's "trust busting" in the field of ethics is underscored by demonstrating how radically and unmistakably different Kira's values are from religious values—best represented in the novel in the portrayal of Kira's sister Lydia.

In the opening chapter of *We the Living*, in the train taking the Argounovs back to Petrograd, "Lydia was thinking of the old church where she had knelt every Easter of her childhood, and that she would visit it on her first day in Petrograd; . . . Kira remembered suddenly that when she went to the theater, her favorite moment was the one when the lights went out and the curtain shivered before rising; and she wondered why she was thinking of that moment" (23).

Chapter 3 of part 1 is in effect the biography of Kira Argounova at the moment she becomes a Soviet citizen, and it contains early references to her sacred values. Kira did not look for such values in church, because she did not find them there: "When she was taken to church and sneaked out alone in the middle of the services, to get lost in the streets and be brought home to her frantic family—in a police wagon—she was never taken to church again" (45). In the first draft of the novel, Ayn Rand was more specific about this incident: "Kira sneaked out of church *and was found following a military parade with a brass band*" (part 1, chapter 3, p. 89; the words in italics were crossed out). But in the same chapter, referring to "sparkling tunes from musical comedies," we are told that "Kira had a solemn reverence for those songs of defiant gaiety" (50). And throughout the novel, music is a crucially important value to Kira:[9] for example, when she

and Leo went to see *Bajadere*, we are told that "They sat, solemn, erect, reverent as at a church service" (208). Music was not the only value Kira found when she got "lost in the streets": "She climbed to the pedestals of statues in the parks to kiss the cold lips of Greek gods" (49–50).

In an important paragraph in the same chapter, Ayn Rand contrasts the childhood values of Kira and her sister Lydia:

> At the age of thirteen, Lydia fell in love with a grand opera tenor. She kept his picture on her dresser, with a single red rose in a thin crystal glass beside it. At the age of fifteen, she fell in love with Saint Francis of Assisi, who talked to the birds and helped the poor, and she dreamed of entering a convent. Kira had never been in love. The only hero she had known was a Viking whose story she had read as a child . . . ; a Viking who laughed at kings, who laughed at priests, who looked at heaven only when he bent for a drink over a mountain brook. . . . The Viking smiled as men smile when they look up at heaven. . . . "To a life," said the Viking, "which is a reason unto itself." (49)

We are told that "Over Lydia's bed hung an ikon, over Kira's—the picture of an American skyscraper" (50). Similarly, but with more detail, in the next chapter Ayn Rand contrasts the two sisters as follows:

> Lydia mumbled prayers feverishly, trembling in the cold, making the sign of the cross with a hurried hand, bowing low to the little red light and the few glimmers of stern, bronze faces. From her corner on the floor, Kira could see the reddish-gray sky in the window and the gold spire of the Admiralty far away in the cold, foggy dusk over Petrograd, the city where so much was possible. (56)

Since Lydia's sacred values are not of this earth, they cannot be obtained and they offer no real hope. She says: "It has been revealed to me. There are secrets beyond our mortal minds. Holy Russia's salvation will come from faith. It has been predicted. Through patience and long suffering shall we redeem our sins" (272–73). And in another scene, toward the end of the novel, she is even further removed from reality:

> Kira was lying on her mattress on the floor, when Lydia came home from work. Lydia took a long time to undress and a longer time to whisper endless prayers before the ikons in her corner. . . . "I had a vision again, Kira, a call from above. Truly, a prophetic vision, and the voice told me that salvation shall not be long in coming. It is the end of the world and the reign of the Anti-Christ. But Judgment Day is approaching. I know. It has been revealed to me." (446–47)

The consolation of imaginary things is a deluded consolation.[10] Because Lydia's values are not of this world, they provide her with no genuine opposition to communism, merely inessential, ineffectual complaints: "'There's no spiritual comfort these days, Aunt Marussia,' Lydia sighed, . . . 'Those pagans! Those sacrilegious apostates! They've taken the gold ikons from the churches—to feed their famine somewhere. They've opened the sacred relics . . . We'll all be punished, for they defy God'" (98).

It is worth noting that in earlier notes and drafts, Ayn Rand was interested in presenting the actual views and actions, historically, of the Russian Orthodox Church with respect to the Soviets. For instance, she originally wrote: "Patriarch Tikhon had declared the Church's loyalty

to the Soviets. But in the dark, warm evenings the churches were still overflowing with bowed heads, incense and candle-lights. Lydia prayed for Saint Russia and for the dull fear in her heart" (first draft, part 1, chapter 11, p. 273; cf. *We the Living*, 146).[11]

Now for Kira to be content "to kiss the cold lips of Greek gods"—to never fall in love—to think of the Viking of her childhood without hoping to find a man of her own who matched the spirit and stature of that Viking—would be (like Lydia) to imagine a heaven but not demand it. But of course, she did meet her ideal man. And in the first draft account of her seeing Leo for the first time, Ayn Rand wrote: "it was the face of the Viking. . . . They were the eyes of a Viking who drank at sunrise over the ruins of a sacred city" (part 1, chapter 4, p. 24). Note the religious language (in the published version) used to describe Kira's first encounter with Leo:

> Kira leaned against a lamp post, looking straight at his face, and smiled. She did not think; she smiled, stunned, without realizing that she was hoping he would know her as she knew him.
>
> He stopped and looked at her. "Good evening," he said.
>
> And Kira who believed in miracles, said: "Good evening." (61)

Ayn Rand refers to the "tremulous reverence" (61) of Kira's voice, and writes that Kira's "face reflected no admiration, but an incredulous, reverent awe" (62). Their first meeting—and chapter 4 itself—ends in the same spirit:

> She climbed to the seat, kneeling and facing the back of the carriage. As it slowly started away, her hatless hair in the wind, she watched the man who stood looking after her.
>
> When the cab turned a corner, she remained kneeling, but her head dropped. Her hand lay on the seat, helpless, palm up; and she could feel the blood beating in her fingers. (66)

Later, Ayn Rand writes of Kira: "She looked up into [Leo's] face and felt as if she were a priestess, her soul lost in the corners of a god's arrogant mouth; as if she were a priestess and a sacrificial offering" (133).[12] Leo's body, Kira thought (in another scene), looked like "the body of a god" (186),[13] and much later in the novel, borrowing the words from Andrei, she refers to Leo as her "highest reverence" (364). Such language was even more prevalent in early drafts of the novel. For example, in an early scene in the first draft, Kira regretted "that the man to whom she wanted to build a temple received as her sole offering a plate of yellow, steaming millet" (part 1, chapter 15, p. 428).

Like Kira, the two other central characters pursued—or had the capacity to pursue—sacred values, here on earth.

Andrei's tragedy was that he held two contradictory sacred values: the Communist Party and Kira. But the Communist Party was a corrupt fraud; and in any case, communism made genuine sacred values (like Kira) impossible. The supposed purpose of the Communist Party, Andrei's life work, was to unchain the masses and elevate their stature—to make them new men. After agreeing with Kira that the masses as they are now deserve to be loathed, he says: "Only I don't enjoy the luxury of loathing, I'd rather try to make them worth looking at, to bring them up to my level" (90). Later in the novel, Andrei tells her: "We were to raise men to our own level. But they don't rise, the men we're ruling, they don't grow, they're shrinking" (334).[14] And in the

same conversation, Andrei declares: “Kira, the highest thing in a man is not his god. It’s that in him which knows the reverence due a god. And you, Kira, are my highest reverence” (335).

Here is how Kira describes Andrei’s contradiction, toward the end of the novel (note the religious language):

> You had two altars and you saw suddenly that a harlot stood on one of them, and Citizen Morozov on the other? But the Proletarian State has exported ten thousand bushels of wheat last month! You’ve had every beam knocked from under your life? But the Proletarian Republic is building a new electric plant on the Volga! Why don’t you smile and sing hymns to the toil of the Collective? It’s still there, your Collective. Go and join it. Did anything really happen to you? It’s nothing but a personal problem of a private life, the kind that only the dead old world could worry about, isn’t it? Don’t you have something greater—greater is the word your comrades use—left to live for? Or do you, Comrade Taganov?

He does not.

Leo’s tragedy, by contrast, is not a contradictory conception or set of sacred values.[15] Rather, in acknowledgment of the fact that sacred values are impossible to him in Soviet Russia, his goal throughout the novel—from his search for a prostitute toward the beginning, to his decision to be a gigolo at the end—is the destruction of his capacity to hold sacred values. The signs that Leo is giving up appear during his first conversation with Kira: “you can muster the most heroic in you to fight lions,” he tells her, “But to whip your soul to a sacred white heat to fight lice . . . ! No, that’s not good construction, comrade engineer. The equilibrium’s all wrong.” Then he adds: “I don’t want to believe anything. I don’t want to see too much. Who suffers in this world? Those who lack something? No. Those who have something they should lack” (83). That something is the capacity to hold sacred values—to revere one’s own life as a sacred value.

Leo’s pursuit of this goal is made difficult by his meeting and falling in love with Kira. Late in the novel, after Andrei secures his release from prison, Leo says to Kira:

> Will you ever come down to earth? What do you want? Want me to sing of life with little excursions to the GPU between hymns? Afraid they’ve broken me? Afraid they’ll get me? Want me to keep something that the mire can’t reach, the more to suffer while it sucks me under? You’re being kind to me, aren’t you, because you love me so much? Don’t you think you’d be kinder if you’d let me fall into the mire? So that I’d be one with our times and would feel nothing any longer . . . nothing . . . ever. . . . (419)

And when he discovers her affair with Andrei, he tells her: “It was the best piece of news I’d heard since the revolution. . . . Because, you see, that sets me free [from] a little fool who was my last hold on self-esteem!” (440). But perhaps the best description of the tragedy of Leo Kovalensky is from Ayn Rand’s theatrical adaptation of *We the Living*, *The Unconquered.* Here, Leo is talking to Tonia:

> Did it ever occur to you what fools we are? We torture ourselves seeking joy, beauty, honor, thinking that our holy quest will give us relief from the agony. We can’t be hurt through the things we hate. Only through the things we love . . . But to give up and give in, to accept our century as it is, to hold nothing precious and

> nothing sacred, never to be hurt again nor astonished—*that*, my dear, is the only enviable achievement left to us. . . .[16]

In contrast to Andrei, Kira does not pursue contradictory sacred values. In contrast to Leo, she recognizes that to destroy one's capacity to pursue such values is to destroy one's life—the sacred value that makes all others possible. Like Leo, however, she recognizes that a human life is impossible in Soviet Russia. And in contrast to Lydia, she does not settle for imagining a heaven in some other realm; she is confident that there must be a place (*abroad*) where a human life is possible, and she does everything possible—and risks everything—to get there.[17]

Early in the novel, while Kira is waiting for Leo to be released from the GPU, she thinks: "She should be terrified, she thought, and she was; but under the terror there was something without name or words, a hymn without sound, something that laughed, even though Leo was locked in a cell on Gorokhovaia 2" (126–27). This something that is "a hymn without sound" included her love for Leo, to be sure, but it was wider than that. It was her reverence and love for life, her most sacred value, which is described, at the very end of the novel, even as she's losing it, as "a hymn without sound" (464)—or, as her cousin Irina had described it earlier, as "something so precious and rare, so beautiful that it's like a sacred treasure" (350).[18]

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1. Ayn Rand, *The Fountainhead* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1943; Signet fiftieth anniversary paperback edition, 1993), 680.

2. Rand, *Fountainhead*, viii–ix.

3. Biographical interviews (Ayn Rand Archives).

4. From the Biographical interviews: "when I came to this country the first book I bought for myself was a Modern Library *Zarathustra* in English. I had left my copy in Russia, and I very promptly underscored all my favorite passages." Her underlined copy of *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (T. Common translator) exists, and about fifteen underlined passages have some relevance to our topic.

5. David Harriman, ed., *Journals of Ayn Rand* (New York: Dutton, 1997), 24–25.

6. In the Biographical interviews, Ayn Rand explicitly connects this passage to her early recollections about theism.

7. Cf. first draft, part 1, chapter 9, pp. 183–85, and second draft, part 1, chapter 9, p. 152. On the nature of the drafts of *We the Living*, see chapter 1 of the present collection: Shoshana Milgram, "From *Airtight* to *We the Living*: The Drafts of Ayn Rand's First Novel."

8. Harriman, *Journals of Ayn Rand*, 66–68.

9. See chapter 6 of the present collection: Michael Berliner, "The Music of *We the Living*."

10. Cf. Roger Scruton, *News from Somewhere: On Settling* (London: Continuum, 2004), 10: "The consolation of imaginary things is not an imaginary consolation."

11. Patriarch Tikhon (Vasily Ivanovich Bellavin, 1865–1925) was Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church from 1917–1925. The extent to which his declaration of loyalty may have been coerced is disputed.

12. Cf. this description from the last scene of the novel: "She went on, a fragile girl in the flowing, medieval gown of a priestess" (463).

13. Cf.: "The tutors, and the servants, and the guests [of Admiral Kovalensky] looked at Leo as they looked at the statue of Apollo in the Admiral's study, with the same reverent hopelessness they felt for the white marble of a distant age" (138).

14. In *Atlas Shrugged*, according to one of the legends about John Galt, "He found the fountain of youth, which he wanted to bring down to men. Only he never came back. . . . Because he found that it couldn't be brought down" (169).

15. For more on the nature of Leo's tragedy, see chapter 15 of the present collection: Onkar Ghate, "The Plight of Leo Kovalensky."

16. Act III, scene 2, p. 15 (of the version in the New York Public Library). For information on *The Unconquered*, see chapter 9 of the present collection: Jeff Britting, "Adapting *We the Living*."

17. On the concept "abroad" in *We the Living*, see for example, 79–80, 120–21, and 444. In 1968, Ayn Rand wrote in her essay "The 'Inexplicable Personal Alchemy'":

> The meaning of that word ["abroad"] for a Soviet citizen is incommunicable to anyone who has not lived in that country: if you project what you would feel for a combination of Atlantis, the Promised Land and the most glorious civilization on another planet, as imagined by a most benevolent kind of science fiction, you will have a pale approximation. "Abroad," to a Soviet Russian, is as distant, shining and unattainable as these; yet to any Russian who lifts his head for a moment from the Soviet muck, the concept "abroad" is a psychological necessity, a lifeline and soul preserver.

Reprinted in Ayn Rand, *Return of the Primitive: The Anti-Industrial Revolution*, Peter Schwartz, ed. (New York: Meridian, 1999).

18. I am grateful to Tara Smith for arranging a BB&T Research Workshop at the University of Texas at Austin in Fall 2010—during which I began work on this essay—and for discussion of the topic with me.