Chapter Fifteen

The Plight of Leo Kovalensky

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> "How long can a man preserve his sacred fire if he knows that jail is the reward for loyalty to reason? No longer than he can preserve it if he is taught that that loyalty is irrelevant—as he is taught [today] both in the East and in the West. There are exceptions who will hold out, no matter what the circumstances. But these are exceptions that mankind has no right to expect." —Ayn Rand, "The 'Inexplicable Personal Alchemy,'" 1969

Readers of *We the Living* debate who is the better person, Andrei Taganov or Leo Kovalensky. Ayn Rand's answer, Leonard Peikoff tells us in his introduction to the novel's sixtieth anniversary edition, was unequivocal: Leo.

From one perspective, the fact that some readers side with Andrei should not surprise. When we first meet Leo, he is already in the process of breaking and giving up; he is seeking out a prostitute to numb his soul. Andrei, by contrast, does not give up until the end of the novel. Throughout most of the story, he is a determined, purposeful man of action. He is a proud fighter for his collectivist goals. He also profoundly loves Kira and tries to protect her. When he learns from her the value of an individual life and an individual's own personal happiness, and sees the monstrosity of the Communist Party's ideals, he even confronts and challenges his own party. Only with the realization that his whole life has been devoted to an inhuman goal, which has brought suffering to the only woman he loved, does he give up and commit suicide.

Yet from another perspective, the fact that some readers side with Andrei is surprising. First, much of what Andrei comes to discover about life through his affair with Kira, Leo already knows (though he never fully actualizes it in his own soul). This knowledge makes life in Soviet Russia unbearable to Andrei; it did the same, earlier, to Leo. As Andrei's newfound knowledge dawns, he wants to escape abroad with Kira, exactly as Leo had earlier tried to do.

Second, Andrei is a member of the GPU. He is a killer willing to kill individuals who are in fact good in the name of a cause that is in fact evil. Andrei is in error, and he only grasps the magnitude and destructiveness of his error toward the end of the story, but that does not erase the fact that it is to a monstrous cause that he has devoted his life.

Of course this second aspect of Andrei's character, that he is a member of the secret police, is not stressed in the story. I suspect this is for two related reasons, one of a more general and one of a more specific nature. The more general reason is that the novel does not focus on what may by some be regarded as temporary emergencies under collectivist rule: slave labor, secret trials, firing squads, gulags, concentration camps, and so on. If only such "excesses" were eliminated, those sympathetic to collectivism often did (and do) argue, collectivist rule would be fine, even noble. Rand's reply in *We the Living* is, in effect, that even if one leaves aside such

"excesses," life under collectivism is hellish. By focusing on the soul- and life-crushing daily experience of those caught in a collectivist state, she makes her indictment of this type of social system more powerful and persuasive.[1]

The more specific reason is that Rand works carefully to make Andrei as sympathetic as possible. His error, though massive, is portrayed as honest, even though it is doubtful that in real life a person of Andrei's intelligence and activities could be honestly deluded for so long about the merits of collectivism. The more she stressed that Andrei was a member of the GPU, participating in its activities, the harder it would be to make him sympathetic, a victim of his own honest error.[2]

Andrei, we sense from the story, does not relish GPU tactics and will resort to them only when he thinks they are absolutely necessary; but my point here is that he will resort to them. Kira glimpses this aspect of Andrei's character when she pleads with him to drop his investigation of Leo, Pavel Syerov and Karp Karpovitch Morozov: "He turned to her and she looked into a face she had never seen before, the implacable face of Comrade Taganov of the GPU, a face that could have watched secret executions in dark, secret cellars" (386).

Viewed from the perspective of life, therefore, Leo both in his conscious convictions and his actual actions is far superior to Andrei.

This does not change the fact that Leo's plight and disintegration are difficult to understand. Indeed, if Leo is superior even to Andrei, why does Leo break and why in the way that he does? This is what I will explore. I will discuss two main issues. First, the difference in strength of character between Leo and Kira. Leo is superior to Andrei, but Kira is superior to Leo. This is crucial to understanding the story. As Rand stated to herself in creating the story,

> The higher and stronger [individual] is broken, but not conquered; she falls on the battlefield, still the same individual, untouched: *Kira.* The one with less resistance is broken and conquered; he disintegrates under an unbearable strain: *Leo.* And the best of those who believed in the ideal is broken by the realization of what the ideal really means: *Andrei*.[3]

What does Kira possess that Leo does not?

Second, I will discuss the "unbearable strain" under which Leo disintegrates and especially why he is unable to cope in the way that other characters seem able to cope, that is, why other characters' courses of action are not open or possible to Leo, why his is an active spiritual suicide.

Let us begin with Kira and Leo. To capture Kira's unique strength of character, I would name two aspects. She has a unique veneration for her own life and, in comparison to Leo, her attitude is more metaphysical.

In their first meeting, Leo exclaims to Kira, "What an appetite!" "For what?" she asks. "For life," Leo answers. "If one loses that appetite, why still sit at the table?" Leo's reaction? "He laughed. His laughter rolled into the empty windows above them, as cold and empty as the windows." And then he answers: "Perhaps to collect under the table a few little crumbs of refuse—like you—that can still be amusing" (63).

It is her appetite for life that Kira never relinquishes and that she consciously knows she must never relinquish. This appetite for life, Leo never fully forms. Kira's is a religious devotion to her life, a sacred quest to make it joyous and exalted. "Do you believe in God?" she asks Andrei. He answers no. "Neither do I. But that's a favorite question of mine. . . . If I asked people whether they believed in life, they'd never understand what I meant. . . . So I ask them if

they believe in God. And if they say they do, then I know they don't believe in life." "Why?" Andrei asks.

> 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, to feel reverence for your 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)

Kira consciously views herself as a soldier, but she has no desire to fight people. She tells Andrei, "I don't want to fight for the people, and I don't want to fight against the people, I don't want to hear of the people. I want to be left alone—to live" (90). "What are you doing in Soviet Russia?" Vasili remarks. "That," Kira answers, "is what I'm wondering about" (42). But she is caught in Soviet Russia, she knows she is caught in an unwanted battle, and she will fight. "Her face serene and confident as a child's," she tells Leo that the two of them will fight: "Together. We'll fight all of it. The country. The century. The millions. We can stand it. We can do it" (133). At the end of her life, Kira knows she has remained the devoted soldier she was since its beginning. Shot and dying, she summons her last strength: "across the border," she tells herself, "a life was waiting for her to which she had been faithful her every living hour, her only banner that had never been lowered, that she had held high and straight, a life she could not betray, she would not betray now by stopping while she was still living, a life she could still serve, by walking, by walking forward a little longer, just a little longer" (463).

In contrast to Kira, Leo never achieves ambition for life.[4] He tells Kira he has but one desire: "to learn to desire something" (83). Caught in Soviet Russia, persecuted and pursued from an early age for his "sin" of being born the son of Admiral Kovalensky, he never reaches the state of firm, enduring reverence for his own life. There are glimpses of it, and he knows that this *is* the state of soul proper to a human being, but it never coalesces in his own soul. When Kira thinks at the end of her life of the Leo that could have been and that would have been had he lived abroad, outside the grip of the collectivist state, this I think is what she means. Free to live, Leo would have formed the devotion to life that is characteristic of Kira.

A consequence of the veneration for life that Kira achieves and maintains but Leo does not is a difference in attitude toward their immediate surroundings. Kira's is a *metaphysical* attitude; Leo's is not.

Consider how we first meet Kira, aboard a train arriving in Petrograd. She is not paying attention to the two weeks of depressing conversation of her fellow passengers, "sentences hissed" in a "rocking haze of dust, sweat and fear" (24). She is not even preoccupied with the revolution, which she thinks is, because ugly and irrational, temporary. As we have seen, she neither wants to fight for nor against the people; she simply wants to live. She is not preoccupied with the sordid world that Russians have made of Petrograd and Russia, but with reality, where "so much is possible" to anyone with the necessary thought, effort and will (25). Her primary focus is always on what life *in fact* demands of those who want to live, not on what is required to cope with her immediate conditions.

This is the opposite of being lost in the clouds, maintaining some kind of self-imposed delusion so that she does not have to face the squalor and evil all around her. Kira grasps the evil around her more than anyone else in the story; she loathes the collectivist ideal. And given her miserable circumstances, Kira copes admirably. But as you progress through the story, you

realize that Kira transcends her circumstances and, in a fundamental sense, is left untouched by them. (This is made explicit at the end and is part of the power of the story's ending.) Why is she left untouched? The answer I think is that she never treats her surroundings as the final verdict on life, man, and reality. Her own soul, and the fact that it *is* right for reality and therefore not for a collectivist slave camp, is the vision that moves her. The actuality of her spirit, and the possibility of its full expression into a truly human life and human form of existence, which she and Leo could have and would have achieved abroad, is the final verdict on life, man, and reality. Nothing other people do, no matter how irrational or evil, can shake this conviction.

Rand, writing years later about this attitude toward life and the philosophical premises that generate it, argued that to achieve serenity of soul an individual must learn to distinguish between the metaphysically given—facts inherent in the very nature of existence, which must be faced unquestionably and on which the standards of how to live must be based—and the man-made. The man-made must never be accepted uncritically but instead judged and rejected when found wanting. "Serenity," Rand writes, "comes from the ability to say 'Yes' to existence. Courage comes from the ability to say 'No' to the wrong choices made by others." One aspect of this attitude is that "one must never accept man-made evils (there are no others) in silent resignation, one must never submit to them voluntarily—and even if one is imprisoned in some ghastly dictatorship's jail, where no action is possible, serenity comes from the knowledge that one does *not* accept it."[5]

This is the serenity that Kira achieves; this metaphysical attitude is the deepest source of the independence of her soul. In this, Kira is like Rand's later heroes, Howard Roark in *The Fountainhead* and John Galt in *Atlas Shrugged.* Roark too transcends his immediate circumstances, unaffected by the irrationality and evil around him. His courage appears so unusual in the novel because so *natural*; in opposing the professional norms of the architectural establishment and the moral norms of his society, Roark gives no impression that he is engaged in a grim, painful battle; quite the contrary. And, the story makes clear, this is because of the serenity of soul that Roark has achieved. He knows that his way of living is right, right for reality, and that other people, whether mistaken or irrational, are in the wrong. His focus, moreover, is not on the errors or evil of other people, but on the actual requirements of living in reality. His is a life that says "Yes" to existence. A memorable scene in *The Fountainhead*, revealing of Roark's state of soul, is when Roark finds himself alone with his enemy, Ellsworth Toohey. Toohey, fixated on bringing Howard Roark to his knees, asks Roark, "Why don't you tell me what you think of me? In any words you wish. No one will hear us." Toohey is hoping for acknowledgment from Roark that Toohey's destructive power is, somehow, equal to Roark's creative power. Roark's reply: "But I don't think of you."[6]

In *Atlas Shrugged*, John Galt is literally in the clutches of dictators, who are torturing him so that he will save their collectivist system—somehow, they hope, he will grant them their anti-reality wish of making the irrational work. On display in the scene is Galt's profound serenity of soul. This serenity comes from the knowledge of the full irrationality and depravity of his enemies and the full conviction and pride that his mind, his self, his soul, his choice to live are right, right for reality. (In the scene, it is this difference of soul that Galt makes his enemies confront, as they torture him.) When his friends free him, one vows to hunt down his torturers and kill them. Galt's attitude, however, resembles Roark's. "If you do," Galt tells his friend, "you'll find that there's nothing left of them to kill."[7]

This serenity of soul which Kira, Roark, and Galt possess, Leo does not. One consequence of the fact that Leo's *metaphysical* reverence for life is killed before it can fully

develop is that Leo is, in comparison to Kira, too focused on his immediate surroundings and the actions of other people. (In this and other ways Leo bears striking similarities to Dominique Francon and Steven Mallory in *The Fountainhead*, although of course significant differences exist.)[8]

When we first meet Kira, we see how her focus is on things other than her immediate, unpleasant circumstances. “You’re off—as usual,” Lydia tells her (25). But Kira is not daydreaming, she is thinking of more important things, things more metaphysical, things pertaining to what is possible in life. This is characteristic of Kira throughout the story. But it is not of Leo. When we first meet him, he cautions Kira about examining people too closely. “The less you see of them the better off you are. Unless you have strong nerves and a strong stomach” (62). His advice to her is to run from all people.

Both Kira and Leo are looked at with disdain by the Soviet authorities, she a daughter of a factory owner, he the son of an admiral in the czar’s navy. It is true that Leo’s persecution is much worse than Kira’s, especially early in the story, but it also true that it affects Leo in a way that it does not affect Kira. The injustices Leo faces consume him and defeat him early, particularly because his opponents are unworthy adversaries. One can fight, Kira tells him. “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 . . . !” (83).

This sort of focus on other people and comparing their standing to his runs throughout Leo’s increasing despair. You can see precursors of it in his childhood, when he deliberately antagonizes people.

> When his young friends related, in whispers, the latest French stories, Leo quoted Spinoza and Nietzsche; he quoted Oscar Wilde at the prim gatherings of his stern aunt’s Ladies’ Charity Club; he described the superiority of Western culture over that of Russia to the austere, gray-haired diplomats, friends of his father, rabid Slavophiles, and he greeted them with an impudent foreign “Allo.” . . . Resenting the portrait of the Czar in his father’s study and the Admiral’s unflinching, unreasoning loyalty, Leo attended a secret meeting of young revolutionists. But when an unshaved young man made a speech about men’s brotherhood and called him “comrade,” Leo whistled “God Save the Czar,” and went home. (138)

Kira would not act in this way. (Nor would Howard Roark in *The Fountainhead* or John Galt or even Francisco d’Anconia in *Atlas Shrugged*, the latter of whom I think is the Rand hero closest in spirit to Leo.)[9]

When Kira and Leo begin their life together, Leo rightly tells Kira, “think what we have against us” (133). But what they have against them consumes Leo in a way that it does not Kira; Leo cannot stand to watch the kind of people who are rising as he struggles. Kira is able to see something in Andrei and become friends with him; Leo does not resent Kira’s friendship with Andrei, but when he meets Andrei he refers to Andrei as his “class superior” (158). When Leo loses his job after refusing to participate in social activities, he tells Kira, “Think I care about their damn job!” (166–67). Expelled from school, Kira is empty and deflated, but Leo is worse: he is drunk. “I know,” he tells her. “You’re kicked out. Like a dog. So am I. Like two dogs” (213). After Leo returns from the Crimea, and enters into the scheme with Morozov, Kira pleads with Leo to back out. “That fool Antonia doesn’t have to lead excursions,” he tells Kira. “She wouldn’t wear your kind of dresses to scrub floors in—only she doesn’t have to scrub floors. Well, you won’t have to either” (285). When the scheme is proving successful, Kira cautions Leo

not to openly display their money. "Why not? Certainly we have money. Let them see that we have money. I'm not going to act like trash for the benefit of trash." He buys an expensive present in order to show off. "Why bring such a present for all the Communists to see?" Kira pleads with him. "That's exactly why" (297).

Of course, Leo's attitude is understandable. He is in the midst of evil, the victim of enormous injustice, and the people who hold his life in their hands are contemptuous. But still, all this is true of Kira as well, yet her attitude is not Leo's. She is not compelled to make comparisons to other people's standing nor is she consumed by the injustice she faces. Precisely because of her metaphysical attitude, Kira can see beyond those injustices to reality—to what reality demands of an individual to count among the truly living; these are facts no collectivist state can wipe out. These facts are what Kira is always loyal to, and that loyalty sustains her spiritually until the end.[10]

There is no question, then, that Kira is the stronger of the two characters. But it is also true, I will argue, that Leo's predicament in the story is unique; his fate could not have been the fate of any of the other characters; he is destroyed in the manner that he is precisely because of how good he is.

To see this, we first need to be clear on the fact that Leo is a good person who is unable to hang on; then we can compare his specific fate to the fates of some of the other characters.

When we first meet Leo in the story, two facts about him are important to keep in mind. First, Leo is actively being pursued by the Communists because he is the son of Admiral Kovalensky. On his first meeting with Kira, he jumps to his feet when he realizes she is not a prostitute. A bit later on, when he comes to see Kira at the Technological Institute for the first time, he is taking a chance simply by showing his face (he is recognized by Pavel Syerov). Second, Leo more than anyone except Kira, understands the evil that has engulfed Russia, the fact that a collectivist system is designed to crush the best individual's spirit and life.

It is not that surprising, therefore, that when we first meet him, he is in the process of giving up, of trying to kill within himself his capacity to envision and long for an exalted state of being. "Stop staring at me as if I were something unusual," he tells Kira. "I want to drink. I want a woman like you. I want to go down, as far down as you can drag me" (63). Kira's strength of spirit, however, revives him—and this is something profoundly good about Leo. When, in their first meeting, Kira says good-bye until they meet again in a month, he answers, "If I'm still alive—and if I don't forget" (66). The next time they part for a month, his answer is dramatically different: "I'll be alive—because I won't forget" (84).

Revived, it is Leo who plans the escape abroad to Germany, and during this whole episode he is firmly in command, a man of action. Here, more than anywhere else in the story, we see the measure of his potential.

But of course the attempt to escape fails, though Leo is released from the GPU. At this point he holds out little hope, but still acts. Leo obtains a home for them, lighting a fire to warm the place before picking up Kira. Leo is aware of the suffocating forces they now face but is willing to try to hold on. Kira tells him they will fight all of it. He answers, without hope, "We'll try" (133).

At this point, Leo can hold on to both his job as a translator and, much more importantly, his studies for the future. He is diligent in regard to both. The beginning of his end occurs when he loses his job: he refuses to engage in unpaid work to fulfill his social duty to the state. "Did it ever occur to you that I have a life to live—in my spare time?" he tells his boss. "The Soviet State recognizes no life but that of the social class" is the reply (166). He repeatedly tries to find

another job, holding out little hope for success, and is met with barred door after barred door. Morally, he is unable to engage in the kinds of activities that those who are rising in the collectivist system engage in. As he later tells Kira, "I couldn't do what Victor Dunaev is doing if I were boiled in oil for punishment!" (284). (One of Leo's noblest acts is his futile attempt to get Syerov to have Sasha and Irina sent to the same prison.) Both he and Kira near starving, Leo tries to make sure Kira is the one who eats the little food they can obtain (she does the same for him). He eventually manages to get temporary manual-labor jobs—and is also periodically "mobilized" by the state. His coughing begins.

The death blow occurs when he is kicked out of the university. He no longer has even the semblance of a future to work toward: the collectivist state has deemed him unworthy of one. For the first time, we see him drinking. Soon after, when he's diagnosed with incipient tuberculosis, he tells Kira that at first he was afraid. "But I'm not—now. Everything seems so much simpler—when there's a limit set" (221). Although Kira is able to save his body by sending him to the Crimea, she can no longer rekindle his soul. When he returns there is "something in his eyes that had not been cured; something that, perhaps, had grown beyond cure" (261).

Thereafter, we witness Leo in his death throes. He enters into the scheme with Morozov and Syerov knowing that he is the fall guy should anything go wrong, and that it is his life that he is risking. "I have no career. I have no future. . . . I'm not risking much when I risk my life," he tells Kira (284). Why is he doing it? To give Kira and himself a taste of life, if only for a moment. "You poor little fool!" he tells her. "You don't know what life can be. You've never seen it. But you're going to see it. And I'm going to see it before they finish me. Listen, if I knew for certain that it's the firing squad in six months—I'd still do it!" (285–86).

But even this last taste of life proves an illusion. The money flows in but, unearned, it has no meaning and, in Soviet Russia, it can serve no future. Leo drowns himself in drink, parties, gambling. There is a growing resentment of Kira, the only one around him who can see and kindle within him the vision of an exalted state of being—which makes life in Soviet Russia unbearable. Occasionally, there are also signs of life. He whispers to Kira to hide the money from him "For the escape. For Europe. We'll do it . . . some day . . . if you can keep me from thinking . . . until then . . . If we can only keep from thinking . . ." (326). But a bit later, when Kira senses that Leo is almost gone, she asks him to marry her. He refuses. He then says to her, to alleviate her worry about his spiritual destruction, "You crazy, hysterical child! You drive yourself into a fit over some weird fears. . . . We'll save every ruble from now on, if that's what you want. You can put it away for a trip to Monte Carlo or San Francisco or the planet Jupiter" (365). He has managed to almost completely wipe out his vision of life and clearly no longer holds out any hope for escape.

When Andrei arrests Leo, Leo seems surprised that, as he reaches for his coat, his fingers are trembling. He steadies himself. But afterward, when he is released, he vows to never feel that fear and lack of control over his life again. How? By vowing "to never feel again." He tells Kira, in an even and flat voice, "No one's going to do anything to me anymore. . . . No one . . . Not you nor anyone else . . ." Kira pleads with him. He replies, "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).

Leo's spiritual suicide-murder is complete. It doesn't have the suddenness and existential finality of Andrei's suicide, but then the cases are different. Andrei has been relentlessly pursuing a purpose. When he grasps that his life has been devoted to a monstrous cause, destroying that which he actually loves, he brings that life to an end. Leo has never been able to

form a purposeful state of being. His soul has been asphyxiated before it ever fully breathed; he is just trying to end the constant, dull pain, at the end not even fully knowing what has been lost. If anything, his lack of decisiveness is the more tragic. He tells Kira that he will not, like her, "keep holy something in your fool imagination—your spirit or soul or honor—something that never existed, that shouldn't exist, that is the worst of all curses if it ever did exist! Well, I'm through with it. If it's murder—well—I don't see any blood" (440–41).

This is the nature of Leo's downward path. To fully appreciate the poignancy of his fate, however, I think you have to appreciate the fact that the courses of action that the other characters take to try to cope with their inhuman circumstances are not open to Leo.[11] Leo is too good and too perceptive to share any of their paths. (As we have already seen, his path could not be similar to Kira's because he does not possess her strength of character; but there is also another important way in which his path could not have been hers, a point I will discuss at the end of the essay.)

The key to understanding why Leo's path is different is the role that the concept of the future plays in the story. (I will discuss the related concept of abroad a bit later.) The effort of the characters to hang on to life is the effort to hang on to their ability to project a future better than the collectivist, man-made hell they currently see all around them.

When we meet Kira's father, Alexander, he is unable to retain any vision of a future. Once a person who, presumably as the head of a textile factory, could project his course of action across years and even decades, this power has faded under communism. When the family boards the train to return to Petrograd, Alexander is "not thinking" (23). What is there to think about? He tries to start some small businesses after returning to Petrograd, but without much conviction or hope. He is too honest to become a "Nepman" (92). He does vow that he "will not become a Soviet employee if we all starve" (he is "mobilized" later on) (93). But he has no positive purpose: a bit later we see him playing solitaire and feeding a stray cat. He eventually takes a Soviet job and mouths some Soviet propaganda, seemingly oblivious to his earlier vow. By the end, he has nothing better to do than collect matchbox labels.

Of all the characters, I think the shriveling of Alexander's soul is most similar to what happens to Leo's, but with this crucial difference: Alexander seems unaware of what is happening to him. Leo, however, is too intelligent and self-aware to share Alexander's path. Leo grasps what is happening to him; consequently, his own disintegration is and has to be more active. Alexander lets go without seeming to know that he is letting go or what he is letting go of; basically, he is passive; this is not a possibility open to Leo.[12]

Like Alexander, Vasili Dunaev will not take a Soviet job—and never does. In contrast to Alexander, Vasili tries to retain a concept of the future by holding on to the hope, entirely unfounded, that Europe will do something about the Soviet nightmare and that his children at least will have a better future. His children become his future. A former prosperous fur trader, when we first meet Vasili his sunken eyes are described as "like a fireplace where the last blazing coals fought against slow, inevitable ashes. He said: 'Sorry Victor isn't home. He's at the Institute. The boy works so hard.' His son's name acted like a strong breath that revived the coals for a moment" (34). "All this is temporary," he announces.

> You all lose faith so easily. That's the trouble with our spineless, sniveling, impotent, blabbering, broad-minded, drooling intelligentsia! . . . Do you think all this can go on? Do you think Russia is dead? Do you think Europe is blind? Watch Europe. She hasn't said her last word yet. The day will come—soon—

> when these bloody assassins, these foul scoundrels, that Communist scum . . .
> (37–38)

By the end of the story, Victor has betrayed his own soul and Irina has been sent to die in Siberia. But Vasili still tries to hold out hope for Acia, whom he now calls a bright child (a new "Soviet" child, he previously regarded her as uneducated). "Everything isn't lost yet," he tells Kira in their last meeting. "I still have Acia's future before me. . . . There's a lot going on in the world. One can wait, if one has faith and patience" (451). Although we can sympathize with Vasili's attempt to cope with his circumstances—and Kira treats him gently, as she treats her father gently—it should be clear that Leo is too intelligent to erect this kind of delusion for himself.

Kira's sister Lydia tries to retain some concept of the future and make sense of the awful present by turning more and more to the supernatural and to stories about a Judgment Day and a mystical salvation. But Leo of course is too rational to delude himself with arbitrary stories and otherworldly revelations; Lydia's is also not a path open to him.

Sasha holds out hope that, with his and others' help, the Russian people will revolt against their Soviet masters. "Do you think the Russian worker is a beast that licks its yoke while his mind is being battered out of him? Do you think he's fooled by the clatter of a very noisy gang of tyrants? Do you know what he reads? Do you know the books that are hidden in the factories? The papers that pass secretly through many hands? Do you know that the people is awakening . . ." "Sasha," Kira says, "aren't you playing a very dangerous game?" She continues: "The people have claimed too many victims already—of your kind" (258). But in contrast to Sasha, Leo, like Kira, does not want to fight against or for "the people." Leo is also more realistic about the present state of the Russian people and the chances for success (escaping abroad has a greater chance of success than rousing the people to overthrow the Soviet state). Irina, it is important to note, also thinks Sasha is doomed. She tells Kira,

> Set the people free. His duty to the people, Sasha says. And you and I know that any one of that great people would be only too glad to betray them all to the GPU for an extra pound of linseed oil. . . . Oh, what can I do? I would like to stop him and I have no right to stop him. But I know they'll get him . . . he won't listen, and he's right, only I love him. I love him. And he'll go to Siberia some day. And what's the use? Kira! What's the use? (328)

The fact is that Sasha's martyrdom is not a path Leo could choose. Leo is too independent and rational to think he has a duty to the people and too realistic to think the counterrevolutionary activities will succeed in toppling the communists.

Kira's mother, Galina, and Victor Dunaev both sell out in order to have a "future" within Soviet Russia. They seek to accommodate themselves to the collectivist state—and lose their souls (or never form them in the first place). Galina's is the more passive compromise; she is a person who seems to absorb and imitate the slogans and mores of her immediate surroundings (a "second hander," to use Rand's terminology from *The Fountainhead*). When we first meet Galina, she is a person of the old world, tied to the traditions of the Russian upper class and to Orthodox religion, and hostile to the Soviets. By the end of the story, she's spouting Communist propaganda. "Mother," Kira says to her at one point, "who wrote all that down for you?" (270). At the end Galina even cautions Kira not to attempt escape abroad, asking: "What's wrong with this country? . . . This is the country for young people. . . . Look at me. I've adapted myself, at

my age, and, really, I can't say that I'm unhappy" (448). In contrast to Galina, Victor's is the more active and therefore much more evil compromise: he knowingly betrays Kira, Leo, Marisha, Vasili, Sasha, and Irina. Neither of these paths is open to Leo: he is too first-handed and intelligent to take Galina's path and we have already seen his view of Victor's chosen path.

Andrei, unlike Galina and Victor, as we have already seen, has been persuaded by the ideal of collectivism. He has a future that he is single-mindedly working toward. Of all the characters, he is able to be the most purposeful. But he has dedicated his life to an evil cause. When he grasps this, he breaks. And this, as we have seen, could not have happened to Leo: Leo is too intelligent and understands too much about life to ever have been seduced by collectivist ideology.

Which leaves Kira. As we have already seen, there is no question that Kira is the stronger of the two. But it is also crucial to grasp that she has a way of holding on to a future that Leo does not.

After Kira and Leo move in together, both try to maintain their jobs so they have enough to eat; but their focus is on their studies and the futures these will bring. The death blow to their futures occurs when Leo is kicked out of the university, and Kira out of the Institute. "I guess I won't be a builder after all," she tells Andrei, "I guess I won't build any aluminum bridges" (212). Leo, as we have seen, begins drinking. After this, no long-range goal remains for either; no real ambition is left. They try, somehow, to persevere. "Because there was no future, they hung on to the present" (216). But Kira, unlike Leo, has a substitute future: Leo. "And, sometimes, she felt pity for those countless nameless ones somewhere around them who, in a feverish quest, were searching for some answer, and in their search crushed others, perhaps even her; but she could not be crushed, for she had the answer. She did not wonder about the future. The future was Leo" (216–17).

What we witness after this is Kira's reverent quest to save Leo. She fights harder than he does to get state permission for him to go south to Crimea, and when that fails, she sells herself to Andrei. What keeps her going, in Leo's absence, is news of his return. "He was coming back, cured, strong, saved. She had lived eight months for one telegram. She had never looked beyond it. Beyond the telegram, there was no future" (252). Leo returns, his body saved but his soul in an even more precarious state. Kira's goal is then to see if she can revive Leo, as she had once done much earlier, and then, somehow, hold on with him. It proves a losing battle, but a battle in which she continually reminds herself of her cause. That cause is, abstractly and metaphysically, her reverent devotion to life. She tells Leo: "There is only one thing that matters and that we'll remember. The rest doesn't matter. I don't care what life is to be nor what it does to us. But it won't break us. Neither you nor me. That's our only weapon. That's the only banner we can hold against all those others around us. That's all we have to know about the future" (261).

But specifically and concretely—and this is crucial—her cause is Leo. She saves money from Leo's scheme with Morozov and Syerov, in a desperate hope that someday, somehow, she and Leo will be able to escape abroad. Leo, as we've seen, tells her to hide the money from him and that perhaps they can hold on long enough "if we can only keep from thinking." And then we learn how Kira copes:

> She had learned to keep from thinking; she remembered only that he was Leo and that she had no life beyond the sound of his voice, the movements of his hands, the lines of his body—and that she had to stand on guard between him and the something immense, unnamable which was moving slowly toward him, which

> had swallowed so many. She would stand on guard; nothing else mattered; she never thought of the past; the future—no one around her thought of the future. (326)

Shortly thereafter, Andrei asks her to marry him and escape abroad. He adds: "Why can't I tell them all, tell men like Leo Kovalensky, that you're mine, that you're my . . . my wife?" Kira's reaction: "She did not look frightened any longer; the name he had pronounced had given her courage, her greatest, coldest battlefield courage. She said: 'Andrei, I can't'" (359).

So the question is, can Kira become Leo's substitute for a future in the way that Leo becomes Kira's substitute for a future? For Ayn Rand, the answer is no. It is not that Leo does not draw strength from Kira. On the contrary, she revives his dying soul at the beginning of the story and, periodically, inspires him to hold on. After the party in which Leo almost confronts Andrei and reveals his affair with Kira, he tells Kira on her return home, "I thought you had gone. Forever . . ." and then adds "You should leave me, Kira. . . . I wish you could leave me. . . . But you won't . . . You won't leave me, Kira . . . Kira . . . will you?" (307).

Further, Leo is devoted to Kira. Early in their relationship, when they begin to live together, we see his care and tenderness toward her. Even when he begins his scheme with Morozov, part of his reason, as we have seen, is to win for Kira, if only for a moment, a state of existence worthy of her.

But for Rand I think Kira's particular feeling for Leo is a feeling distinctive to a woman who is truly in love with a man. "For a woman *qua* woman," she wrote years later in explaining an aspect of her view of romantic love,

> the essence of femininity is hero worship—the desire to look up to man. "To look up" does not mean dependence, obedience, or anything implying inferiority. It means an intense kind of admiration; and admiration is an emotion that can be experienced only by a person of strong character and independent value judgments. A "clinging vine" type of woman is not an admirer, but an exploiter of men. Hero worship is a demanding virtue: a woman has to be worthy of it and of the hero she worships. Intellectually and morally, i.e., as a human being, she has to be his equal; then the object of her worship is specifically his *masculinity*, not any human virtue she might lack.
>
> This does not mean that a feminine woman feels or projects hero worship for any and every individual man; as human beings, many of them may, in fact, be her inferiors. Her worship is an abstract emotion for the *metaphysical* concept of masculinity as such—which she experiences fully and concretely only for the man she loves, but which colors her attitude toward all men.[13]

To such a woman, the man she loves can become her focus in a way that is not reciprocal. We see this dynamic in some of Rand's early fiction.[14] And we see it again in *The Fountainhead.* Howard Roark and Dominique Francon are in love, but his feeling for her is different from her feeling for him. Partway through the story, Dominique asks Roark to quit his career as an architect, instead of being tortured by an indifferent, even hostile society; they will move to a small town and make their exclusive focus each other. Roark's reaction is revealing. He laughs—even though he tries not to laugh. He says in part: "If I were very cruel, I'd accept. Just to see how soon you'd beg me to go back to building." Dominique's reply is also revealing: "Yes . . . Probably . . ."[15] In this scene I think it is not just that Dominique is wrong about the power that

other people hold, an error she comes to correct later in the story. It is that she is wrong that she would still love Roark if his focus in life became her.

None of this is to imply that it is good for Kira that her sole focus becomes Leo. This is her way of coping, of having a substitute for a future when the collectivist state has torn her own future away from her. The point is only that, when deprived of her own future, Leo can become the sole focus of Kira's existence in a way that Kira could not become for Leo.

Indeed, what we witness in Leo is that part of what he resents in their inhuman circumstances is that Kira must save him. When Leo cannot get permission to work but Kira can, he lashes out at her when she tells him they do not have to worry. "No? We don't, do we? You're enjoying it, aren't you, to see me living off you? You're glad to remind me that I don't have to worry while you're working yourself into a scarecrow of a martyr?" (203) Kira must convince Leo to go south to the Crimea after she gets the money from Andrei. "It had not been easy to convince Leo to go. He said he would not let her—or her uncle—keep him. He said it tenderly and he said it furiously. It took many hours and many evenings" (235).[16] He tells Kira when he returns from the Crimea: "I love you. I love you too much. I wish I didn't. It would all be so simple if I didn't. But to love a woman and to see her dragging herself through this hell they call life here, and not to help her, but to let her drag you instead . . . Did you really think I'd bless this health you gave back to me? I hate it because *you* gave it back to me" (261). He enters into the scheme with Morozov and Syerov to offer Kira, for a moment, something he has been unable to offer her.

The specific path that Kira takes to cope with the loss of her future is not a path open to Leo to take.

And when the highest individuals no longer have even the semblance or illusion of a future, all that remains is the attempt to escape abroad—to try to pursue a future outside the collectivist state's borders. Leo understands this: he knows he has no future in Russia. He tries to escape with Kira early on; his fate is sealed when the attempt fails. Andrei's future in Russia is gone when he realizes that the cause he has devoted his life to and helped ascend to power is evil; all that remains for him is to try to escape abroad with Kira. When she refuses, his fate is sealed. And when Kira loses her battle for Leo's soul, she loses her substitute for a future; as was true of Leo before her, the only option left is escape. Lydia asks Kira where she is going to go, after losing Leo. Kira "answered and her voice had the intensity of a maniac's: '*Abroad*'" (444).

All of Rand's novels contain characters who, through lack of full philosophical understanding, cannot cope with the evil they encounter. If one can sympathize with the plights of Dominique Francon and Steven Mallory in *The Fountainhead*, or of Dan Conway and Cherryl Brooks in *Atlas Shrugged*, characters paralyzed (though not always destroyed) by an evil they should never have had to endure, one should be able to sympathize with the plight of Leo Kovalensky, trapped as he is in a collectivist state with no way out.

We the Living's theme is that collectivism kills the best individuals. The potency and poignancy of how Rand conveys her theme comes, unquestionably, from the fate of Andrei Taganov, destroyed because he believes the promises of collectivism, and, above all, from the fate of Kira Argounova, who, spirit unbroken, is murdered trying to escape. But if you truly understand the story, it comes also from the fate of Leo Kovalensky. He is destroyed because of his considerable virtues.[17]

NOTES

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1. Of course *We the Living* does contain some reference to gulags and the like, most prominently in the story of Irina and Sasha. I think this is because Rand does not regard such things as "excesses" but rather as logical consequences of collectivist rule. Collectivism strips the individual of all power and hands it to the state. It therefore attracts people who want to wield the state's total power. And *We the Living* does show the kind of human scum that rises to positions of power under collectivist rule, people like Victor Dunaev and Pavel Syerov. It is logical, therefore, that at the very top of a collectivist system would be psychological and moral monsters, people like Lenin, Stalin, Hitler, Mao, Pol Pot, and Kim Jong Il. But nevertheless, this aspect of collectivist rule is not the focus of the novel. For more on the novel's specific depiction of how collectivism kills in everyday life, see Tara Smith, "Forbidding Life to Those Still Living," in the present volume.

It is worth noting as well that in *We the Living* Rand does not even focus on the particularities of Soviet ideology and propaganda, apart from presenting enough of it to establish Soviet Russia as the background for the story. From the points of view of both the individuals caught in a collectivist system and of the average power-lusting thugs who rise to positions of some power in such a system, the niceties of the specific collectivist dogma they must espouse (e.g., the dogmas of Marx or Engels or Lenin or Trotsky or Hitler or Mussolini) are nonessential. This contributes to the universal, timeless feel of the novel. Rand's focus is on what is common to day-to-day existence under collectivist rule, not on what was unique to Russia. As Rand herself states in her foreword, "*We the Living* is not a story about Soviet Russia in 1925. It is a story about Dictatorship, any dictatorship, anywhere, at any time, whether it be Soviet Russia, Nazi Germany, or—which this novel might do its share in helping to prevent—a socialist America. What the rule of brute force does to men and how it destroys the best, will be the same in 1925, in 1955 or in 1975—whether the secret police is called GPU or NKVD, whether men eat millet or bread, whether they live in hovels or in housing projects, whether the rulers wear red shirts or brown ones, whether the head butcher kisses a Cambodian witch doctor or an American pianist" (xv).

2. For a bit more discussion of Andrei's error and Rand's view of the very superficial plausibility of collectivism, see my essay "The Death Premise in *We the Living* and *Atlas Shrugged*" in the present volume. One might ask why then does Rand make Andrei a member of the GPU at all? I suspect one reason is that it would also not be plausible for Andrei to be truly devoted to the cause of collectivism yet take no brutal actions on its behalf, precisely because part of Rand's point is that collectivism entails brutality. The two honest Communists in the story, Andrei and Stepan Timoshenko, both knowingly spill blood but think the bloodshed necessary for a better future. Another reason, of course, is that the climax of the story, which Rand arrived at early in the novel's creation, is Andrei arresting Leo and discovering Leo and Kira's relationship.

3. David Harriman, ed., *Journals of Ayn Rand* (New York: Dutton, 1997), 57.

4. While creating the story of *We the Living*, Rand, in a page of her journals which she later crossed out, describes Leo as never having acquired ambition: "The greatest lack in him is the lack of any strong desire or ambition; therefore, also, the lack of will." Harriman, *Journals*, 53.

5. Ayn Rand, "The Metaphysical Versus the Man-Made," *Philosophy: Who Needs It* (New York: Signet, 1984), 27, 32.

6. Ayn Rand, *The Fountainhead* (New York: Signet, 1993), 389.

7. Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged* (New York: Signet, 1992), 1057.

8. In commenting on the tragic ending of *We the Living*, notice the stress Rand puts on the metaphysical issue involved:

> The justification for presenting tragic endings in literature is to show, as in *We the Living*, that the human spirit can survive even the worst of circumstances—that the worst that the chance events of nature or the evil of other people can do will not defeat the proper human spirit. To quote from Galt's speech in *Atlas Shrugged*: "Suffering as such is not a value; only man's fight against suffering, is."

> Here I speak of philosophical justification, not literary. As far as literary rules go, you can present anything you wish—you can write a story in which everybody is destroyed, the theme then being that man has no chance and destruction is his fate. There are many such stories, some of them well written. But to present suffering for the sake of suffering is totally wrong philosophically; and literarily it makes for a pointless story.
>
> In *We the Living*, all the good people are defeated. The philosophical justification of the tragedy is the fact that the story denounces the collectivist state and shows, metaphysically, that man cannot be destroyed by it; he can be killed, but not changed or negated. The heroine dies radiantly endorsing life, feeling happiness in her last moment because she has known what life properly should be." (Ayn Rand, *The Art of Fiction: A Guide for Writers and Readers*, Tore Boeckmann, ed. [New York: Plume, 2000], 174.)

9. In his introduction Peikoff writes, "If Leo had been born in America, he would have become Francisco d'Anconia of *Atlas Shrugged*; that is the measure of his heroic potential" (vii).

10. This, as Rand herself observed (see endnote 8), is the meaning of the ending. Collectivism can murder men in the millions but not man: the collectivist state cannot wipe out man's nature, the factual requirements of his survival and happiness, or an individual's loyalty to that nature and life's demands.

11. For more on how collectivism kills the spirit and on the lives of some of these other characters, see Tara Smith, "Forbidding Life to Those Still Living," and John Lewis, "Kira's Family," in the present volume.

12. As Robert Mayhew pointed out to me, there is a perspective from which you can say it is easier for Alexander to let go: he can feel as though he has already had a life, having created a successful business and raised a family. Leo has never had the opportunity to live, and knows it.

13. Ayn Rand, "About a Woman President," *The Voice of Reason: Essays in Objectivist Thought* (New York: Meridian, 1990), 268.

14. As Leonard Peikoff writes in *The Early Ayn Rand*:

> "Man-worship" means the enraptured dedication to values—and to man, man the individual, as their only achiever, beneficiary, and ultimate embodiment. This is basically a metaphysical-ethical feeling, open to either sex. . . . When a woman with this kind of character sees her deepest values actualized and embodied in a specific man, man-worship becomes (other things being equal) romantic love. Thus the special quality of the Ayn Rand romantic love: it is the union of the abstract and the concrete, of ideal and reality, of mind and body, of uplifted spirituality and violent passion, of reverence and sexuality. Throughout the early years, female protagonists predominate Ayn Rand's fiction; and one of their essential traits is a kind of man-worship. The early heroes are merely suggested; they are not fully realized until Roark. But whatever the language and literary problems still unresolved, the motif of a woman's feeling for a hero *is* realized. (Leonard Peikoff, ed., *The Early Ayn Rand: A Selection from Her Unpublished Fiction* [New York: Signet, 1986], 4.)

15. Rand, *The Fountainhead*, 465.

16. One can only imagine what would have happened at this point had Leo learned what Kira was doing to obtain the money.

17. I would like to thank Robert Mayhew for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this essay.