

Chapter Seventeen

Kira Argounova Laughed

Humor and Joy in We the Living

By Robert Mayhew

Most people familiar with Ayn Rand's fiction came to it through her two most popular novels, *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*. Evident in both is what Rand calls the benevolent universe premise—the conviction that we live in a world in which people can prosper and achieve their values, and where evil is ultimately impotent.¹ Both novels are serious in tone, and both have tragic characters, but neither is a tragedy. Thus, some readers are surprised when they turn to *We the Living*, Rand's first novel and sole tragedy.² For instance, in the mid-seventies, Rand was asked: "If the universe is benevolent, why does Kira die at the end of *We the Living*, just as she's about to escape?"³ (I give her answer later.)

So, why would an author who maintains that the universe is benevolent write a tragedy? Is there evidence of this benevolent universe outlook in *We the Living*? And on a connected point, with which I begin, what role does the humor in *We the Living* play?

HUMOR IN *WE THE LIVING*

"Humor," Ayn Rand says, "is the denial of metaphysical importance to that which you laugh at."⁴ It is the denial of that which contradicts what she calls one's "metaphysical value-judgments"—one's appraisal of reality and man's relationship to it.⁵ Laughter comes (at least in part) from the awareness of that which does not fit your view of reality. If one is rational and moral, she argues, one will laugh at what is evil, absurd, or inconsequential; if one is irrational and immoral, one will laugh at what is good and rational.⁶

According to Rand, humor should not be a major issue or play a major role in a person's life. It is, she says, like sports and good food: they are enjoyable—"they are the spice"—but they should not be a person's primary concern. One's own life—and particularly one's career—should be. There is something wrong, in her view, with a person who hates his job, lacks ambition, and so lives for eating good food or watching football or telling jokes around the water cooler.⁷ In the same way, she explains that humor does not play such a role in her novels or in the lives of the heroes in them. The tone of her novels is serious.⁸ To be sure, there are humorous touches in all of her novels (and especially in *The Fountainhead*⁹), but consistent with her account of humor, most of them are directed at the evil, the incompetent, and/or the inconsequential. Nevertheless, why include humor in a *tragedy*?

To better understand the purpose of the humorous touches in *We the Living*, let's consider some representative samples involving Comrade Sonia, communist clichés, and Red art.

Comrade Sonia is arguably the most evil character in *We the Living*. (In notes for the novel, Rand describes her as “‘the new woman,’ mob womanhood at its most dangerous.”¹⁰) Sonia is presented as evil and dangerous, but she is also presented humorously. For example, she is first described as follows:

The young woman had broad shoulders and a masculine leather jacket; short, husky legs and flat, masculine oxfords; a red kerchief tied carelessly over short, straight hair; eyes wide apart in a round, freckled face; thin lips drawn together with so obvious and fierce a determination that they seemed weak; dandruff on the black leather of her shoulders. (69)

Later, she is said to waddle away from Kira (95). Touches such as this and the dandruff are humorous and undercutting.

At one point, she says to Kira: “Well, bye-bye. Have to run. Have three meetings at four o'clock—and promised to attend them all!” (88). In a particularly comic scene, Sonia (who is pregnant) and Pavel Syerov discuss what to name their child. She suggests “Ninel” if it's a boy. “What the hell's that?” asks Syerov. Sonia replies: “Ninel is our great leader Lenin's name—reversed. . . . Or we could call him Vil—that's for our great leader's initials—Vladimir Ilyitch Lenin. See?” She suggests, in the case of a girl, Octiabrina (after the October Revolution), Marxina, Communara, Tribuna, Barricada, or Universiteta. She then asks: “What do you want it to be, Pavel, a boy or a girl?” “I don't care,” he replies, “so long as it isn't twins” (410–11).¹¹

Soviet citizens were free to choose the names of their children, but not the ideas they mouthed or were expected to hold. A number of communist clichés were stuffed down their throats, and Kira's cousin Victor is full of them. Early in the novel, his visits to the Argounov family are strewn with clichés. To Lydia, he says: “short skirts are the height of feminine elegance and feminine elegance is the highest of the Arts” (39); and he tells Kira: “A typewriter's keys are the stepping stones to any high office” (41). To Galina Petrovna, he says: “A man of culture . . . has to be, above all, a man attuned to his century” (56), and he tells Lydia (who has heard this on several occasions, she tells us): “Diplomacy is the highest of the Arts” (115).

Victor is not the only one who utters them. The government official filling out Kira's Soviet passport says: “The trade unions are the steel girders of our great state building, as said . . . well, one of our great leaders said” (49), and Comrade Bituik constantly reminded the people who worked under her that the House of the Peasant was “the heart of a gigantic net whose veins poured the beneficial light of the new Proletarian Culture into the darkest corners of our farthest villages” (194).

Later, after Kira's mother (Galina Petrovna) has warmed to the new political system, she speaks of the Soviet Union enthusiastically:

“It's not like in the dying, decadent cities of Europe where people slave all their lives for measly wages and a pitiful little existence. Here—each one of us has an opportunity to be a useful, creative member of a stupendous whole. Here—one's work is not merely a wasted effort to satisfy one's petty hunger, but a contribution to the gigantic building of humanity's future.”

“Mother,” Kira asked, “who wrote all that down for you?” (270)

Galina goes on to praise the Soviet system of education, at which point her other daughter “Lydia’s head drooped listlessly; she had heard it all many times.” Galina has only one complaint:

“Of course, our distribution of commodities has not as yet reached a level of perfection and, really, the sunflower-seed oil I got last week was so rancid we couldn’t use it . . . but then, this is a transitional period of . . .”

“. . . State Construction!” Alexander Dimitrievitch [Kira’s father] yelled suddenly, hastily, as a well-memorized lesson. (271)

Like the other examples of communist clichés, this scene is meant to be a little humorous (however pathetic).

In *We the Living*, Ayn Rand regularly subjects Red art to a comic critique. Here is her parody of anti-capitalist propaganda novels:

They were novels . . . in which a poor, honest worker was always sent to jail for stealing a loaf of bread to feed the starving mother of his pretty, young wife who had been raped by a capitalist and committed suicide thereafter, for which the all-powerful capitalist fired her husband from the factory, so that their child had to beg on the streets and was run over by the capitalist’s limousine with sparkling fenders and a chauffeur in uniform. (136–37)¹²

The odd structure of this passage captures the relentless, droning-on, anti-capitalist tone of the propaganda, as well as the episodic (and thus inept) structure of these works—and it enables Rand to convey this economically. Other forms of literature (short story and poetry) are fundamentally the same:

Masha looked at him coldly. “I fear that our ideologies are too far apart. We are born into different social classes. The bourgeois prejudices are too deep-rooted in your consciousness. I am a daughter of the toiling masses. Individual love is a bourgeois prejudice.” “Is this the end, Masha?” he asked hoarsely, a deathly pallor spreading on his handsome, but bourgeois face. (174)

“My heart is a tractor raking the soil,
My soul is smoke from the factory oil . . .” (174)¹³

The silent foreign film Kira and Leo see (174–75) has the following title and credits: “*The Golden Octopus*, directed by Reginald Moore, censored by Comrade M. Zavadkov.” The film is heavily edited, and different intertitles and even some scenes have been inserted. For example: “On the screen, a man was bending over the hand of a delicate lady, pressing it slowly to his lips, while she looked at him sadly, and gently stroked his hair”; the accompanying intertitle reads: “I hate you. You are a bloodsucking capitalistic exploiter. Get out of my room!” The original ending of the film is replaced with this title card: “Six months later the bloodthirsty capitalist met his death at the hands of striking workers. Our hero renounced the joys of a selfish love into which the bourgeois siren had tried to lure him, and he dedicated his life to the cause of the World Revolution.” Finally, when Leo takes Tonia to a ballet, here is what they see: “On the glittering stage a chorus of fragile ballerinas in short, flame-red tulle skirts fluttered, waving thin, powered arms with gilded chains of papier-mâché, in a ‘Dance of the Toilers’” (387).

Soviet art has all the originality and seriousness of Sonia's baby names and Galina's political philosophy. As such, it makes excellent grist for the humor mill.

What do these humorous touches add to *We the Living*—which is, after all, a tragedy? Obviously, they contribute to the critique of communism contained in the novel, by ridiculing it. But this cannot be the sole reason for their presence. *We the Living* is much more effective as a critique of statism when its content and tone are serious. And Ayn Rand did not believe that in tragedy or other serious fiction an author needed to provide comic relief.¹⁴ So why the humor?

One way to discover why Rand sometimes employed humor in *We the Living* is to examine her discussion of how *not* to use humor to criticize communism. At one point during her 1969 nonfiction writing course, she was asked: “You say that it is inappropriate to treat evil humorously, if one knows that it is an actual evil. In this connection, what is your view of the film *Ninotchka*?” She responded:

Ninotchka is an excellent movie. It is brilliantly done, and yet, when I saw it for the first time, although I could admire it technically, it depressed me enormously. The reason was that the subject is not funny. Recall that when *Ninotchka* returns to Russia from Paris and describes her beautiful hat, her roommate asks, “Why didn't you bring it?” and *Ninotchka* answers: “I'd be ashamed to wear it here.” The roommate replies: “It was as beautiful as that?” The audience chuckles, but this is not funny. It's very eloquent, and typical of the Russian atmosphere. It's a good, realistic line, and for that reason it is not the subject for humor. Moreover, I assume the film's creator is anticommunist, because ideologically the film is anticommunist. Yet observe: by treating the issue humorously, he left you with an element of sympathy—with the idea that the evil is unreal. . . . It makes you feel, “Oh, yes, Russia; that's *Ninotchka*”—a good-natured disapproval. It makes you feel that these Russians are naughty when in fact they are evil. In that sense, *Ninotchka* is a morally inappropriate movie. Artistically, *Ninotchka* is well done. But to enjoy it, you must evade (at least for the duration of the movie) the nature of its background. The same would be true if you transposed *Ninotchka* to Nazi Germany.¹⁵

Ayn Rand holds that it is okay to laugh at what is evil, “provided you take it seriously but occasionally permit yourself to laugh at it.”¹⁶ *Ninotchka* does not take the evil of communism seriously, and then laugh at it—on the side, as it were. Rather, it treats communism humorously only—which undercuts or vitiates the film's critique of communism.

In *We the Living*, Rand launches a *serious* attack on communism—or rather, on statism and collectivism generally—and from time to time permits herself to laugh at it. I suggest that the humor in *We the Living*, which is primarily aimed at evil (at the villains, and the Soviet state generally), serves to remind us of Rand's conviction that the universe is benevolent, and that in the end, the evil does not matter. Clearly, she believes we must take certain kinds of evil—here, statism—dead seriously. Not to do so creates the problems she identifies in *Ninotchka*. But we must not forget, even when fighting in earnest against the worst kinds of evil, that it is impotent: for example, that Comrade Sonia, however evil, is also ridiculous and ultimately insignificant; that Red art, however ubiquitous and propagandistic, can never defeat the good.

JOYFUL LAUGHTER IN *WE THE LIVING*

Armed with the benevolent universe premise, one can use laughter to combat evil in two ways: one is negative—laughter directed at the evil (while taking it seriously), as was just examined; another is positive—laughter as a celebration of the good. According to Ayn Rand, humor—even the best, most benevolent humor—always involves a negation. When we laugh in response to the humorous, we are considering or focusing on the evil or the unimportant at least long enough to dismiss it with laughter. But there is a special kind of laughter which transcends humor: laughter in response to a benevolent universe.

In *We the Living*, this benevolent sort of laughter is associated most of all with two young women. One is a minor character, the other is the novel's heroine. And though each meets a tragic end, both evoke and concretize this joyful laughter, which is rarely found outside of Ayn Rand's novels.

Irina Dunaeva

Notes Rand wrote for *We the Living* describe Irina as “an average girl, caught by events.”¹⁷ But this does not do justice to the kind of person Irina is or the horrific way in which she is “caught by events.”

Irina is first described in the novel as “a young girl of eighteen with the eyes of twenty-eight and the laughter of eight” (34). She loved to draw, and we hear of her drawings early in the story:

She sketched cartoons whenever she was supposed to, and at any other time. A drawing board on her lap, throwing her head and hair back once in a while for a swift glance at Acia through the smoke, she was sketching her little sister. On the paper, Acia was transformed into a goblin with huge ears and stomach, riding on the back of a snail. (76)

Acia wasn't the only relative Irina sketched pictures of: “Lydia disliked her cousin ever since Irina, following her custom of expressing her character judgments in sketches, had drawn Lydia in the shape of a mackerel” (115).

Later, we learn Irina has fallen in love with Sasha, a student with revolutionary, anti-communist ideas, and that he loves her. She tells Kira: “Sasha is studying history. . . , that is, he was. He's been thrown out of the University for trying to think in a country of free thought” (254).

Eventually, Irina and Sasha are arrested: Sasha for counterrevolutionary activities, Irina for hiding him. They get married in prison, but are nonetheless assigned to different labor camps. The last we see of them is in a train bound for Siberia. Sasha is dejected and miserable; Irina is a rock. She lifts Sasha's spirits, and remains beautifully benevolent in the face of horrible tragedy.

Sasha sat up, erect, his face the color of brass, darker than his hair, and said, his voice changed, firm: “If they let us write to each other, Irina, will you . . . every day?”

“Of course,” she answered gaily.

“Will you . . . draw things in your letters, too?”

“With pleasure . . . Here,” she picked a small splinter of coal from the window ledge, “here, I’ll draw something for you, right now.”

With a few strokes, swift and sure as a surgeon’s scalpel she sketched a face on the back of her seat, an imp’s face that grinned at them with a wide, crescent mouth, with eyebrows flung up, with one eye winking mischievously, a silly, infectious, irresistible grin that one could not face without grinning in answer.

“Here,” said Irina, “he’ll keep you company after . . . after the station. . . .”
Sasha smiled, answering the imp’s smile. (352–53)

A bit later, they are forced to separate, as Irina must take another train to her camp.

The guard tore her away from him and pushed her out through the door. She leaned back for a second, for a last look at Sasha. She grinned at him, the homely, silly grin of her imp, her nose wrinkled, one eye winking mischievously. Then the door closed. The two trains started moving at once. Pressed tightly to the glass pane, Sasha could see the black outline of Irina’s head in the yellow square of a window in the car on the next track. . . .

Sasha lost sight of the window; but he could still see a string of yellow spots that still looked square, and above them something black moving against the sky, that looked like car roofs. Then there was only a string of yellow beads, dropping into a black well. Then, there was only the dusty glass pane with patent leather pasted behind it, and he was not sure whether he still saw a string of sparks somewhere or whether it was something burned into his unblinking, dilated eyes.

Then there was only the imp left, on the back of the empty seat before him, grinning with a wide, crescent mouth, one eye winking. (353–54)

Irina’s benevolence underscores the tragedy. This is not Ayn Rand’s joyful laughter in the face of tragedy—rather, it is her way of saying (in a most heartrending manner) that the capacity for joy that Irina represents is precisely what a dictatorship destroys. Nevertheless, as Rand gives the imp the last word (or look), this ending to the story of Irina and Sasha is also an affirmation of the benevolent universe premise in the face of grotesque cruelty and injustice.

Kira Argounova

In “What Is Romanticism?” Ayn Rand writes the following of O. Henry, one of her favorite writers:

O. Henry[’s] . . . unique characteristic is the pyrotechnical virtuosity of an inexhaustible imagination projecting the gaiety of a benevolent, almost childlike sense of life. More than any other writer, O. Henry represents the spirit of youth—specifically, the cardinal element of youth: the expectation of finding something wonderfully unexpected around all of life’s corners.¹⁸

This is an excellent description of Kira, around the time she first arrives back in St. Petersburg:

She had a calm mouth and slightly widened eyes with the defiant, enraptured, solemnly and fearfully expectant look of a warrior who is entering a strange city and is not quite sure whether he is entering it as a conqueror or a captive. (19)

Kira . . . looked straight into [the young soldier's] eyes and smiled. She thought that he understood her, that he guessed the great adventure beginning for her. (30)

“Well,” said Alexander Dimitrievitch, “we’re back.” “Isn’t it wonderful!” said Kira. “Mud, as ever,” said Lydia. “We’ll have to take a cab. Such an expense!” said Galina Petrovna. (31)

During the lectures, she smiled suddenly, once in a while, at no one in particular; smiled at a dim, wordless thought of her own. She felt as if her ended childhood had been a cold shower, gay, hard and invigorating, and now she was entering her morning, with her work before her, with so much to be done. (55)

We are told early on that “because she worshipped joy, Kira seldom laughed” (50). Even so, when Rand describes Kira, laughing and smiling has a special place.¹⁹

It seemed that the words she said were ruled by the will of her body and that her sharp movements were the unconscious reflection of a dancing, laughing soul. (44)

Kira’s mouth was thin, long. When silent, it was cold, indomitable, and men thought of a Valkyrie with lance and winged helmet in the sweep of battle. But a slight movement made a wrinkle in the corners of her lips—and men thought of an imp perched on top of a toadstool, laughing in the faces of daisies. (44)²⁰ She ran, sliding along the frozen sidewalks, laughing at strangers. . . . (136)

She smiled happily and kicked an icicle in a puddle, splashing water at the passersby, laughing. (148)

She laughed, that strange laughter of hers which was too joyous to be gay, a laughter that held a challenge, and triumph, and ecstasy. (162)

Of course, Kira is living in Soviet Russia. To present her as utterly unaffected by her surroundings would have been unrealistic and inconsistent with the novel’s theme, and would perhaps have sent the wrong message—namely, that a hero is in no way bothered or affected by his or her evil, irrational surroundings. This in part explains Kira’s reaction to the operetta *Bajedere*:

They [Leo and Kira] saved the money for many months and on a Sunday evening they bought two tickets to see “Bajadare,” advertised as the “latest sensation of Vienna, Berlin and Paris.”

They sat, solemn, erect, reverent as at a church service, Kira a little paler than usual in her gray silk dress, Leo trying not to cough, and they listened to the wantonest operetta from over there, from *abroad*.

It was very gay nonsense. . . . There were women in shimmering satin from a place where fashions existed, and people dancing a funny foreign dance called “Shimmy,” and a woman who did not sing, but barked words out, spitting them contemptuously at the audience, in a flat, hoarse voice that trailed suddenly into a husky moan—and a music that laughed defiantly, panting, gasping, hitting

one's ears and throat and breath, an impudent, drunken music, like the challenge of a triumphant gaiety, like the "Song of Broken Glass," a promise that existed somewhere, that was, that could be.

The public laughed, and applauded, and laughed. When the lights went on after the final curtain, in the procession of cheerful grins down the aisles many noticed with astonishment a girl in a gray silk dress, who sat in an emptying row, bent over, her face in her hands, sobbing. (208)²¹

The music laughs, the audience laughs, but Kira cries. Why? Unlike most of the audience, Kira had a greater capacity to see the gaiety in *Bajadere*, to see that this wasn't a pleasant momentary diversion, but that such was possible in life—life outside the USSR. She could see more clearly the contrast between what was possible in a human society, and what was the Soviet reality. That is why she cries.²²

Aside from this scene, Kira is often presented as laughing and full of joy—or more accurately, she is presented that way in part 1. By my count, Kira is described as laughing or smiling (in a benevolent, joyful way) twenty times. Of these twenty, seventeen are in part 1; of the three in part 2, two are toward the beginning, while the other is in the novel's last scene. What explains this distribution? During much of the novel, but especially from about the time Leo returns from the Crimea (near the beginning of part 2), Kira is fighting a losing battle. We get an indication of this battle in part 1:

[Leo's] eyes looked at her, wide and dark, and he answered a thought they had not spoken: "Kira, think what we have against us."

She bent her head a little to one shoulder, her eyes round, her lips soft, her face serene and confident as a child's; she looked at the window where, in the slanting mist of snow, men stood in line, motionless, hopeless, broken. She shook her head.

"We'll fight it, Leo. Together. We'll fight all of it. The country. The century. The millions. We can stand it. We can do it."

He said without hope: "We'll try." (133)

Towards the end of the novel, after Leo discovers Kira's affair with Andrei, we know her battle is lost.

She was packing a suitcase, her back turned to him, when he asked suddenly:

"Aren't you going to say anything? Have you nothing to say?"

She turned and looked at him calmly, and answered: "Only this, Leo: it was I against a hundred and fifty million people. I lost." (443)

Though losing the battle, she did not lose her benevolent view of life. She had little cause for laughter in the second part of the novel, because—and in a sense, this is the theme of *We the Living*—the benevolent universe outlook is incompatible with statism. In a dictatorship, one can hold on to this outlook for a time (as Irina did, even as her train took her away from Sasha and to a Siberian prison) and hope to realize such an existence elsewhere; but one cannot *live* it. Yet we discover—even as we find out (against all hope) that this *is* a tragedy—that Kira's failure to achieve her goals does not destroy her sense of life.

Attempting to escape from the Soviet Union, Kira is shot by an utter mediocrity—a border guard named Ivan Ivanov.²³ *We the Living* ends:

She smiled. She knew she was dying. But it did not matter any longer. She had known something which no human words could ever tell and she knew it now. She had been awaiting it and she felt it, as if it had been, as if she had lived it. Life had been, if only because she had known it could be, and she felt it now as a hymn without sound, deep under the little hole that dripped red drops into the snow, deeper than that from which the red drops came. A moment or an eternity—did it matter? Life, undefeated, existed and could exist.

She smiled, her last smile, to so much that had been possible. (464)

CONCLUSION

A girl like Irina *could* end up in a prison camp in Siberia; a creature like Ivan Ivanov *could* kill someone like Kira. But this does not mean that we are doomed, that the universe is malevolent; it means only that we are doomed in the kind of world created by Soviet Russia (or any other dictatorship).

Ayn Rand affirms the benevolent universe premise even in the face of tragedy. And given her spirit, it was inevitable that some of her heroes would not only laugh in the spirit of Kira, they would succeed in the world as well—that the “so much that had been possible” for Kira would be realized on earth. Thus *The Fountainhead* begins with “Howard Roark laughs,” and ends with Roark triumphant, standing atop a skyscraper; and *Atlas Shrugged* contains Rand’s fullest characterizations of the benevolent universe premise: Francisco d’Anconia, Dagny Taggart, and John Galt.

Still, why *write* a tragedy, if one maintains that the universe is benevolent? I return to the question asked at the outset: “If the universe is benevolent, why does Kira die at the end of *We the Living*, just as she’s about to escape?” Here is Ayn Rand’s answer:

I did not sit there and decide arbitrarily to let Kira die. A novel isn’t written that way. If you want to know about anything in a novel, ask what its theme is. The theme of *We the Living* is the individual against the state. I present the evil of dictatorship, and what it does to its best individuals. If I let Kira escape, I leave the reader with the conclusion that statism is bad, but there’s hope because you can always escape. But that isn’t the theme of *We the Living*. In Russia, a citizen cannot count on leaving or escaping. Someone who does escape is an exception, because no borders can be totally closed. People do escape, but we’ll never know the number of people who died trying. To let Kira escape would have been pointless. Given the theme of *We the Living*, she had to die.²⁴

Kira’s death is not a reflection of Rand’s view of reality and man’s life; rather, it is necessitated by her desire to write a novel portraying the fate of the individual—and especially the best, most heroic sort of individual—under a dictatorship. But even in selecting and presenting such a theme—one that is as important today as it was in the 1930s—Rand wanted to affirm the benevolent universe outlook at the moment her heroine meets a tragic end.

She gets the last word:

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." . . .

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.²⁵

NOTES

1. On the benevolent universe premise, see Leonard Peikoff, *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand* (New York: Dutton, 1991), 342–43.

2. I am referring to her novels. Her short story "The Husband I Bought" and her play *Ideal* are arguably tragedies. Both were first published in Leonard Peikoff, ed., *The Early Ayn Rand* (New York: New American Library, 1984; Signet paperback edition, 1986).

3. Robert Mayhew, ed., *Ayn Rand Answers: The Best of Her Q&A* (New York: New American Library, 2005), 190.

4. Mayhew, *Ayn Rand Answers*, 141. Similar statements can be found in Ayn Rand, *The Art of Fiction: A Guide for Writers and Readers*, ed. Tore Boeckmann (New York: Plume, 2000), 165; in Ayn Rand, *The Art of Nonfiction: A Guide for Writers and Readers*, ed. Robert Mayhew (New York: Plume, 2001), 126; and in Marlene Podritske and Peter Schwartz, eds., *Objectively Speaking: Ayn Rand Interviewed* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009), chapter 18: "The Nature of Humor." For the brief presentation of Rand's conception of humor that follows, I draw on my "Humor in *The Fountainhead*," in Robert Mayhew, ed., *Essays on Ayn Rand's The Fountainhead* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006).

5. See Harry Binswanger, ed., *The Ayn Rand Lexicon: Objectivism from A to Z* (New York: New American Library, 1986; Meridian paperback edition, 1988), s.v. Metaphysical Value-Judgments.

6. Rand does not believe it is appropriate to laugh at *all* evil. See *Art of Nonfiction*, 126–27.

7. See Mayhew, *Ayn Rand Answers*, 141. She there notes an exception: humor *can* properly be a primary value for a comedian, just as sports can properly be a primary value for a professional athlete, and good food for a chef.

8. See Mayhew, *Ayn Rand Answers*, 141. I should mention, however, that the tone of some of her early short stories—especially "Good Copy," "Escort," and "Her Second Career"—*is* light and humorous. These were all first published in Peikoff, *Early Ayn Rand*.

9. See my "Humor in *The Fountainhead*."

10. David Harriman, ed., *Journals of Ayn Rand* (New York: Dutton, 1997), 59.

11. Though humorous, such names were not invented by Rand: see Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 83–84.

12. Cf. the description of a Red novel in the 1936 edition of *We the Living*, which Ayn Rand omitted from the revised edition: "She [Kira] picked up her book, but she did not want to read; the book told the story of a dam built by heroic Red workers in spite of the nefarious machinations of villainous Whites who tried to destroy it" (405).

13. Tonia, in the presence of Leo and Kira, tries to remember a line from a poem of Valentina Sirkina: "my heart is asbestos that remains cool over the blast-furnace of my emotions—or something like that" (264).

14. On humor in fiction, see Rand, *Art of Fiction*, 165–68.
15. Mayhew, *Ayn Rand Answers*, 142. For more of Rand’s praise of *Ninotchka*, see *Art of Fiction*, 168.
16. Mayhew, *Ayn Rand Answers*, 141.
17. Harriman, *Journals*, 60.
18. Ayn Rand, “What Is Romanticism?” *The Romantic Manifesto: A Philosophy of Literature*, revised edition (New York: Signet, 1975), 110.
19. On the dearth of smiles in Russia when Rand lived there, see her testimony before the House Un-American Activities Committee, in Harriman, *Journals*, 373, 380–81, and Robert Mayhew, *Ayn Rand and Song of Russia: Communism and Anti-Communism in 1940s Hollywood* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2005), chapter 8: “Russian Smiles.”
20. Cf. Leo’s smile, *We the Living*, 83.
21. On Kálmán’s operetta *Bajadere*, see Michael S. Berliner, “The Music of *We the Living*,” in the present volume.
22. In an earlier draft of this passage, Rand wrote that this was the first time Kira cried. I am grateful to Shoshana Milgram for bringing this to my attention, and for a better understanding of this passage.
23. For Rand’s account of the importance of the character Ivan Ivanov, see Michael S. Berliner, ed., *Letters of Ayn Rand* (New York: Dutton, 1995), 18.
24. Mayhew, *Ayn Rand Answers*, 190.
25. Rand, *Art of Fiction*, 174. I wish to thank Shoshana Milgram and Tore Boeckmann for their comments on an earlier version of this essay.