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Ayn Rand at 100: "Yours Is the Glory"

by Brian Doherty

This year marks the 100th anniversary of the birth of Alissa Rosenbaum, who won renown and the affection of millions under her chosen identity of Ayn Rand. When Jerome Tuccille wrote his semifictional odyssey of a libertarian activist from the 1950s to the early 1970s, his title seemed inevitable: *It Usually Begins with Ayn Rand*. Rand was the most popular and influential libertarian figure of the 20th century. But what is most enduringly important about her is not necessarily her explicitly political and economic philosophy.

She was born February 2, 1905, in St. Petersburg, Russia, the daughter of a shop-owning chemist. When the Soviets took over, the shop was taken from him. Her family's (and nation's) privations and struggles with communism informed her first novel, *We the Living* (1936). In that book's indomitable heroine Kira Argouvna it is easy to see the reflected light of Alissa, another young girl, Soviet by cruel fate but not spirit, with little to motivate her but the desire to escape. Kira's desire ended in tragedy, Rand's in triumph.

After years of trying, Rand won a coveted and rare passport out of Russia in 1926 and made it to America. Although her stay in America was meant to be temporary, Rand knew that she'd never return to the trap she'd escaped. For years she'd tell a story that limned the mission she took on. Someone approached her at her farewell party, she says, and told her, "If they ask you, in America—tell them that Russia is a huge cemetery and that we are all dying slowly."

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Andrew G. Biggs, associate commissioner for retirement policy at the Social Security Administration and former assistant director of Cato's Project on Social Security Choice, addresses a White House conference on Social Security reform on January 11, as President Bush and other panelists listen. **See p. 3.**

She did, most concretely in *We the Living* and more abstractly throughout her career. In doing so, she created a body of work, both fiction and nonfiction, that established her as the 20th century's dominant Goddess of—not necessarily Reason, for which she wanted to be best known, or even political liberty—but Heroism and Achievement. Thus, she provided the best possible gift to her adopted country.

Building an Individualist Movement

Rand knew what she wanted to accomplish as early as 1934. That year she sent H. L. Mencken a copy of the manuscript of *We the Living* and praised him as "the greatest representative of a philosophy to which I want to dedicate my whole life. . . . I have always regarded you as the foremost champion of individualism in this country. . . . Perhaps it may seem a lost cause at present, and there are those who will say that I am too late, that I can only hope to be the last fighter for a mode of

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thinking which has no place in the future. But I do not think so. I intend to be the first one in a new battle which the world needs as it has never needed before.” It took decades, but Rand did what she’d hoped to do.

In the early 1940s she planned, with drama critic Channing Pollock, to establish a national organization of individualists. Many of the pro-market businessmen whom she and Pollock tried to recruit doubted that any such group was needed—after all, didn’t the National Association of Manufacturers stand up for the interests of business and free markets?

“The first aim of our organization will be intellectual and philosophical—not merely political and economic,” Rand wrote to Pollock. “We will give people a faith—a positive, clear and consistent system of belief. Who has done that? Certainly not the N.A.M. They . . . are merely fighting for the system of private enterprise and their entire method consists of teaching and clarifying the nature of that system. It is good work, but it is not enough. . . . We want to teach people, not what the system of private enterprise is, but why we should believe in it and fight for it. We want to provide a spiritual, ethical, philosophical groundwork for the belief in the system of private enterprise.”

Although the later Rand would doubtless bridle at the word “faith,” she already recognized her task: establishing a defense of individualism and capitalism that went deeper, more to the roots—more radical in the true sense—than any then existing. While still a struggling novelist, she saw herself as a “radical for capitalism.”

That planned organization never got off the ground. But something more important did—her 1943 novel, and first major success, *The Fountainhead,* in which she made her points not through a manifesto but through the imaginative creation of men who lived out dramatically the struggle of ideas and spirit that Rand wanted to win. The plot revolved around the intertwined careers and struggles of two architects, the individualist and heroic Howard Roark and the glad-handing, uncreative, craven Peter Keating.

Critics often condemn Rand’s characters as unrealistic. In the literal sense, that is true; they are romantic, living evocations of ideas. She romanticizes not just her heroes but also her villain, the modern collectivist intellectual in the person of Ellsworth Toohey, a witty, intelligent, and highly influential architectural and social critic who realized that disarming the human soul through unrelenting attacks on the great and elevation of the mediocre left men open for manipulation by the likes of him.

That the collectivist villain is a critic rather than a politician gives telling insight into Rand’s concerns. She realized that the enemies of individual liberty were not just those who openly advocated tyranny but anyone who chipped away at the foundation of individual greatness. She always contended that evil was inherently powerless and that it won only with the acquiescence of the potentially good. Toohey, the great villain of *The Fountainhead,* and Roark, its hero, meet only once, and anticlimactically. Toohey, eager with curiosity, asks Roark what he, Roark, thinks of him. Roark replies, before walking away, “But I don’t think of you.”

Using Fiction to Illustrate Ideas

Rand’s next, and last, novel, *Atlas Shrugged,* presented the synthesis of her philosophy and its concretization; in it we see the effects of embracing her philosophy—and her enemies’. We see her path leading to grand achievements, wealth, brotherhood, and peace—and her opponents’ leading to failure, rot, corruption, self-hate, and eventually societal destruction.

The book’s wild, careening plot concerned the first strike by the creative men of the mind. In *Atlas,* especially in the 57-page speech that strike leader John Galt gave to explain to a world heading to ruin exactly where it had made its wrong turns, Rand stitched together her philosophical vision, later known as Objectivism. Galt went on, famously, at great length. But Rand, when challenged, was able to deliver a précis of her philosophy while standing on one foot: “Metaphysics: Objective reality. Epistemology: Reason. Ethics: self-interest. Politics: capitalism.” Galt’s exposition gave meat, context, and drama to this bare presentation—and connected the nightmare world *Atlas* presented with people’s rejection of one or all of the above premises.

But most important, both *Atlas* and the less explicitly political *Fountainhead* provide what Rand called “emotional fuel.” “Romantic art is the fuel and the spark plug of a man’s soul,” Rand wrote. “Its task is to set a soul on fire and never let it go out. The task of providing that fire with a motor and a direction belongs to philosophy.”

Her novels gave readers a chance to contemplate in dramatic form the thrilling, fulfilling places to which the intelligent, dedicated, and purposeful seeking after goals can lead. And it didn’t matter whether or not those goals were grand in the eyes of the rest of the world—not everyone admired Roark’s architecture. And she didn’t just tell, she showed, with the unique combination that great fiction provides of the emotional and the rational in a package weightier, yet easier to grasp, than either alone.

Although she is sometimes written off as merely a clumsy political-ideological novelist, the most significant part of Rand’s appeal, then, is not purely political. It is her appeal to what conservative movement founder Russell Kirk, echoing Edmund Burke, called “the moral imagination.” While conservatives of the Kirk ilk found little to admire in Rand—and vice versa—she, more than most conservative intellectuals, worked with the notion that the human soul must be fed by more than just politics and policy and economizing Man—that literary art could focus the human soul on greater aspirations.

Rand presented characters that inspire and create an aspiration toward a higher, better, more wondrous and brave vision of what human life can be—however unrealistic her characters might seem because “they don’t talk or act like the folks at the corner store.” Because she showed her heroes and heroines indulging in creative and productive work in the context of business and markets and science, this Russian novelist pur-

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sued a particularly American path, nailing the key to what was really glorious and inspirational about this country.

Barbara Branden wrote in her biography of Rand, *The Passion of Ayn Rand:* “[*Atlas*] was to be Ayn’s gift to America. A moral sanction. The philosophical demonstration that to live for one’s own rational self-interest, to pursue one’s own selfish, personal goals, to use one’s mind in the service of one’s own life and happiness, is the noblest, the highest, *the most moral* of human activities. . . . Speaking to the unnamed, unchampioned, beating heart of her new land, Ayn was to say: ‘Yours is the glory.’”

Rand knew from the beginning that that glory had as much, if not more, to do with individual creative striving as with politics per se. Young Alissa in Soviet Russia loved America not so much for Thomas Jefferson and the Declaration of Independence as for Cecil B. DeMille and his light, but soul-feeding, Hollywood entertainments. And as the American future unfolds in the 21st century, its truly important figures for the human future are likely to be not politicians but creators—the men and women who will develop new computer technologies; new sources of energy; new methods of bringing the physical world, from steel to our very genes, under our control; and the physical and market techniques to take us off the planet’s surface. It is for those sorts of people—the businessmen and technologists who make life richer and more option filled for everyone—that Ayn Rand is patron saint and inspiration.

Ideas Have Consequences

Politics does matter, of course—and no one dramatized that in fiction better than Rand, especially in *Atlas*. There we see precisely how the decisions of faceless, malign, or just ignorant bureaucrats lead to dire effects in human lives. We see real-world confirmation of Rand’s notions in the grim, constrained deprivation that gripped the Soviet bloc through much of the 20th century, and on a smaller scale in America where any number of dreams and lives have been destroyed by eminent domain, drug prohibition, estate taxation, and even local zoning and business regulations. (Trying to launch a business in many contemporary American regulatory environments might not seem like a tragedy, until it happens to you or a loved one.)

Today, Social Security and Medicare and Medicaid seem on track to lead Americans to working more than half their lives merely to feed a government machine dedicated to kicking back some of their own money to them, accompanied by lots of nannying, bullying, commands, and a huge skim off the top. That can seem abstract, especially in a world of income tax withholding. But Rand helps you really see, and really feel, what it can do to a human soul when your effort, your life, your essence are hijacked from your own choices and subjected to the whims of bureaucrats.

Rand’s Call to Greatness

Despite common misunderstanding based on her use of the phrase “the virtue of selfishness” (used intentionally to shock), Rand’s vision was by no means purely selfish in the sense that she wanted only *herself* to be happy. She was motivated by love and admiration for what she saw as best in humanity and her desire for a world that encouraged and rewarded that greatness. As her portrayal of such characters in *Atlas* as Cherryl Taggart and Eddie Willers shows, a sense of deep compassion for how decent humans were injured in a world that followed wrong premises motivated what Rand’s detractors see as horribly uncharitable contempt for the “looters” who would destroy the values of civilization.

Rand’s critics who hear only hate and heartlessness in her are themselves tone-deaf to peals of glory. As Barbara Branden wrote, “In Ayn’s presence, and in her work, one felt that command: a command to function at one’s best, to be the most that one could be, to drive oneself constantly harder, never to disappoint one’s highest ideals.” As Rand herself put it, the “essence of life is the achievement of joy, not the escape from pain.” *Fountainhead* lovers didn’t just want to hiss at Toohey—they wanted to *be* Roark. And despite cavils about his “unrealism” or “inhumanity,” a man of consummate skill, bursting creativity, and unyielding integrity is a man eminently worth being.

That is the positive side to what is sometimes seen as libertarianism’s purely negative vision of restricting the state. It is a valuable addition to the libertarian movement’s “sense of life.” The heart of Rand’s appeal is not contempt but her passionate belief in the possibility of individual glory and greatness, and her burning admiration for it.

Yet in the essence of Branden’s statement about the unyielding command to rise that Rand issued lies the key to another common phenomenon among Rand readers. The political and ethical message of her novels is hard to mistake—in *Atlas,* nearly impossible (though one often hears of people who “skip the speeches”). Rand has had tens of millions of readers. Yet only a very small percentage seems to have internalized and lived out her political and ethical message. People often refer to affection or admiration for Rand as a passion of their youth that they “outgrew.” Branden speculates that “people figured out how unpopular her ideas were, and maybe they didn’t outgrow anything, maybe they were just afraid to admit to it publicly because the wrath of God would descend on them from people they knew.”

Rand’s standards were demanding—a call to be the best you can be, achieve the most you can achieve. But the respect and admiration she showed for those who rose to those demands was a warming, revivifying sun. Rand’s fiction has had such an energizing effect on millions, including almost every significant figure in the American libertarian movement. And her books will doubtless stay in print and continue to capture and thrill future generations—and, through her romantic evocations of heroic individuals, continue to lead a certain observant, thoughtful percentage of readers to really see, and really feel, how personal liberty and limited government are necessary for such heroic striving to reach its zenith.

Libertarianism may not “usually” begin with Ayn Rand anymore. But her literary skills and burning moral passion, as much as her rigorous, systematic approach to the linkages between reason and liberty, will remain a powerful introduction to the idea that your life belongs to you, not to the state or the collective—and to the rich and complex series of conclusions about the proper nature and mission of government that follows from that idea. ■