THE ART OF FICTION

Stephen Cox

The Art of Fiction: A Guide for Writers and Readers
Ayn Rand
Edited by Tore Boeckmann. With an introduction by Leonard Peikoff
New York: Plume-Penguin, 2000
xii + 180 pp., index

In the Foreword to the 1959 republication of *We the Living*, a novel that draws on her personal experiences in Russia, Ayn Rand distinguishes her ambitions from those of her heroine: "I did not want to build bridges—I wanted to write" (Rand 1959, ix). In the beginning, she had no desire to become a philosopher, either. She wanted to write novels. Her novels' great popular success can be attributed in part to the distinctiveness of her ideas, but the ideas would surely have recommended themselves to a much smaller audience without the shaping of her literary imagination. And some of her most interesting thoughts, as *The Art of Fiction* shows, are about the process of imaginative writing.

Their publication was a long time coming. The book originated in a series of Galt's Gulch-like talks that she gave to friends who gathered in her New York City apartment in 1958. According to Leonard Peikoff's introduction (ix), she used some of the material from these lectures as a basis of *The Romantic Manifesto*, the book on aesthetic theory that she published in 1969; but a great deal of material remained unpublished and unexploited when she died in 1982. The Ayn Rand Institute made the lectures available on tape, but this is the first version in book form.

The editor, Tore Boeckmann, faced a serious problem of audience.[1] General readers can do very nicely with brief selections from work that Rand never intended for publication. The last thing they want is a full transcription of her lectures and informal discussions (length, approximately 48 hours [Peikoff 2000, vii]). But scholars and admirers are

The Journal of Ayn Rand Studies 1, no. 2 (Spring 2000): 313-31.

interested in something more than an author's selected thoughts. They want to experience the author's process of thought, not the editor's skill at processing it for the consumption of less conscientious readers than themselves. They just want to see everything, even if the resulting volume runs longer than *Atlas Shrugged* and fairly groans with repetitions, redundancies, and reformulations. The result, as they suppose, may be charming as well as instructive. No one who is really interested in William Faulkner regrets any of the circling and stalking in the published records of his Q & A sessions; it makes him come alive (Faulkner 1959).

Compromises can be made between the two audiences, although such compromises have a way of pleasing nobody. There is one compromise that an editor who, like Boeckmann, is in charge of transforming oral remarks into print really has to make: he has to do what is delicately known in the profession as "cutting all the ums and ahs." Boeckmann has done this, but he has gone much farther—just how far, the published explanations of his editorial practice make it difficult to tell. "In general," he says, he "cut discussions of issues that Ayn Rand later covered in *The Romantic Manifesto*." He also repressed Rand's repetitions of ideas by selecting statements that he "judged superior, sometimes combining the best parts of different statements." In organizing his material, he mainly "follow[ed] the structure of Ayn Rand's course," but he made "many minor transpositions within her general structure"; and he "incorporated" one of her lectures from 1959 and some comments from a 1969 course on non-fiction writing (Boeckmann 2000, xi-xii).

That's a lot of changes, and Boeckmann has not indicated exactly where his omissions, selections, combinations, transpositions, and incorporations occur. Peikoff's introduction provides another layer of ambiguity. He says that he (the heir to Rand's estate) invited Boeckmann "to give us AR faithfully—the identical points and words—but freed of the awkwardness, the repetitions, the obscurities, and the grammatical lapses inherent in extemporaneous speech. Mr. Boeckmann has delivered superlatively" (ix). But how could he? No one can "give us . . . the identical points and words," while changing the words. Recent editions of Rand's journals and marginalia have accustomed us to such mysterious statements of method, which create insecurity even when there may be no other ground for it. In any event, Rand's extemporaneous talk was always

extraordinarily well organized; turning some of it into a book isn't equivalent to doing nuclear physics.

Editorial method is important, but the newly published material is more important. It presents quite a different view of Rand's interests from that of the material she included in *The Romantic Manifesto*. That book has disappointed many readers, including me, because it neglects the problems of rhetoric and style that occupied enormous amounts of her attention in her career as novelist (Cox 1986, 26). Rand mastered English as a literary language in adulthood—something that very few writers have managed to do—and she made herself as proficient in colloquial American as she was in formal English. Only a person who was minutely curious about language could have done that. Her ideal was still higher: it was complete literary control. She boasted that she could "give the reason for every word and every punctuation mark in *Atlas Shrugged*—and there are 645,000 words in it" (4). Her claim was substantiated when her publisher and editor tried to change some things. They lost (Cerf 1977, 253; Haydn 1974, 261-62). As I will show, *The Art of Fiction* does a great deal to correct the impression, created by separate publication of *The Romantic Manifesto*, that Rand had nothing important to say about matters of style.

Another surprise is in store for people who have regarded Rand, sometimes on her own authority, as someone who believed that every detail of life must be arranged by rational processes. The newly published material places a very heavy emphasis on the workings of the subconscious mind. Here Rand says: "I have written many scenes which I did not plan in advance, beyond a general definition that 'this scene will accomplish such and such a purpose'—yet when I came to them, they wrote themselves." She adds that this "is the happiest state a writer can reach. . . . You come to a scene and you feel as if somebody else is dictating it; you do not know what is coming, it is surprising you as it comes, you write almost in a blind trance—and afterward, when you reread it, it is almost perfect" (6). She believes, in fact, that no writing is possible without substantial reliance on subconscious processes: "Before you sit down to write, your language has to be so automatic that you are not conscious of groping for words or forming them into a sentence" (1).

That's an empirical fact, one with which professional writers are intimately familiar. It can lead to some unfortunate conclusions, to the idea

that good writing is simply spontaneous self-expression, or to the less liberating idea that good writing has to wait for those special moments when the subconscious kicks in and "inspires" the writer. These ideas have been around for a long time; two centuries ago, Samuel Johnson correctly labeled them a "fantastick foppery" (Johnson 1971, 595). Rand realizes how counterproductive they can be. A writer may start off, she says, with certain "original observations stored in his subconscious"; he therefore feels himself inspired. He writes from these observations, and his writing is well received. And after that—nothing. He has consumed all his original impressions, and he can only repeat them, or fall silent. He is afraid to analyze what is wrong or take conscious steps to remedy it. He thinks that if he does that, he will "stop his inspiration altogether. . . . Given the way he functions, it *would* stop him" (7). Inspiration is one thing; confidence is another. As Rand observes, one of the greatest and most common dangers to good writing is the author's crippling fear of the next project, the "terror" that inspiration will fail (7).

What is needed, according to her, is a practical, working relationship between subconsciously stored and asserted impressions and the planning ability of the conscious mind. Writing ability can be cultivated; it must be, if it is to last. To cultivate it, she suggests, one should exploit the possibilities inherent in the fact that all writing is a union of the concrete and the abstract. Every writer works with abstract themes, which he embodies in specifics; this is where the imaginative link must be forged. Writers can prepare to forge it by a conscious storing of their unconscious reserves. When you are struck by some concrete impression, Rand advises, ask yourself what other impressions belong in the same category, what general themes they may bear out. Reverse the process: when you think of a general idea, the kind of idea that might, some day, become a theme of your writing, try to itemize the concretes that bring that idea to life for you. Do all that; then let those impressions subside into your subconscious. They may be useless to you at the moment, but you are storing them for future "inspiration" (52-56).

This is good advice, and I do not recall ever seeing it given in another place. People who take it will avoid what may be called the Writer's Notebook Problem. As Rand says, one is often impressed by concrete images that might possibly be useful in writing. One may remember them

or even jot them down, as the creative writing courses tell one to do; but if one never connects them with any general idea, they will never actually be used (55). Another piece of advice has no claim to originality, but it strikes me as helpful because I have seen it work: "In order to form your own literary taste and put it under your conscious control, always account for what you do or do not like in your reading" (8). Don't stop with emotional impressions; try to identify the reasons for your responses. With practice, these reasons will become reliable literary premises.

Rand makes a similar suggestion about one's impressions of people: "Do not go through life saying: 'I don't like X. Why? How do I know? I just don't like him.' That will never make you a writer" (84). Identify not only what you like or dislike but also the precise "means" by which you noticed these things (84). When you're disappointed by a book or a movie, you should ask yourself what you would do to fix it. It's good practice in literary method (56-57). Again, Rand is not advising people to "memorize" the results of their investigations but to commit them to their subconscious mind: "they will be there when you need them" (8). Apparently, she is afraid that too much conscious systematization will lead to the stiffness of mere rule-bound behavior; she wants a continuous circuitry of consciousness and subconsciousness.

Since Rand is herself so famously a giver of rules, it is interesting to note her emphasis on the idea that rules don't write: "[D]o not edit yourself while writing . . . rely on your subconscious; you cannot doubt yourself and edit every sentence as it comes out." But don't leave your sentences that way: "next morning," edit your writing, and if there is something you don't like about it, consciously identify the reason why it isn't fulfilling your purpose (4). Here is the connection with Rand's Promethean rationalism: creation must be guided by purpose and rational foresight. Writing entails constant choice—choice of words, sentences, characters, action, description, everything. The standard of choice is provided by the author's purpose, his conscious desire to give definite form to some particular "theme" (not the most precise word, but useful enough in context).

To identify the purpose is to acquire a means of assessment, either of the uncompleted parts or of the completed whole. Putting this idea in its simplest terms, Rand says that you can judge "a novel's esthetic value" if

you know "the author's theme and how well he has carried it out." Other kinds of assessment are possible, too. One might, for instance, consider the political or philosophical merits of the theme. But those are *other* kinds of assessment: "whether one *agrees* with the theme or not is a separate question" (16). The literary question is "how well" the author has created whatever he decided to create. Prometheus was a craftsman, and literature is a matter of craftsmanship.

This is an area in which Rand agrees closely with her mentor Aristotle. The similarity of their attitudes may result from either study or coincidence. (*The Art of Fiction* never cites Aristotle's specifically literary theories; *The Romantic Manifesto* does, but it misinterprets the idea it cites.[2]) However that may be, Rand agrees with Aristotle in regarding the literary enterprise as a purposeful *making* of something (in Aristotle's term, a *poiesis*) and in regarding literary assessment as the study of how well that particular something is *made*. Like Aristotle, she refuses to reduce the object of assessment to any of its materials, such as the political ideas or historical facts that it incorporates. What's important for literature as an art is the skill with which any given materials are used to create the kind of object that the author proposed to make. You wanted to make a tragedy: how well did you use your materials? Did it turn into a comedy? Or did it fill the audience with pity and fear? That, roughly speaking, is the way in which Aristotle proceeds.

Rand proceeds in approximately the same way, although it was a way that was not entirely congenial to her. She was sorely tempted to reject or approve works of art on ideological grounds, and often she gave into the temptation. Also, the ancients' commonsensical idea of the writer as craftsman was not a perfect fit for her distinctively modern idea of fiction as the exalted vehicle of a new ideology, let alone her modern idea of literature as (in part) a product of the subconscious mind. In *The Art of Fiction*, however, she is scrupulous about making the distinction between psychological or ideological materials of art, on the one hand, and the craftsmanship that makes something out of them, on the other. She warns against the fallacy of including anything in a novel simply because it happens to be historically true or biographically relevant. "That something happened to *you* is of no importance to anyone, not even to you (and you are now hearing it from the archapostle of selfishness)" (16). This is the

same radical individualist who said that writing the story of her own life "would bore [her] to death" (Rand 1959, ix). She would not regard it as a *literary* challenge.

Ironically, the one direct reference to Aristotle in *The Art of Fiction* comes from outside his literary theory; and Rand uses it to take her own ideas to a place where Aristotle would never go. Talking of literature as a purposive activity, she mentions Aristotle's concept of final causation, or process determined by result: "As a writer, you must follow the process of final causation: you decide on the theme of your book (your purpose), then select the events and sentences that will concretize your theme" (21). Aristotle would agree about that. But he would not agree with her suggested corollary, that the *characters* in a novel should follow a similar process of causation, that their conduct should be governed by their own "main goals" (24).

And he would be right to demur. It is true that no good novel—no novel at all, in fact—can be written about characters who are destitute of purpose and effective choice. Even novels about animals have ways of imputing choice and purpose to their protagonists, usually by associating them with humans whose attributes they more or less unobtrusively assume. That is why there are many novels about dogs and cats, very few about ants and beetles, and none at all about viruses. But Rand's analogy between authors and characters is very loose. Many good novels, most of them satirical, have been written about hare-brained or bird-brained people; and even in heroically "romantic" novels of the kind that Rand prefers, the protagonists certainly do not, as she thinks, "determine the course of their lives," in anything like the sense in which the author does (21). If they did, there would be no sense of the "struggle" that, as she correctly insists, is essential to any story (22).

What is always indispensable, from her point of view as well as Aristotle's, is the *author's* purpose; and that is the strength of their approach to literature. It's hard to see how literary evaluation could be conducted on any other basis. Even if an author's purpose is frankly absurd, even if the purpose is to create a book that will leave its readers hopelessly confused, the question can still be asked: How well did the author accomplish that purpose? This is the kind of question that academic critics currently deride as "naive formalism," but few writers would agree.

They spend their whole lives dealing with *merely formal* problems. Even antiformalist critics probably spend some anxious afternoons in front of the computer screen, asking themselves whether they have really made the right choice of words.

Rand's suggestions about these problems are often very canny. "You can do anything if your content permits it," she says; but that is just the issue. When Thomas Wolfe writes about a "moment that is so perfect, unknown, and inevitable," she wonders whether he has established *why* it is so perfect, unknown, and inevitable (107). You cannot *use* a word without *paying* for it intellectually; you cannot "substitute words for meaning" (107). A writer who knows that fact may also know how to create a memorable aphorism, and Rand does:

> Do not assert anything which you cannot prove. (148)
>
> [S]tating something three times does not make it stronger; it makes it three times weaker. (109)
>
> [O]verwriting destroys the dignity of the thought. . . . A writer has to know when to stop. (110)

At all times she emphasizes the fact that the writer is responsible for evoking that dignity of thought, and that it can be evoked only if the writer thinks through the technical problems of his craft. There's nothing wrong, for instance, about bringing up vulgar or even horrific subjects, but "[i]t is sufficient to say that someone stumbles upon a half-decomposed corpse; to describe the corpse in every horrible detail is horror for horror's sake. All you will achieve is that your book, no matter what the rest of it consists of, will always connote in the reader's mind that particular touch of horror" (160-61). By the same token, it's an insufficient defense of some bit of dialogue to say that women really do talk that way at Klein's department store: "You have to reproduce the way women talk at Klein's according to your own style" (158).

And when you judge your own style, you should ask yourself whether it "conveys the most with the greatest economy of words. . . . I never waste a sentence on saying: 'John Smith meets James Brown.' That is too

easy; it is playing the piano with one finger" (143). In her comments about style, Rand is decidedly a modernist. She echoes the most common of all modernist commands—"you have to *show*, not tell" (155)—and she believes that the showing must be simultaneously rich and economical. Anything else would be "too easy," beneath the dignity of art. She would also prefer that the showing be at least mildly suspenseful: meanings should not be conveyed too "conveniently" (131). And she adheres to the typically modernist idea that emotions cannot be described or communicated directly; they must be evoked by concrete reference to their causes or effects (136).

Some of Rand's modernist ideas may have been influenced by her friend Isabel Paterson, who many years before meeting her had discussed the futility of "depict[ing] emotions instead of facts" (Paterson 1916, 227). Modernist art tends either to drench itself in facts (as in Sinclair Lewis's novels, much discussed by Rand in this book) or to use facts but transcend them (as in T.S. Eliot's "Little Gidding," which recreates the atmosphere of World War II without mentioning it by name). Rand chooses the latter alternative, as Paterson usually does in her novels; and it is interesting to find that Paterson helped Rand perfect her modernist style by advising her to avoid specific references to contemporary political movements in *The Fountainhead*. Only if she did so, Paterson argued, could her book attain universality. Rand didn't like the advice; she wanted to have her say about politics, and in detail, too. But she saw that the advice was right, and she took it (162-63).

Rand's heaviest emphasis in *The Art of Fiction*, however, is on plot rather than style. She realizes that immature writers have a clearer conception of the subject they want to "write about" than the kind of story that can give life to that subject. She very accurately observes that if you feel you have a subject on which you can write just about anything, "you will write nothing. Only when you have some specific entity in mind—some germ of a plot—can you make something out of something and begin to build" (34). Style alone won't do; a style is not a story. A start is not a story either, no matter how good the "hook" on page 1 may be: "It has been said that Broadway is full of first acts" (48). The vital thing is the end of the story, the climax. A good plot is constructed with its climax in view.

Rand is so emphatic about what constitutes a real plot that she denies that her own novel *Anthem* has one, because the conflict is insufficiently dramatized (36-37). Most readers will regard this as a strangely puritanical judgment, but few will dispute her idea that all real stories result from conflict. This principle is so fully grounded that one seeks in vain for a way to identify it as either a rule of theory or a rule of practice. It is a rule you cannot do without.

In the old hobo ballad, we are assured that someplace, in the Big Rock Candy Mountain,

> There's a lake of stew,
> And a gin lake, too;
> You can paddle all around 'em
> In a big canoe.

The fun in this song results from the triumphant absence of conflict—but fun alone doesn't make a story. Further, if there were no conflict in *this* world, the world from which people want to escape to the Big Rock Candy Mountain, there would be no sudden delight, no literary charm, in a song about the absence of conflict from *that* world. To take a more classical view of the subject: people may be interested in Odysseus because Homer describes him as handsome, clever, and courageous, but if the *Odyssey* were nothing more than an account of how he wanted to get back to Ithaca and how he immediately got back there, no one would call it a story. What makes it a story is the conflicts, the obstacles that Homer raises to Odysseus' return; and it is these conflicts that allow Odysseus, the resolver of conflicts, to assert himself as a hero.

Thinking about conflict allows Rand to identify many fundamental principles of plot: conflict must be expressed in action, or there is no story, only description or fantasy; conflict must have "spiritual significance," or its drama will be merely melodrama; conflict must be sufficiently complicated to support a complicated plot; various conflicts must be related to one another; and so forth (36-37, 42-44).

But contrast a principle that to Rand seems just as incontestable as the necessity of conflict, her idea that the most effective conflict is conflict wrought to the uttermost. "Ask yourself," she advises, "Is this the worst

situation in which I can put my hero? If these are his values, is this the worst clash I can engineer between them?" (44). Although she is not fond of tragedy, she can be happy even with a tragic conflict when it is made especially strong (38). Unfortunately, however, this is one of those places where her theory takes leave of its evidence. A literary conflict is not necessarily any more effective because it is the "worst" you can think of—and you can always think of conflicts that would be "worse." *Atlas Shrugged* could begin with a scene in which the villains threaten to boil Dagny Taggart in motor oil unless she agrees to work for them, and the conflicts could go on from there, each worse than the last, and each bearing some kind of "spiritual significance." The climax could be Galt's need to choose between abandoning his values and allowing the solar system to explode.

Ridiculous? Yes, and that's the point. Like several of Rand's other artistic ideas, the "worst conflict" principle needs to be balanced by other principles, in ways that she does not care to make specific. It especially needs to be balanced by the idea that any one principle should be carried only so far as not to interfere with any other crucial consideration, such as the reader's desire for proportion and a degree of calm.

Another theory that has escaped its evidence is Rand's idea that *all* good plots *must* be resolved at their climax: "You can judge a story's climax by asking: Has it resolved the central conflict? If not, the story is badly constructed" (46). The idea seems so obvious to Rand that she does not consider any contrary arguments. Yet contrary evidence appears all around us. Many absolutely terrible stories include a climax that perfectly resolves the central conflict. By contrast, many very good stories fail to resolve it. *The Sun Also Rises*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, *My Mortal Enemy* . . . you can expand the list indefinitely; there is an example for every taste. Some good stories, like the story in *Citizen Kane*, fail even to resolve the question of whether they are resolved. It's a technique designed to accomplish a certain purpose. A successful lack of resolution thrusts the conflict back upon the audience, making them resolve it, if they can, by thinking through the issues for themselves. Whether they reach their own resolution or not, the literary effect can be very emphatic; a lack of resolution is not by any means equivalent to a lack of climax.

Nor can one dismiss unresolved conflicts as merely one of modernism's less respectable tricks. Euripides knew how to use unresolved conflicts, and so did Sophocles. They aren't just devices of literary elitism, either. The most popular American novel, *Gone with the Wind*, is also the most notoriously unresolved. No one imagines that the book would be improved if the last page demonstrated that Scarlett O'Hara was thoroughly reformed and would unquestionably be able to get Rhett Butler back. As to Scarlett's sudden realization that she loves her husband, this is the "resolution" of a conflict that didn't need much resolving; the audience always knew that she did.

For that matter, what about the conflicts in "The Simplest Thing in the World," the story that Rand included in *The Romantic Manifesto* as a kind of literary exemplum? The climax does indicate that the protagonist will stop trying to make money by writing bad stories; it thus resolves his conflict about artistic integrity. But it does not resolve his conflict with the world outside or with his sense of duty to his wife; it does not even indicate whether he will resolve his conflict about writing by ceasing to write or by waiting for a more favorable opportunity to do so. The story fails to resolve these conflicts, but it succeeds in using them to illuminate the artistic issues that are its subject; to that degree, it is a successful story, whether or not it is "resolved."

Rand's treatment of characterization also suffers from unguarded theorizing. She insists that a character's motives be mined all the way to the core: "First you understand the immediate motive behind his actions. Then you ask: Why this motive? You peel off another skin and go into deeper motivation—until you come to grasp the fundamentals of the personality" (70). The passage illustrates Rand's commitment to the intellectual and moral significance of novel-writing, to the idea that something important can be learned from it. Authors who take her advice will avoid characterization that is full of "accidental details" but has nothing to do with the deep sources of personality (75). But personalities are more than their "fundamentals." An author cannot create the appearance of personality simply by essentializing the fundamentals and deducing their effects: "a character with X values will act in X ways."

Rand repeatedly warns against the idea that one can "create a character from philosophical abstractions alone" (83). But her emphasis

is on the use of subconscious understandings of the various kinds of human character to come up with concrete examples of the behavior likely to result from a given person's "premises"—as if premises were really capable of generating all the vital and individuating features of human beings (75). In *Atlas Shrugged*, she had the integrity to follow her own rule; but that is why John Galt remains a man without fingerprints. We know his premises, we see how his actions are derivable from them, but we do not see the unprogrammed intricacies of a real personality.

Rand's theory of narration also admits of some strong exceptions. She shares the modernists' cherished idea that the author of a novel should never address the audience directly, as authors were always doing in the backward eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Well, but why not? Rand offers the standard explanation: by intruding into the text, the author destroys the sense of "reality" and forces the audience to read "on two levels," that of the story and that of the author (103; see also 97). She provides a clever theological analogy: "Fiction is an atheistic universe: you are the God who is creating it, but there must not be any God in your writing" (103).

Of course, a universe like that would not be atheistic at all; it would simply be one in which God, for some reason, refused to talk. May there be good enough reasons for this refusal? Perhaps. He may, for example, want to use his silence to focus his interpreters' attention on the visible events of the story he is creating. By adopting that method, however, he denies himself the ability to intervene so as to focus attention on the kind of observations and analyses that only he can make. Such observations can still be communicated, but the methods of communicating them may be cumbersome and distracting. To appropriate a phrase that has been applied to a group of British poets, Rand is a "romantic ventriloquist," trying not to speak in her own voice but always making sure that certain characters share her values and her ways of forming and enunciating them (Bostetter 1975).

Here's the most important point: any reader who is worth Rand's trouble knows that this is going on. Any good reader *always* works "on two levels." The reader is interested in the action of a novel, but he is also interested in the action of the novelist. People read *Atlas Shrugged* to find out what Dagny Taggart will do and think; they read it even more

attentively to find out what Ayn Rand will do and think. The reader follows her choice of words, her manipulation of events, her ideas and her means of making those ideas known. If there are Godlike authors in the universe of novels, there are also theologians, physicists, and evolutionary biologists among their readers; and these people are busy investigating God's every move. When Rand objects to authorial intrusion, she is specifying the kinds of narration that she does and does not like to practice; but her practice does not deserve to be erected into universal law.

Of course, Rand doesn't need to be totally right to be interesting. Sometimes she opens provocative avenues of investigation, even though she is willing to walk down them only part of their length. A good example is her speculations about humor. Although her novels make generous use of humor and comedy, she is often regarded as monochromatically serious—partly because the discussion of humor in *The Romantic Manifesto* is mainly concerned with warning against the kind of humor that "is used as the camouflage of moral cowardice" (Rand 1969, 126). *The Art of Fiction* gives fairer treatment to the subject.

The treatment begins in a fairly traditional way: "We regard as funny that which contradicts reality: the incongruous and the grotesque" (165). The word "reality" is oddly chosen; there are a lot of incongruous things about "reality." But the salient term is "incongruous." In using that term, Rand is adopting an age-old prescription for comedy or humor. It's age-old because it seems to work. Try this example. Two businessmen are carrying on a civil conversation when one of them whips out a custard pie and throws it in the other's face. That's funny (or it may be funny); it also happens to be incongruous.

But try another example. Two businessmen are carrying on a civil conversation when one of them whips out a pistol and shoots the other dead. That's incongruous too, but it may also be sad (the victim is an honorable person subjected to senseless violence) or happy (the victim is a gangster who has been terrorizing honest people), or simply indifferent (these things happen). How onlookers respond to an action depends on their assessment of the situation. In literature of any technical proficiency, everything depends on the way in which the author guides the audience's assessment. "Incongruity" is just one of many signposts that an author can use to say, "this is supposed to be funny."

Rand doesn't see matters that way. She doesn't realize that the "incongruity" explanation presents any difficulty. But this is where her discussion gets interesting. She claims that situations are funny when "the audience [not the characters who are the butts of the author's joke] know[s] the truth of the situation." The audience is "in control of reality. . . . That is the essence of humor" (165). This is a major advance. Presumably, the businessman who gets the pie in the face or the bullet in the breast doesn't think that's funny, because he lacks the audience's privileged viewpoint and clearer knowledge. We can deduce from this that comedy takes place in the audience, not in the action.

But just knowing "the truth" doesn't necessarily make us laugh. To be told, authoritatively, that you will die during the next 24 hours, even though nobody else expects you to, will probably not make you laugh—unless you see the matter from a viewpoint lofty enough to make this particular truth seem laughable. And this is the point that Rand makes on the *next* page, when she quotes her novel *Atlas Shrugged*: "Francisco seemed to laugh at things because he saw something much greater" (166). She then observes that some people use humor to make all values seem laughable, which is a bad thing to do. But the important idea goes unemphasized: this theory of humor is not really about incongruity or about someone's knowing the truth; it's about the sense of freedom that people derive from discovering a higher perspective, a perspective that allows them to see that some things are simply not significant. What might have intimidated them before can no longer do so; they feel themselves free; they laugh. That's what happens in *Atlas Shrugged*; that's what Rand almost identifies in her theory of humor; but that's an issue that she doesn't pursue.[3]

Another of Rand's provocative but insufficiently developed concepts is her well-known distinction between "romantic" and "naturalistic" literature, discussed in *The Romantic Manifesto* and revisited in *The Art of Fiction*. This is an important and useful distinction. Some works of literature, as she argues, are based on the assumption that people are conditioned by their "natural" circumstances; and some (which she calls "romantic") are based on the assumption that people can transcend those circumstances by making individual judgments of values. The interesting difficulty with this concept is that few writers, good or bad, are either pure

naturalists or pure romanticists; but Rand herself is not especially interested in that problem. She's more interested in supporting her distinction by hurrying writers to one end of the spectrum or the other. In her hurry, she fails to see how many "romanticists" of one kind of another there really are.

Her theory about individual judgments and their crucial importance in certain kinds of plots has applications to authors to whom she never dreams of applying it. The best example is Shakespeare. She classifies him as a naturalist, because he allegedly believes that "man is a plaything of fate, carrying within himself some tragic flaw that ultimately destroys him" (80). And that's that—as if Lear, Macbeth, Othello, and Henry V, perhaps the most individually motivated characters in all of English literature, were portrayed as simple expressions of a substrate of "nature." She mentions Othello's supposedly unmotivated jealousy: "It's in his nature, and he is helpless against it" (80-81). One wonders what she was reading when she formed this judgment, and when she formed various other superficial views, unworthy of her literary intelligence.

Part of the answer is that she wasn't reading very widely. Of the thirty-nine literary authors she mentions, only three (Shakespeare, Aristotle, and Swift) are pre-nineteenth century. Almost half the others are twentieth-century Americans, many of them undistinguished. Faulkner, Cather, Hemingway, Fitzgerald—none of these appears in *The Art of Fiction*. The European list is more distinguished, with important romantic authors (Dumas, Rostand, Scott, Hugo, Mary Shelley) strongly represented. But she has little to say about most of the authors she mentions. Only a handful receive anything like close analysis.

When she does make detailed literary assessments, however, her judgments are usually very acute. People who are wondering just what went wrong with such once-famous writers as Thomas Wolfe and James Gould Cozzens will find the answer here; and people who wonder what is so impressive about such perennially famous but currently unfashionable writers as Victor Hugo will also be enlightened. Even when, as a theorist, Rand comes up with wrong or premature answers, she is generally asking the right questions, questions that literature should never get too far away from asking.

The example here is her discussion of why we read literature at all. She says that she reads fiction (which, besides the essay, appears to be the only kind of literature with which she steadily concerned herself) "for the purpose of seeing the kind of people [she] would want to see in real life and living through the kind of experience [she] would want to live through." Anticipating the obvious objection, she replies:

> To those who say that this is a limited use of fiction, my answer is: No—because for any other purpose, non-fiction is better. If I want to learn something, I can learn it from nonfiction. But in the one realm where nonfiction cannot do as well—the realm of values and their concretization in human reality—nothing can take the place of art, and specifically of fiction. (176)

Only fiction can provide the kind of world you want to live in.

That sounds naive. A seemingly more naive statement follows: "Since that is the primary purpose of art, that is what I personally enjoy most and the only thing that counts" (176). The argument is breathtakingly abrupt. Even if Rand is right about the primary purpose of art, it does not follow that this is the only thing that should count in literature. She should be able to see that, and she doesn't (at least in this passage).

Nevertheless, her basic question is very well worth asking: Why *do* we read fiction? Isn't it to enjoy a world that we want to enjoy but that we could not enjoy in any other way? If we could enjoy it in some other way, presumably we would. You may reply: No one wants to live in a totalitarian state, but it's perfectly legitimate to write a novel about life in those conditions. Rand would agree with you. After all, who wrote *We the Living* (174)? It's all a matter of what level of abstraction you operate on. If your story is set in a totalitarian state, and your writing exists only on the level of concretes and naturalistic impressions, she will not enjoy that story. But if your writing includes those concrete impressions as a means of projecting values that endure and triumph despite all the horrors that the characters may encounter, then your story can create a world in which she will enjoy living, because she enjoys participating in that kind of moral victory.

But what about works of literature that obviously do not project the values she would want to live by? This is the great question of the usefulness of the literature that we do not agree with, and to that question

Rand returns the traditional, conservative, and eminently plausible response: you *shouldn't* enjoy such works, even if you appreciate their technique. Writing about her literary hero, Victor Hugo, she suggests that one need not share an author's ideas to want to live in that author's world; but she still specifies that he is "nearest to creating the kind of people and events" that she "would like to observe or live with" (176). As for Dostoevsky, whose technique she also greatly admired, she indicates that she *appreciates* him, but she does not *enjoy* him (175). She thus reiterates her opinion that aesthetic valuation exists apart from philosophical agreement, but she denies the power of that idea. She appreciates Dostoevsky's novels "as a spectacle of human intelligence and perceptiveness at work. . . . The artistic means are superlative; his technique is magnificent." But the experience of Dostoevsky's artistic genius is somehow not the kind of experience that is "an end in itself" (175). To this, one can only reply that it certainly sounds like an end in itself.

The world is full of literary works that people richly enjoy despite their indifference or violent opposition to the non-literary values that these works project. To select an extreme instance: few people want to live in the intellectual world of the *Rubaiyat*, the purpose of which is to question all values; but the literary world of the *Rubaiyat* is a place where many people obviously do enjoy living. Rand might think that they shouldn't, but she ought to ask herself more seriously why they *do*. A world denuded of values, that is one thing; but an earth clothed with language, the earth evoked as

> this batter'd Caravanserai,
> Whose Portals are alternate Night and Day—

that is a different matter (FitzGerald 1997, 98). The offices of Taggart Transcontinental, as evoked in *Atlas Shrugged*, are also a different matter. No one would want to go there if those offices actually belonged to Jimmy Taggart. But they don't. They belong to Ayn Rand, by virtue of her literary ability. And that's enough to make people want to enter them, whatever they may think of her politics or psychoepistemology.

This is a pregnant thought. One hopes that it will be taken seriously,

both by the followers of Rand, who have too often narrowed their cultural views to conform with what they assume is the essential message of Objectivism, and to her philosophical opponents, who have too often declined to visit her world or to recognize her contribution to the vitality of literature.

Notes

1. Cox 1998 discusses this problem in connection with Rand's posthumously published *Journals*.

2. Rand 1969, 57, 169, interprets Aristotle's *Poetics* as arguing that fiction shows things as they "ought to be"; Aristotle's argument (at *Poetics* 1451b) is that imaginative literature evokes a world of greater probability than the everyday world. See Cox 1986, 20.

3. A work that does pursue it is Olson 1968, which presents the best argument so far for the "lost significance" theory of humor and comedy.

References

Boeckmann, Tore. 2000. Editor's preface. In Rand 2000, xi-xii.
Bostetter, Edward E. 1975. *The Romantic Ventriloquists: Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Shelley, Byron*. Rev. ed. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
Cerf, Bennett. 1977. *At Random: The Reminiscences of Bennett Cerf*. New York: Random House.
Cox, Stephen. 1986. Ayn Rand: Theory versus creative life. *Journal of Libertarian Studies* 8: 19-29.
___. 1998. The evolution of Ayn Rand. *Liberty* 11 (July): 49-57.
Faulkner, William. 1959. *Faulkner in the University: Class Conferences at the University of Virginia, 1957-1958*. Eds. Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner. New York: Vintage.
FitzGerald, Edward. 1997. *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam: A Critical Edition*. Ed. Christopher Decker. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.
Haydn, Hiram. 1974. *Words and Faces*. New York: Harcourt Brace.
Johnson, Samuel. 1971. The life of Gray. *Rasselas, Poems, and Selected Prose*. Ed. Bertrand H. Bronson. 3rd ed. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
Olson, Elder. 1968. *The Theory of Comedy*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
Paterson, Isabel. 1916. *The Shadow Riders*. New York: John Lane.
Peikoff, Leonard. 2000. Introduction. In Rand 2000, vii-x.
Rand, Ayn. 2000. *The Art of Fiction: A Guide for Writers and Readers*. Ed. Tore Boeckmann. Introduction by Leonard Peikoff. New York: Plume-Penguin.
___. 1969. *The Romantic Manifesto: A Philosophy of Literature*. New York: World.
___. 1959. *We the Living*. 2nd ed. New York: Random House.