

## Books

### Having Your Say

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*The Art of Nonfiction: A Guide for Writers and Readers*

Ayn Rand

Edited by Robert Mayhew

With an introduction by Peter Schwartz

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Three decades ago, Ayn Rand delivered a series of informal lectures on nonfiction writing to a group of friends. These lectures, like an earlier series on fiction writing, were tape-recorded and, long after Rand's death, prepared for publication. The fiction lectures came out in 2000; the nonfiction lectures have now appeared.

In each case, an editor appointed by the Rand estate reduced many hours of recorded lecture and conversation (48 hours of the fiction lectures, a similar number for the nonfiction) to the discreet length of a monograph. Everyone interested in Rand will appreciate the fact that these editions have been made available, although not everyone will make the same assessment of the costs and benefits of the editorial methods. Elsewhere, I have discussed at some length the processes involved in the editing of Rand's posthumous works (Cox 1998; 2000). In the present case, as in others, a great deal of editing was done, and the editorial explanation of what was done is too general to inspire complete confidence. In one sense, the editing clearly "worked": the text we have is smooth and reasonably well-organized, with a minimum of the repetitiousness we would expect to encounter in a series of informal lectures and question and answer sessions. But "success is never," as Harold Nicolson said, "an ultimate justification" (Nicolson 1961, 166). Another editorial

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<sup>2</sup>*The Journal of Ayn Rand Studies* 3, no. 2 (Spring 2002): 339-47.

method might well have been more "successful," depending on how you define success.

Many readers would be glad to put up with some redundancy in order to see an exact reproduction of what Rand actually said, with all its psychological as well as literary interest. Particularly to be regretted is the translation of question-and-answer sessions into more pages of continuous exposition by Rand. She was brilliant in dialogue, and I doubt very much that the edited version of these particular discussions is as lively as the original. As for sales, people who have a serious interest in Rand, the people who are, presumably, the largest audience for a book like this, would be more rather than less likely to buy it if it contained her nonredacted remarks, or at least a hefty selection from them.

Whatever position one takes on the editorial method, it's hard to account for the index, which is grossly inadequate, especially in regard to the easiest things to index, proper names. Scanning the last four pages of this volume, one would never suspect that Rand had interesting things to say about Hegel, Kant, Erich Fromm, Hubert Humphrey, or William F. Buckley, to list a few examples of the people omitted. In fact, the only people who rate an entry are Aristotle, Rand's husband Frank O'Connor, and Leonard Peikoff, who supervised the edition.

Yes, but is the book any good? Indeed it is, although Rand's self-imposed limitations need to be understood and respected. She was giving advice to her friends about the particular kind of nonfiction writing she practiced—the thesis-driven essay. She was remarkably good at that type of writing, but there are many types of nonfiction that she didn't write and didn't try to teach: history, biography, the familiar essay . . . . It is hard to recall many practitioners of the familiar essay whom she is even known to have read. Certainly, she read and appreciated Isabel Paterson, H. L. Mencken, and probably Albert Jay Nock, but that is not a very long list. To see how narrow her band of interests was, one need only imagine how impressive it would be to learn that a series of autobiographical essays had turned up among her papers.

She does discuss the art of the book review, but her conception

of it is disappointingly limited. To her, a review is simply an objective report on the contents of a book and a just assessment of its merits. A book review is emphatically not an opportunity for the reviewer to advance his own ideas, much less to project his personality (Rand 2001, 150). Rand, who had been savagely mistreated by reviewers, had good reason to insist that such people stick to their job, which is *to review the book fairly*, but she does not allow for the fact that reviewers can be fair even while using a book primarily as an introduction to their own way of coming at things. Nobody regards Samuel Johnson's review of Soame Jenyns primarily as an addition to Jenyns studies; it's significant because it's a classic expression of Johnson's ideas and style. Reviews endure as works of literature, when they do endure, primarily because of what they reveal about the reviewers, not because of what they convey about the books under review.<sup>1</sup>

But if Rand has little to say about the potential of the various genres of nonfiction writing, she has a great deal to say about general literary principles and about the psychology of writing. The most important of her principles is clarity: "Make clarity a fetish, an absolute, a dogma, a god" (104). The obvious function of clarity is communication, transference of thoughts in full integrity from author to audience. But that isn't where Rand starts. For her, authors have nothing important to communicate until their thoughts exist in clear verbal form: "If you cannot write something down clearly and objectively, then you do not really know it. . . . The great majority of writing problems come from approximations in one's mind" (17).

Now, the interesting thing is that she couples this emphasis on consciousness, discipline, and rationality with an emphasis on the freedom of the subconscious mind:

There is one great enemy of mental activity: repression. . . . [T]rust your subconscious. Let your mind be free to wander around a subject and to judge it. Do not set artificial constraints . . . (174)

Identifying one's theme and approach is a rational process, but the

actual writing must be spontaneous and uncensored:

When you write, you must trust *your* subconscious, and more: you must allow your subconscious to be the sole authority in the universe. (33)

There is a good deal of dramatic overemphasis here, and a good deal of psychological play-acting, too: one must act *as if* one's subconscious were the sole authority in the universe, so that one can mobilize memories, uncover ideas, and allow imagination to make its unexpected conceptual "integrations." But the act won't work unless one remembers that the play as a whole has to be *made up*. It has to consist of more than an uncensored subconscious invited onto the stage to ramble along by itself. Indeed, as Rand argues, a subconscious left on its own would soon exhaust its material (86–87). A continuously productive writer carefully establishes the "premises" for the work of his subconscious, storing it with images and observations and setting it specific tasks to perform: be on the lookout for this, see what you can do with that.

Rand goes too far when she says that the subconscious "is like a computer and will do what you consciously order it, within the limits of its knowledge and training" (59). Every writer wishes that were true. But writers who have had the experience of giving "standing orders" to their subconscious know that it can do many of the things it's told to do, even if it lacks the predictability of a computer. How it works, nobody knows. Rand does not presume to explain it. But *that it works* is as certain as the fact that one can disable one's writing by feeding one's subconscious a constant diet of doubts and fears.

"Self-doubt," Rand very wisely observes, is the enemy of real doubt: it "stifles the authentic subconscious warning that something is wrong" (93). Nevertheless, she doesn't depend entirely on subconscious warnings. Just as writing begins with the conscious setting of goals, so it ends with systematic editing of what has been spontaneously written. We've known for a long time how minutely conscientious Rand could be as an editor of her work (Cox 1986), but no one could suggest a more demanding program of successive

inspections and revisions than she does here.

On this and other matters, Rand gives a great deal of specific, practical advice, and most of the advice is good. One of her best suggestions is to avoid being led astray by suggestions—*good* suggestions, that is. You can probably see through bad suggestions, but good ones, coming "from outside your own context," can throw you completely off (Rand 2001, 80). Much of what she says, however, can work in a variety of contexts. To find your own material, for instance, you can reflect on what other people say about some issue and ask, What are the premises on which these ideas are based? What are their implications? "I love doing that," she says (176). It's an excellent way to spy out the territory, to view a topic, especially a topic under debate, in its many associations and relationships. As she also advises, the way to make a topic interesting is to look *around* it, to find its connections with wider issues (175).

That doesn't mean that you should try to say everything that is possible to say about a topic, even everything that may be important or relevant. That would be disastrous. One must set limits to one's work. Deadlines, however painful, are contacts with reality; without them, "[y]ou could spend the rest of your life adding chapter upon chapter" (83). You could also spend the rest of your life talking a project to death. Discussion is a surrogate for writing; its normal function is to create confusion about ideas that should be set down on paper before other people are invited to comment (81–82). It's the words that count, and you can never be too careful about their selection. As a non-native writer of English, Rand is appalled to find that "most Americans do not know English grammar." About this, she gives the best possible advice: "get a good primer on grammar—preferably an old one"; consult Fowler's *Modern English Usage*, "make a religion of grammar" (99–101). Rational rules for style can also be defined—with the benefit that, if you make it a habit to observe them, "you can sometimes achieve great effects by deliberately breaking them" (123).

It's amusing to see Rand advising against overstatement, pejorative language, and sarcasm: "Even if you give reasons for your strong language, understatement is usually more desirable" (124).

Well, who wrote Galt's speech? "Take a look around you, you savages who stutter. . . ." (Rand 1957, 1049). But the advice is well taken. Rand's critical machinery is always at work, even when she fails to see its application to herself. She takes no responsibility for the effects of the intimidating style of Objectivism, but she is sensitive to the fact that "too many Objectivists ask themselves, 'What do I *have* to feel?' instead of, 'What *do* I feel?," thereby damaging their ability to think and write (2001, 29). Her constant insistence on trusting one's subconscious is plainly adapted to an Objectivist audience that is reluctant to do that. Also well adapted to that audience is her advice about avoiding "Objectivist bromides,"<sup>2</sup> not waiting to write until one finds the "best" theme, not thinking that one has to write "the 'perfect' article," and not thinking, as one inspects one's work, "I don't see any error, but what if I could do better?" Those are all perfect ways, as she indicates, to "paralyze your judgment" (32, 14, 89).

Her prescription is to see writing as a professional job, not a self-inquisition:

If you do not regard writing as a job . . . [y]ou will be putting yourself on trial every time you attempt to write. Instead of being an expression of your self-esteem, writing becomes its test. If so, it will be a miracle if you ever connect two sentences. (4)

Golden words. Rand says precisely the right thing to people who want to write but are discouraged about doing so:

[W]riting is for your own pleasure. Never mind your mistakes or who will say what about your work. Remind yourself what you sought in writing, and what great pleasure there is in having your say about life, reality, or whatever subject you choose. (86)

That's Ayn Rand in one of her best modes of operation, the Rand who keeps a sure grip on common sense, the pursuit of happiness,

and the colloquial American language. Have your say!

Besides giving advice, Rand provides interesting information about her own history as a writer. Considering her exacting standards of work, one can well believe that in writing *Atlas Shrugged* she "discarded five pages for every one that [she] kept" (64). Something she wished she had discarded entirely was her play *The Unconquered*, a version of her novel *We the Living*. It was a bad play, because she wrote it at another person's suggestion and merely for the purpose of publicizing her novel. The motive was "irrelevant" to the actual writing, so the writing itself could never be really good (81).

People who don't know much about professional writers often imagine that they are also professional readers. Many successful, even distinguished, writers (Hemingway and Faulkner are examples) never develop any passion for the consumption of other people's work. Rand was more of a writer than a reader, so it's not surprising to find that she considered boredom a useful signal from the subconscious that enough background reading had already been done (79). Nevertheless, she was certain to seize anything in her reading that might conceivably be of use to her. Some of her most interesting comments about developing a style have to do with the influence of a little pamphlet about a film actor, recommended to her during her Russian youth. The pamphlet taught her the difference between simply writing, "He is an elegant screen comedian," and evoking "[t]his elegant figure shivering on the screens of the whole world." It also showed her the difference between "dramatiz[ing] everything" and making "every sentence fancy" (108-9).

Throughout these lectures, one sees an author with a strictly delimited range of literary pursuits but an intensely professional focus on their requirements. She had no qualms, she says, about axing large amounts of the material she had carefully worked up for *The Fountainhead*: it wasn't needed, and it had to go (162-63). The title of that book never did meet her standards, but it wasn't for lack of trying. Her original choice for a title was *Secondhand Lives*. She liked it because it was clearly relevant to the book's central problem, the subversion of individualism. Then her editor, Archie Ogden, pointed out that the title drew attention to the villains who embody the

problem instead of the hero who embodies the solution. So she tried *The Prime Mover*, which correctly identifies the hero's role. Ogden observed that very few readers would understand what that title meant. Rand weighed his advice, thought some more, and came up with *Mainspring*, only to find that someone else had taken it. At that juncture, she searched the thesaurus and settled on "fountainhead"—a word that never appears in the novel. Her fastidious reservation, however, was that the word seemed "a bit too poetic." It wasn't quite right. She still would have preferred *Mainspring* (168–69).

If you're looking for overconscientiousness, you need look no farther. The idea that *Mainspring* is a better title than *The Fountainhead* will strike most readers as sufficient evidence that Rand knew what she was talking about when she said, "If you think I am good at titles, I assure you I am not" (169). What was good—what was great, in fact—was her commitment to thinking her way through the tangled web of options that inevitably constitutes the process of writing. Should anything need to be left imperfect in the choice of possibilities, she would at least be sure to identify the imperfection. Her example invites imitation. If you follow what she says in these lectures as carefully as it deserves to be followed, you may find that she arrives at some wrong conclusions and comes up with some unhelpful advice. But no one has to agree with everything she says. The important thing is that one actively pursues the process of thought that creates mature literary judgment, and no one can say that she fails to stimulate that kind of thought.

## Notes

1. For Rand, such an article as Johnson's "is *not* a book review—it is a discussion of ideas for which the particular book you are attacking serves as the springboard" (2001, 150). I do not believe, however, that the question is simply that of which label to attach; what's at issue is the potential of the book review as a genre.
2. The word "bromide," which, following Rand, Objectivists use for "cliché," has itself become a "bromide."

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