

The Actuality of Ayn Rand¹

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Ayn Rand's fascination for male figures displaying absolute, unswayable determination of their Will, seems to offer the best imaginable confirmation of Sylvia Plath's famous line, "every woman adores a Fascist" (Plath 1981, 223). Is, however, such a quick "politically correct" dismissal of her work really correct? The properly subversive dimension of her ideological procedure is not to be underestimated: Rand fits into the line of "overconformist" authors who undermine the ruling ideological edifice by their very excessive identification with it. Her over-orthodoxy was directed at capitalism itself, as the title of one of her books (*Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal*, Rand 1967) tells us; according to her, the truly heretical thing today is to embrace the basic premise of capitalism without its communitarian, collectivist, welfare, etc. sugar-coating. So what Pascal and Racine were to Jansenism, what Kleist was to German nationalist militarism, what Brecht was to Communism, Rand is to American capitalism.

It was perhaps her Russian origins and upbringing that enabled her to formulate directly the fantasmatic kernel of American capitalist ideology. The elementary ideological axis of her work consists in the opposition between the "prime movers" or "men of the mind," and "second handers" or "mass men." The Kantian opposition between ethical autonomy and heteronomy is here brought to its extreme: the "second hander" is searching for recognition outside himself, his self-confidence and assurance depend on how he is perceived by others, while the "prime mover" is fully reconciled with himself, relying on

his creativity, selfish in the sense that his satisfaction does not depend on getting recognition from others or on sacrificing himself—his innermost drives—for the benefit of others. The prime mover is innocent, delivered from the fear of others, and for that reason without hatred even for his worst enemies. Roark, the “prime mover” in *The Fountainhead*, doesn’t actively hate Toohey, his great opponent; he simply doesn’t care about him. Here is the famous dialogue between the two:

“Mr. Roark, we’re alone here. Why don’t you tell me what you think of me? In any words you wish. No one will hear us.”

“But I don’t think of you.” (Rand 1992a, 389)

On the basis of this opposition, Rand elaborates her radically atheist, life-assertive, “selfish” ethics: the “prime mover” is capable of the love for others. This love is even crucial for him since it does not express his contempt for himself, his self-denial, but, on the contrary, the highest self-assertion. Love for others is the highest form of properly understood “selfishness,” i.e., of my capacity to realize through my relationship with others my own innermost drives.

And also on the basis of this opposition, *Atlas Shrugged* constructs a purely fantasmatic scenario: John Galt, the novel’s mysterious hero, assembles all prime movers and organizes their strike. They withdraw from the collectivist oppression of the bureaucratized public life. As a result of their withdrawal, social life loses its impetus: social services, from stores to railroads, no longer function, global disintegration sets in, and the desperate society calls the prime movers back. They return, but on their own terms.

What we have here is the fantasy of a man finding the answer to the eternal question “What moves the world?”—the prime movers—and then being able to “stop the motor of the world” by organizing the prime movers’ retreat. John Galt succeeds in suspending the very circuit of the universe, the “run of things,” causing its symbolic death and the subsequent rebirth of the New World. The

ideological gain of this operation resides in the reversal of roles with regard to our everyday experience of strikes: it is not workers but the capitalists who go on strike, thus proving that they are the truly productive members of society who do not need others to survive.² The hide-out to which the prime movers retreat, a secret place in the midst of the Colorado mountains accessible only via a dangerous narrow passage, is a kind of negative version of Shangri-la, a “utopia of greed”: a small town in which unbridled market relations reign, in which the very word “help” is prohibited, in which every service has to be reimbursed with true (gold-backed) money, in which there is no need for pity and self-sacrifice for others.

The Fountainhead gives us a clue as to the matrix of intersubjective relations that sustains this myth of prime movers. Its four main male characters constitute a kind of Greimasian semiotic square: the architect Howard Roark is the autonomous creative hero; Wynand, the newspaper tycoon, is the failed hero, a man who could have been a “prime mover”—deeply akin to Roark, he got caught in the trap of crowd-manipulation (he was not aware of how his media manipulation of the crowd actually makes him a slave who follows the crowd’s whims); Keating is a simple conformist, a wholly externalized, “other-oriented” subject; Toohey, Roark’s true opponent, is the figure of diabolical Evil, a man who never could have been a prime mover and who knows it—he turned his awareness of his worthlessness into the self-conscious hatred of prime movers, i.e., he becomes an Evil Master who feeds the crowd with this hatred. Paradoxically, Toohey is the point of self-consciousness: he is the only one who knows it all, who, even more than Roark who simply follows his drive, is fully aware of the true state of things.

We have thus Roark as the being of pure drive in no need of symbolic recognition (and as such uncannily close to the Lacanian saint—only an invisible line of separation distinguishes them), and the three ways to compromise one’s drive: Wynand, Keating, Toohey. The underlying opposition is here that of desire and drive, as exemplified in the tense relationship between Roark and Dominique, his sexual partner. Roark displays the perfect indifference towards the Other characteristic of drive, while Dominique remains caught in

the dialectic of desire, which is the desire of the Other: she is gnawed by the Other's gaze, i.e., by the fact that others, the common people totally insensitive to Roark's achievement, are allowed to stare at it and thus spoil its sublime quality. The only way for her to break out of this deadlock of the Other's desire is to destroy the sublime object in order to save it from becoming the object of the ignorant gaze of others:

"You want a thing and it's precious to you. Do you know who is standing ready to tear it out of your hands? You can't know, it may be so involved and so far away, but someone is ready, and you're afraid of them all. . . . I never open again any great book I've read and loved. It hurts me to think of the other eyes that have read it and of what they were."
(143-44)

These "other eyes" are the Evil Gaze at its purest, which grounds the paradox of property: if, within a social field, I am to possess an object, this possession must be socially acknowledged, which means that the big Other who vouchsafes this possession of mine must in a way possess it in advance in order to let me have it. I thus never relate directly to the object of my desire: when I cast a desiring glance at the object, I am always already gazed at by the Other (not only the imaginary other, the competitive-envious double, but primarily the big Other of the symbolic Institution that guarantees property), and this gaze of the Other that oversees me in my desiring capacity is in its very essence "castrative," threatening.³

Therein consists the elementary castrative matrix of the dialectics of possession: if I am truly to possess an object, I have first to lose it, i.e., to concede that its primordial owner is the big Other. In traditional monarchies, this place of the big Other is occupied by the King who in principle owns the entire land, so that whatever individual landowners possess was given, bequeathed, to them by the King; this castrative dialectic reaches its extreme in the case of the totalitarian Leader who, on the one hand, emphasizes again and again how he is nothing in himself, how he only embodies and expresses

the will, creativity, etc. of the people, but, on the other hand, he gives us everything we have, so we have to be grateful to him for everything we have, down to our meager daily bread and health. At the level of drive, however, immediate possession is possible, one can dispose of the Other, in contrast to the everyday order of desire in which the only way to remain free is to sacrifice everything one cares for, to destroy it, to never have a job one wants and enjoys, to marry a man one absolutely despises.

So, for Dominique, the greatest sacrilege is to throw pearls before swine: to create a precious object and then to expose it to the Other's Evil Gaze, i.e., to let it be shared with the crowd. And she treats herself in precisely the same way: she tries to resolve the deadlock of her position as a desired object by way of willingly embracing, even searching for, the utmost humiliation—she marries the person she most despises and tries to ruin the career of Roark, the true object of her love and admiration.⁴ Roark, of course, is well aware of how her attempts to ruin him result from her desperate strategy to cope with her unconditional love for him, to inscribe this love in the field of the big Other; so, when she offers herself to him, he repeatedly rejects her and tells her that the time is not yet ripe for it: she will become his true partner only when her desire for him will no longer be bothered by the Other's gaze—in short, when she will accomplish the shift from desire to drive. The (self-)destructive dialectics of Dominique, as well as of Wynand, bears witness to the fact that they are fully aware of the terrifying challenge of Roark's position of pure drive: they want to break him down in order to deliver him from the clutches of his drive.

This dialectics provides the key to what is perhaps the crucial scene in *The Fountainhead*. Dominique, while riding a horse, encounters on a lone country road Roark, working as a simple stone-cutter in her father's quarry; unable to endure the insolent way he looks back at her, the look that attests his awareness of her inability to resist being attracted to him, Dominique furiously whips him. (In the film version, this violent encounter is rendered as the archetypal scene of the mighty landlord's lady or daughter secretly observing the attractive slave: unable to admit to herself that she is irresistibly

attracted to him, she acts out her embarrassment in a furious whipping of the slave.) She whips him, she is his Master confronting a slave, but her whipping is an act of despair, an awareness of his hold over her, of her inability to resist him—as such, it's already an invitation to brutal rape. So the first act of love between Dominique and Roark is a brutal rape done with no compassion:

He did it as an act of scorn. Not as love, but as defilement. And this made her lie still and submit. One gesture of tenderness from him—and she would have remained cold, untouched by the thing done to her body. But the act of a master taking shameful, contemptuous possession of her was the kind of rapture she had wanted. (217)

This scorn is paralleled by Dominique's unconditional willingness to destroy Roark—the willingness that is the strongest expression of her love for him. The following quote bears witness to the fact that Rand is effectively a kind of feminine version of Otto Weininger:

"I'm going to fight you—and I'm going to destroy you—and I tell you this as calmly as I told you that I'm a begging animal. I'm going to pray that you can't be destroyed—I tell you this, too—even though I believe in nothing and have nothing to pray to. But I will fight to block every step you take. I will fight to tear away every chance you want away from you. I will hurt you through the only thing that can hurt you—through your work. I will fight to starve you, to strangle you on the things you won't be able to reach. I have done it to you today—and that is why I shall sleep with you tonight. . . . I'll come to you whenever I have beaten you—whenever I know that I have hurt you—and I'll let you own me. I want to be owned, not by a lover, but by an adversary who will destroy my victory over him, not with honorable blows, but with the touch of his body on mine." (272–73)

The woman strives to destroy the precious agalma, which is what she doesn't possess in her beloved man, the spark of his excessive autonomous creativity: she is aware that only in this way, by destroying his agalma (or, rather, by making him renounce it), she will own him, only in this way will the two of them form an ordinary couple; yet she is also aware that in this way, he will become worthless—therein resides her tragic predicament. Is then, *in ultima analisi* the scenario of *The Fountainhead* not that of Wagner's *Parsifal*? Roark is Parsifal the saint, the being of pure drive; Dominique is Kundry in search of her delivery; Gail is Amfortas, the failed saint; Toohey is Klingsor, the impotent evil magician. Like Dominique, Kundry wants to destroy Parsifal, since she has a foreboding of his purity; like Dominique, Kundry simultaneously wants Parsifal not to give way, to endure the ordeal, since she is aware that her only chance of redemption resides in Parsifal's resistance to her seductive charms.

The true conflict in the universe of Rand's two novels is thus not between the prime movers and the crowd of second handers who parasitize on the prime movers' productive genius, with the tension between the prime mover and his feminine sexual partner being a mere secondary subplot of this principal conflict. The true conflict runs within the prime movers themselves: it resides in the (sexualized) tension between the prime mover, the being of pure drive, and his hysterical partner, the potential prime mover who remains caught in the deadly self-destructive dialectic (between Roark and Dominique in *The Fountainhead*, between John Galt and Dagny in *Atlas Shrugged*). When, in *Atlas Shrugged*, one of the prime mover figures tells Dagny, who unconditionally wants to pursue her work and keep the transcontinental railroad company running, that the prime movers' true enemy is not the crowd of second handers, but herself, this is to be taken literally. Dagny herself is aware of it: when prime movers start to disappear from public productive life, she suspects a dark conspiracy, a "destroyer" who forces them to withdraw and thus gradually brings the entire social life to a standstill. What she does not yet see is that the figure of the "destroyer" that she identifies as the ultimate enemy, is the figure of her true Redeemer.

The solution occurs when the hysterical subject finally gets rid of

her enslavement and recognizes in the figure of the “destroyer” her Savior. Why? Second handers possess no ontological consistency of their own, which is why the key to the solution is not to break them, but to break the chain that forces the creative prime movers to work for them—when this chain is broken, the second handers’ power will dissolve by itself. The chain that links a prime mover to the perverted existing order is none other than her attachment to her productive genius: a prime mover is ready to pay any price, up to the utter humiliation of feeding the very force that works against him, i.e., that parasitizes on the activity he officially endeavors to suppress, just to be able to continue to create. What the hysterical prime mover must accept is thus the fundamental existential indifference: she must no longer be willing to remain the hostage of the second-handers’ blackmail (“We will let you work and realize your creative potential, on condition that you accept our terms”). She must be ready to give up the very kernel of her being, that which means everything to her, and to accept the “end of the world,” the (temporary) suspension of the very flow of energy that keeps the world running. In order to gain everything, she must be ready to go through the zero-point of losing everything. And, far from signaling the “end of subjectivity,” this act of assuming existential indifference is, perhaps, the very gesture of absolute negativity that gives birth to the subject. What Lacan calls “subjective destitution” is thus, paradoxically, another name for the subject itself, i.e., for the void beyond the theater of hysterical subjectivizations.

This subject beyond subjectivization is free in the most radical sense of the word. This is why Rand’s “prime movers” are not characterized primarily by their positive properties (superb intelligence, etc.); their innermost feature is their lack of the false guilt feeling, their freedom from the superego vicious cycle—when you are caught in this cycle, you are guilty whatever you do. This superego logic was nicely formulated by Rand apropos of the antitrust laws: everything a capitalist does becomes a crime—if his prices are higher than the others’ prices, he exploits his monopolistic position; if they are lower, he practices unfair competition; if they are the same, it’s collusion and conspiracy to undermine true competition (Rand 1967,

49).

And is this not similar to the time of the patient’s arrival in psychoanalysis? If the patient is late, it’s a hysterical provocation; if he is early, it’s an obsessional compulsion; if he arrives exactly on time, it is a perverse ritual. One should introduce here the key distinction between ethics and morality: when the subject gathers the strength to break out of this vicious circle, he leaves behind the sphere of morality while simultaneously asserting his or her ethical commitment.

From my high school days, I remember the strange gesture of a good friend of mine that shocked me considerably at the time. The teacher asked us to write an essay on “what satisfaction does it provide to accomplish a good deed of helping one’s neighbor”—the idea being that each of us should describe the profound satisfaction that comes from the awareness that we did something good. My friend put the paper and pen down on the table and, in contrast to others who quickly scribed their notes, just sat motionless. When the teacher asked him what was wrong, he answered that he was unable to write anything, because he simply never felt either the need for (or the satisfaction of) such acts—he never did something good. The teacher was so shocked that she gave my friend a special opportunity: he could write his paper at home after school—surely he would remember some good deed.

Next day, my friend came to school with the same blank paper, stating that he thought a lot about it the previous afternoon. There was simply no good deed of his that he could recall. The desperate teacher then blurted out: “But could you not simply invent some story along these lines?” to which my friend answered that he had no imagination that would run in this direction, that it was beyond his scope to imagine such things. When the teacher made clear to him that his stubborn attitude could cost him dearly—the lowest grade he could get would seriously damage his standing—my friend insisted that he could not help it. He was completely powerless, since it was beyond his scope to think along these lines, his mind was simply blank.

This refusal to compromise one’s attitude is ethics at its purest,

ethics as opposed to morality, to moral compassion. My friend was, in his deeds, an extremely helpful and "good" person; what was absolutely unpalatable for him was to find narcissistic satisfaction in observing himself doing good deeds. In his mind, such a reflexive turn equaled the profoundest ethical betrayal.

Is there not something profoundly "Randian" in this stance? There is a well-known story about Rand whose superficially scandalous aspect often eclipses its extraordinary ethical significance. When, in the early fifties, she suffered a writer's block in the middle of her work on *Atlas Shrugged*, she proposed to the young Nathaniel Branden and his wife Barbara that, during the time of writing the novel, she would meet Nathaniel in the afternoon twice a week for sexual relations to help her overcome the block (Branden 1986, 259). They came to an agreement, the encounters took place, and when, years later, the novel was completed, the encounters were over.

Although, later on, relations got more complicated, there are nonetheless two important aspects to this anecdote. First, contrary to the standard patriarchal procedure of men exchanging women among themselves, here, the exchange took place *among women*—one woman borrowed a man from another one. Second, more importantly, Rand *did not cheat*, the writer's block was not an excuse to indulge in promiscuity. Once the work was done, she returned the man to his wife. To show such firmness in the most intimate domain bears witness to an ethical stance of extraordinary strength: while Rand was here arguably "immoral," she was *ethical* in the most profound meaning of the word. It is this ethical stance of inner freedom that accounts for the authenticity clearly discernible in Rand's description of the momentary impact Howard Roark makes on the members of the audience in the courtroom where he stands trial:

Roark stood before them as each man stands in the innocence of his own mind. But Roark stood like that before a hostile crowd—and they knew suddenly that no hatred was possible to him. For the flash of an instant, they grasped the manner of his consciousness. Each asked himself: do I

need anyone's approval?—does it matter?—am I tied? And for that instant, each man was free—free enough to feel benevolence for every other man in the room. It was only a moment; the moment of silence when Roark was about to speak. (Rand 1992a, 677)

Indeed, as Lacan put it: a true Master is the one who cannot ever be betrayed—the one who, even when actually betrayed, does not lose anything. How, then, is this Randian Master figure *sexualized*? We are dealing here with two radically different narratives that are not to be confused: the standard masculine narrative of the struggle between the exceptional One (Master, Creator) and the "crowd" that follows the universal norm, as well as the feminine narrative of the shift from desire to drive, i.e., from the hysteric's entanglement in the deadlocks of the Other's desire to the fundamental indifference of the desubjectivized being of drive.

The Randian hero is not "phallocratic"—phallocratic is rather the figure of the failed Master (Wynand in *The Fountainhead*, Stadler in *Atlas Shrugged*): paradoxical as it may sound, the being of pure drive who emerges once the subject "goes through the fantasy" and assumes the attitude of indifference towards the enigma of the Other's desire, is a feminine figure. What Rand was not aware of was that the upright, uncompromising masculine figures with a will of steel with whom she was so fascinated, are effectively figures of the feminine subject liberated from the deadlocks of hysteria. It is well known that a thwarted (disavowed) homosexual libidinal economy forms the basis of military community—it is for that very reason that the Army opposes so adamantly the admission of gays in its ranks. *Mutatis mutandis*, Rand's ridiculously exaggerated adoration of strong male figures betrays the underlying disavowed lesbian economy, i.e., the fact that Dominique and Roark, or Dagny and Galt, are effectively lesbian couples. It is thus a thin, almost imperceptible line that separates Rand's ideological and literary trash from the ultimate feminist insight.⁵

Such a reading enables us to draw a crucial theoretical conclusion about the limits of subjectivity: hysteria is not the limit of subjectiv-

ity. There is a subject beyond hysteria. What we get after "traversing the fantasy," i.e., the pure being of drive that emerges after the subject undergoes "subjective destitution," is not a kind of subjectless loop of the repetitive movement of drive, but, on the contrary, the subject at its purest, one is almost tempted to say: the subject "as such." Saying "Yes!" to the drive, i.e., precisely to that which can never be subjectivized, freely assuming the inevitable, i.e., the drive's radical closure, is the highest gesture of subjectivity. It is thus only after assuming a fundamental indifference towards the Other's desire, getting rid of the hysterical game of subjectivizations, after suspending the intersubjective game of mutual (mis)recognition, that the pure subject emerges.

Notes

1. This is an expanded and revised version of "The Lesbian Sessions," an essay which appeared in *Lacanian Ink* 12 (Fall 1997): 58–69.

2. Rand's ideological limitation is here clearly perceptible: in spite of the new impetus the myth of the "prime movers" got from the digital industry (Steve Jobs, Bill Gates), individual capitalists are today, in our era of multinationals, definitely not its "prime movers." In other words, what Rand "represses" is the fact that the "rule of the crowd" is the inherent outcome of the dynamic of capitalism itself.

3. See Assoun 1995, v. 2, 35–36.

4. *Atlas Shrugged* contains a whole series of such hysterical inversions of desire—suffice it to quote from the blurb on the cover of the pocket edition: "Why does [John Galt] fight his hardest battle against the woman he loves? . . . why a productive genius became a worthless playboy. Why a great steel industrialist was working for his own destruction . . . why a composer gave up his career on the night of his triumph . . . why a beautiful woman who ran a transcontinental railroad fell in love with the man she had sworn to kill." See Rand 1992b.

5. Along the same lines, one is tempted to make the same claim about Tom Ripley, the hero of a series of Patricia Highsmith's novels: insofar as the uncanny coldness he evinces characterizes a certain radical lesbian stance, rather than being a closet gay, the paradox of Ripley is that he is a *male lesbian*. A series of outstanding texts in *Feminist Interpretations of Ayn Rand* (Gladstein and Sciabarra 1999) elaborate in detail the homosocial and gay dimensions of Rand's work, especially those essays by Judith Wilt, Thomas Gramstad, and Melissa Jane Hardie. While deeply indebted to them, the present essay just wants to add a specific twist to their insights.

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