

Review

Rebuttal Witnesses

Dean Brooks

Facets of Ayn Rand

Memoirs by Mary Ann Sures and Charles Sures

Introduction by Leonard Peikoff

Ayn Rand Institute Press, 2001

153 pp., no index

Facets of Ayn Rand, the first publishing project of the Ayn Rand Archives Oral History Program, has few parallels in Objectivist writing. It is not a biography of Rand, or a systematic account of her ideas, but a series of vignettes in question-and-answer format, drawn from 48 hours of interviews with Charles and Mary Ann Sures.

By the standard of most oral histories or memoirs by the friends of the famous, I would judge this effort as above average, both for intellectual focus and for relevance. There is an undoubted need for oral histories dealing with Rand and the early Objectivist movement, and the fact that Charles Sures died days after the manuscript was finished only underlines the urgency.

We might contrast the total biographical output on Rand to date with the biographies, memoirs, and related studies that have been written for the minor Canadian painter Emily Carr. The latter include not only several standard biographies, her collected letters, *Emily Carr: Rebel Artist*, and *Emily Carr: The Untold Story*, but even *This Woman in Particular: Contexts for the Biographical Image of Emily Carr*. Ayn Rand should be so lucky, to have legions of scholars providing contexts for her biographical image! So in many ways this effort is quite welcome.

There is, however, a sense of déjà vu in much of the material. Nearly all of the factual aspects, from the name of Ayn Rand's housekeeper to her taste for Godiva chocolates to the descriptions of Frank O'Connor's painting style, have been available to the public since 1986, when *The Passion of Ayn Rand* appeared. I did not know

that Mary Ann Sures typed the manuscript for *Atlas Shrugged*, or that Rand had 52,000 stamps in her collection; and I had no idea that she thought 'Professor' Irwin Corey was funny. But as these examples illustrate, the revelations tend to be minor.

The book comes closest to being a genuine intellectual memoir when Mary Ann describes her exchanges with Rand on the subject of art; Sures wrote for *The Objectivist* on the subject, and lectured as well. But this portion is quite short, only a half-dozen pages.

The main significance of the book for many readers is likely to be its self-described function of rebutting Rand's critics and protecting her "larger than life" status. We get ample warning of the editorial stance in the Introduction by Leonard Peikoff, which observes, "The Sures were among the few people in Ayn Rand's life who were intellectually honest all the way down . . ." (in Sures and Sures 2001, iv). There is no mention of the Nathaniel Branden Institute as such, no mention of the break between Rand and the Brandens, no mention of the many fellow writers and intellectuals such as Murray Rothbard, Edith Efron or Ruth Beebe Hill who were friendly with Rand and later ejected from her circle. We learn instead about Mary Ann's experience typing *Atlas Shrugged*, and how Rand rekindled Charles Sures' interest in stamp collecting, and what it was like to watch Humphrey Bogart in *The African Queen* in Rand's living room. Although there is a section entitled "On Negatives," it does not contain criticism of Rand. It contains vignettes about her well-known tendency to public anger and invective, and the Sures' largely supportive views on it.

By the normal standard for rebuttal witnesses, the Sures fall short. When they insist that "her critics have made too much" (106) of Rand's anger during question periods, and that by comparison with her achievements, her outbursts were minor in nature, the effect is weak and unconvincing. In part, this is because their argument is contradicted by other witnesses, but even more because it leaves so much unacknowledged from their own experience. Their testimony is self-contradictory, which when facing competent cross-examination is generally fatal.

The Sures characterize the focus of Rand's public anger as "ideas

she thought were implicit in the question asked" (107). They argue that as Rand was speaking to strangers—and in answering written questions, she did not even necessarily know who had asked the question—"she was not angry at anyone personally" (107). Instead, "She knew when someone was, for example, really questioning the validity of reason or advocating altruism—without saying it openly" (107). One defect of this defense is that Rand was at times mistaken about what she perceived. Nathaniel Branden described an incident in *Judgment Day* where a non-English speaker used the heavily accented phrase "Galt contends," only to have Rand shout him down, insisting that Galt would never "contend," that the word betrayed offensive premises. When it was pointed out later that the man most likely had no idea of the connotations of "contend," Rand was apparently thunderstruck (Branden 1989, 243).

However, the biggest problem with this defense is that one cannot have it both ways. A larger-than-life moral genius either merits credit *and* blame for her impact on other people, or she merits neither. Mary Ann Sures was once deeply affected when Rand cheerfully identified her implicit premise in cleaning a frying pan. She had been criticized by a friend as being unintellectual for enjoying household chores, and asked Rand's opinion. As she puts it: "To this day, I seldom mop a floor or polish a mirror without thinking of Ayn Rand and of how much that discussion of values has meant to me" (Sures and Sures 2001, 45). So if Rand were to read a written question that some eager young student had submitted, identify the premises behind it as evil, evasive, or irrational, and then angrily denounce the anonymous writer in front of her friends or family, not to mention a lecture hall full of Rand's own loyal admirers—how long would *that* experience stay with a person? How is it not personal?

Margit von Mises, surely no stranger to the impact of respected public figures on impressionable students, has been quoted on this aspect of Rand:

Someone asked her a question, and she answered in such a rude, disagreeable way that I couldn't understand how anyone could take it. She just killed the questioner with her

reply. You can do indescribable harm to people that way. I couldn't understand how she could hurt people, and I disliked her terribly for that. (Branden 1986, 329)

I do not want to give the impression that I view Rand's public outbursts as fundamentally undercutting her accomplishments, or that they are the only issue worthy of discussion. In a lengthy section on her experiences as Rand's employee, Mary Ann Sures remarks that Rand was only ever angry with her once, and that she was otherwise unfailingly gracious, considerate and patient—facts about Rand that deserve to be put on the record. For that matter, I see nothing surprising about loyal friends not wanting to speak ill of the woman they loved, whatever her faults. For anyone who was not personally subject to Rand's fits of temper, their only relevance lies in the light they may cast on her writing and values, and their undoubted impact on the Objectivist movement.

I therefore agree with the Sures that Rand's temper does not constitute grounds for dismissing what she said. However, the failing of *Facets* is that, having chosen to issue rebuttals and wave the flag of "intellectual honesty," the Sures do not meet the critics head-on or face the arguments that have been made in the past. Their tame, self-censoring treatment is well illustrated by Charles Sures' remarks about a conversation with Rand concerning surprise parties, which cover two pages. The setup for this exchange consists of a single sentence: "Mary Ann mentioned to me that the Collective had given Ayn a surprise dinner party to celebrate the publication of *Atlas Shrugged*, and that Ayn was very annoyed and did not enjoy the party" (Sures and Sures 2001, 86). This is all we are told in the way of concretes. The rest is a lecture at secondhand from Ayn Rand, on why one should never throw surprise parties.

First and foremost is that it puts the recipient in the position of suddenly having to switch his context and deal with an unplanned for, unexpected situation. What, she asked, is the value in that? . . . [the recipient] is expected to be gracious and charming when he may feel annoyance, or anger, or

overwhelmed by the situation. (87)

A reader unfamiliar with Barbara Branden's biography of Rand would probably find this mildly puzzling, and move on, wondering among other things why there was no testimony from Mary Ann, who was actually at the party. But according to Branden, the story really began months earlier when Rand, at the urging of Hiram Haydn, had approached Bennett Cerf and Donald Klopfer at Random House to publish her novel. On the spot, Cerf proposed a kind of "philosophical contest," in which various publishers would vie to prove who was best suited to publish her. It quickly became clear that Random House was the strongest choice, and Rand resolved to let Cerf know this.

She decided to stage the kind of dramatic scene she loved, and Alan [Collins, Rand's agent] got into the spirit of it. He made an appointment with Bennett, merely saying that he wanted to talk; he did not mention that Ayn would be joining him. "When we entered Bennett's office," Ayn would report happily, "I said to him, 'You have the first, exclusive submission. The book is yours.' Bennett simply inclined his head silently for what seemed a full minute." (Branden 1986, 287)

A grateful Rand later singled out Cerf and Klopfer for an unusual kind of praise in her author's afterword: "I trust that no one will tell me that men such as I write about don't exist. That this book has been written—and published—is my proof that they do" (Rand 1957, "About the Author").

It was in this context that the private dinner party was thrown by the Collective. It included everyone professionally associated with the book. Frank O'Connor created the floral displays; Rand's favorite dishes were served; and Alan Collins along with Bennett Cerf handed out packages of cigarettes with the dollar sign on each one, and the slogan "Who is John Galt? They know at Random House" on the package itself. None of this sufficed to charm the guest of honor,

who was outraged and apparently remained so.

In the account from *Passion*, the paradox is very clear: Rand the writer was in love with the idea of dramatic surprises, and she even enjoyed staging them herself, but she found it annoying if not overwhelming to be on the receiving end. She was not flattered, but rather threatened, by the efforts of her friends—as Charles Sures' report of their conversation ironically shows.

Through Branden's eyes, we are able to experience this moment as the dozens of people present did, and we are left to ponder what it all means. By contrast, the Sures' account of the party deliberately does not permit us to make any judgment whatever about Rand's behavior, or what happened that day; instead we are immediately whisked away to authoritative and misleading abstractions about surprise parties in general. It did not have to be this way. There is nothing inherently malicious about pointing out contradictory behavior, even in a close friend; I could readily picture Mary Ann remarking, in a sympathetic way, on the occasional contrast between Rand's heroines (thirtyish women of action who cope quite well with surprise), and Rand in her fifties.

To be sure, Rand is entitled to have her own voice heard on this point. For Charles Sures to recount her explanation has real biographical value and is appropriate. Where *Facets* goes wrong is in implicitly treating her explanations about what happened at the party as nothing but principled arguments, when if seen in context they contradict her values as a fiction writer as well as her own behavior in other situations.

At bottom, *Facets of Ayn Rand* is a mixture of charming but minor scenes preserved for history, and larger missed opportunities. Despite the bright sincerity and genuine love that is evident throughout the Sures' narrative, at several points I felt a weary sense of futility at what the demand for "intellectual honesty" on this subject continues to cost us all. The Sures were witnesses to significant events, and any record of what they saw will no doubt serve historians—but the title in this case is almost too apt. In many cases where we might hope to learn something substantive and new, we are offered not much more than bowdlerized fragments, a carefully

polished surface of narrative that fends off controversy in the process of avoiding many legitimate questions about its subject.

References

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