

Review

## Art and the Pursuit of a Cultural Renaissance

*Kirsti Minsaas*

*From the Fountainhead to the Future  
and Other Essays on Art and Excellence*

Alexandra York

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In *The Romantic Manifesto*, Ayn Rand calls for a renaissance of the ideals that informed the Romantic movement of the nineteenth century, ideals that in the course of the twentieth century—under the joint onslaught of aestheticism, naturalism, and (post)modernism—have gradually lost their foothold. As Rand writes in the Introduction: “There is no Romantic movement today. If there is to be one in the future, this book will have helped it to come into being” (Rand 1975, v).

The effect of Rand’s call for a rebirth of Romanticism has, however, been slim. Most of her admirers have been more concerned with her advocacy of capitalism as a political ideal than with her aesthetic vision. But it should be noted that for Rand an ideal society was not only one governed by free market liberalism but also one infused with a cultural atmosphere dominated by a Romantic sense of life. This was an atmosphere Rand had had the chance to experience during what she describes as its last afterglow, in the pre-World War I world of her early youth in Russia. Before World War I, as she writes, “men still held a benevolence that would be incredible to the men of today, i.e., a smiling, confident good will of man to man, and of man to life” (vi–vii).

When in 1926, after the demise of Romanticism, she arrived in

America, she could enjoy the benefits of a political and economic liberty and a rapidly advancing technology previously unknown to her. But as her early fiction as well as her journal notes indicate, it is obvious that the cultural state of her adopted country in many ways was a great disappointment to her. Over the years, as she witnessed the widening gulf in American society between the growth in science and technology and the decay in the arts and humanities, this disappointment seems to have grown into despair. In the early sixties, her fiction-writing having come to a halt, she turned to philosophical writing which, in line with her Russian intellectual heritage, was less aimed at scholarly investigation than at political and cultural change. Her role became that of an intellectual activist, and in a series of essays she urged for freedom and individualism not just in the political and economic realm but also in the cultural realm. Seeking to identify the true nature of Romanticism and what made it such a great achievement in art history, she also set the agenda for a cultural renaissance pointing towards the future. As she wrote: "In regard to Romanticism, I have often thought of myself as a bridge from the unidentified past to the future" (vi).

One of those who has chosen to tread on that bridge is Alexandra York. In her collection of essays, *From the Fountainhead to the Future* (2000), York gives vigorous voice to a cultural activism that seeks not just to revive but also to renew the ideals of Romanticism. Although her essays contain only a few references to Rand, the Randian influence is clearly evident. To readers of Rand, many of York's ideas will have a familiar ring—such as her insistence on the need to curb the excesses of Romanticism by grounding it in reason and realism, her complaint about the gulf between technology and the spiritual life in contemporary American society, her emphasis on the metaphysical relevance of art through its power to concretize our deepest values, and her advocacy of an art that can be uplifting and inspiring.

York, however, is not a spokesperson for Rand's theory of art. Addressing an audience consisting largely of artists, art lovers, and educators beyond the narrow world of Objectivism, she proposes a broader agenda for cultural change. Although she follows Rand in advocating a renaissance of the ideals of Romanticism, truly identified,

she does not see these ideals as restricted to the nineteenth-century Romantic movement in Europe but traces their roots back to what she holds to be the fountainhead of Western culture, namely, the legacy of Greek thought and art. The renaissance she has in mind, therefore, is one that, like the historical Renaissance, involves a rebirth of the Greco-Roman culture. In this regard, she places herself in a humanistic tradition that saw art as a means to the promotion of distinctly pro-human values by projecting images of man at his best and most noble. In so doing, she also presents herself as a champion of beauty, advocating works that express such time-honored aesthetic qualities as order, proportion, harmony, and grace.

In setting forth this program for cultural change, York takes the approach of an activist rather than a scholar. Unlike Louis Torres and Michelle Marder Kamhi, who in *What Art Is: The Esthetic Theory of Ayn Rand* (2000) tried to give credence and respectability to Rand's theory of art by providing it with a scholarly grounding, liberated from Rand's sometimes rash and idiosyncratic judgments, York has no scholarly aims or pretensions. For this reason, it may be a bit unfair to review her book in a scholarly journal. Yet, even a non-scholarly work must meet certain standards of accuracy and documentation, especially one that so ambitiously calls for nothing less than a full-scale cultural renaissance both in the arts and in philosophy.

In her essays, York is dealing with issues of fundamental philosophical import, issues that within the world of scholarship are the subject of great controversy and that pose many as yet unanswered difficulties. These difficulties are ironed out by York, who tends to argue for her views as if they are self-evident verities. Too often she speaks in flat assertions, showing little awareness of conflicting views and offering little in the way of active engagement with other art theorists, living or dead. Also, her book suffers from a striking paucity of examples. With the notable exception of the essay entitled "Art as Interactive Experience," where she discusses in some depth and detail Michelangelo's *David*, Rodin's *The Thinker*, and Frudakis's *The Signer*, we get very few examples of the kind of art she advocates. For someone, like myself, who is deeply sympathetic to her mission, this is regrettable. For if we are to counter the current vogue for post-

modernism and bring about any form of Romantic rebirth in our culture, this has to be done in more sophisticated terms than what York offers. As written, York's book is bound to alienate scholars, even ones sharing her disenchantment with the state of contemporary culture and wishing, like her, for a renaissance of a more positive, value-affirming art.

This lack of scholarship is especially evident in her presentation of cultural epochs. Generally, her arguments are weakened by a tendency to discuss a given period as if it is informed by one monolithic thought system that infuses the whole culture, ironing out the many individual visions and voices that give it richness and diversity. Also, she tends to romanticize some cultural periods, especially ancient Greece. Although duly noting that ancient Greek society was far from perfect, she nevertheless conveys the impression that its art and thought were a storehouse of rational and humanistic values, making no reference to the very dark image of man (and the gods) that emerges in much Greek art, especially its poetry. Holding up Homer as the father of Greek humanism, for example, she writes that in the figure of Achilles in *The Iliad*, "we encounter for the first time the notion of an integrated human *hero* united in mind, body and soul who personifies a rational ideal of what man could and ought to be, a universal paradigm for all humankind to approach individually in real life" (York 2000, 41). This is a strong claim that has only modest support in the text. Although it is true that Achilles often has been seen as a heroic ideal, he is clearly flawed, a warrior driven not by reason but by a wrath that impairs his rational faculty and that causes his tragic downfall. Homer's image of man's heroic potential is thus much more complex than what York suggests. Rather than providing exemplary portraits of the human ideal, held up as models for imitation, he shows us heroes caught in a tragic tension between their heroic aspirations and their earth-bound limitations as humans and not gods. In this regard, he set the stage for the great tragedians, who in their dramas project even more complex and troubling images of human aspiration. If it is true that the Greeks celebrated the heroic in man, it is also true that they were keenly aware of the tragic potential of human existence, especially the dangers of overstepping the boundaries of what was humanly possible. But this

is an aspect of Greek culture that York in her somewhat idealized and one-sided presentation chooses to ignore.

York's tendency towards historical simplification does not, however, detract from the validity and importance of her view that we need to build on the great achievements of the past to ensure the future. Nor does it detract from her many valuable points regarding the indispensable role of the arts in a healthy society. One such point, and one of her central concerns, is the need for the creation of a cultural environment that provides not only a fertile ground in which artists can grow and flourish but also a nurturing ground in which young people can develop their potential as human beings. Drawing on Rand's essay "Our Cultural Value-Deprivation" (Rand [1966] 1990), she points out the psychological harm caused by prolonged deprivation of spiritual values, especially in a decadent culture where art, which should be our chief source of spiritual nourishment, is turned into the opposite: a lethal tool aimed at the destruction rather than the enhancement of values (York 2000, 20–22).

In such a culture, York urges, it becomes the responsibility of each one of us to "preserve and advance the ideals of our great Western intellectual and artistic heritage" (42). To suggest how, she introduces the Greek idea of *paideia*, which, as she correctly points out, does not merely mean "education" in a narrowly specialized sense but refers more broadly to the "harmonious intellectual environment within which to cultivate the character of human beings in order to approach the potential inherent within each of us" (40).<sup>1</sup> Such *paideia*, moreover, is especially important for the education of the young and hence for the future. As she writes: "We must . . . create an American Paideia, a nurturing environment in which to teach young people how to think, how to judge, and how to aspire to the heights of their own possibilities" (45). Although this environment must be created by the joint effort of many disciplines, art is indispensable since through its power "to show us our ideals in concrete form . . . it may be the one dynamic powerful enough to envision for us a way to a better future" (46).

It is worth noting that York's notion of the specific role of the arts for an American *paideia* lies close to Plato's recommendation in Book 3 of *The Republic* that the poets along with other artists should

be induced to produce artworks that could create an aesthetic environment that would function as an antidote to the moral damage he believed was caused by most of the existent art. A quote will indicate how close:

We shall thus prevent our guardians being brought up among representations of what is evil, and so day by day and little by little, by grazing widely as it were in an unhealthy pasture, insensibly doing themselves a cumulative psychological damage that is very serious. We must look for artists and craftsmen capable of perceiving the real nature of what is beautiful, and then our young men, living as it were in a healthy climate, will benefit because all the works of art they see and hear influence them from earliest childhood into close sympathy with beauty and reason. (Plato 1974, 401c-d)

An important difference, however, is that while Plato thought it necessary to enforce this climate by means of censorship, York (2000, 42) insists upon the power of "individual commitment" as well as increased emphasis on art education in the school curricula to bring about the desired cultural state. She thus avoids the danger of political force that so often accompanies the promotion of art as a means to moral and spiritual edification—as exemplified both in Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany.

In general terms, York envisions a future American *paideia* as one generated by five fundamental values: reason, health, humanism, individualism, and beauty. By advocating these five values, she holds, we may in the new millennium create an "Age of Eudaimonia" in philosophy and of "Romantic Realism" in the arts (81-83), which together will constitute a new cultural renaissance. Regrettably, however, York is rather vague when it comes to the task of delineating the specific nature of these new ages. In regard to the age of Eudaimonia, she refers to Aristotle, claiming that it is Aristotle's word for "that abiding inner state of contentment achieved by virtue of living a life of reason" (83)—which is somewhat inaccurate, since he used it more generally to refer to a state of contentment arising from

successful living in a much broader sense. In regard to Romantic Realism, she explains that it is similar to but not synonymous with Romanticism, sharing with Romanticism the ideal of art as value-charged emotional expression, but avoiding the tendency towards excessive subjectivism that has marred much Romantic art by tying the "subject matter to real life" (84).

Although York makes no reference to Rand here, it seems likely that this is a view she has at least in part absorbed from Rand, who in *The Romantic Manifesto* refers to herself as a Romantic Realist (Rand 1975, 167). Like Rand, York observes that the Romantic movement of the nineteenth century often lost touch with the concerns of actual life, here on earth, by escaping into the remote and the mystical. As an antidote to this unrealistic Romanticism, York advocates a Romanticism adapted to "contemporary sensibilities" in that it seeks to "refresh images of reason and an affirmative view of human life on earth" (2000, 50). For anyone tired of the assaults on human dignity in today's culture, it is not difficult to sympathize with this view. York's arguments, however, would have been much stronger if they had been less gushing and more substantiated by concrete example and reasoned argument. Although stating that there are artists around in America today who are producing "exhilarating, penetrating, idea-based art" (85) along the lines of Romantic Realism, she gives no indication who these artists are—with the result that it is very difficult for the reader to know, in concrete terms, what kind of art does or does not conform to her aesthetic ideal.

A further problem posed by York's advocacy of Romantic Realism is that it is undermined by her tendency to restrict the value of art to one thing only: that of moving and inspiring the soul with beautiful images of man's great potential. Like Rand, she makes the error of seeing art as a domain reserved for the projection of life's positives. As she writes: "Artists have always been the dreamers who turn unseen ideas into sights and songs. Whether we follow beautiful dreams or nightmares is up to us. Ugliness and cruelty and tragedy are part of life, to be sure, but in *art*, it is life-serving values that we need to see—to experience—in order to bring those visions of values into existence in the real world" (46).<sup>2</sup> But this is to pose a false alternative

between a romantic art that is life-affirming (and hence good and uplifting) and a nihilistic art that is life-negating (and hence bad and destructive), leaving little room for the large in-between area of art that explores the darker or less ideal sides of human experience in positive and meaningful ways, without necessarily expressing contempt for human nature or aiming to subvert rational values. Such art may, for example, like a good tragedy, foster feelings of compassion with human misfortune; or it may, like a good satire, open our eyes to human folly and vanity and so promote self-knowledge; or it may, like Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* or Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, serve to clarify and deepen our understanding of what leads a good man into crime and evil.

By ignoring possibilities like this, York (along with Rand) places herself in a Platonic tradition that gives exclusive priority to art that beautifies and idealizes life, dismissing all forms of negative representation. Even though she does not, like Plato, recommend censorship, she argues for an aesthetic program that, if it were to dominate the art scene, would lead to a very monotonous cultural environment. Instead of a richly varied artistic landscape, we would have endless depictions of beauty and reason and harmony that, however inspiring and uplifting, would deprive the soul of its need for more complex and challenging forms of spiritual nourishment. As human beings, we exist in a world that has not only endowed us with possibilities of aspiring towards nobility and greatness but also exposed us to the risks of loss and failure. Art, if it is to fulfill its humanistic function, needs to explore the whole range of human experience, to show us not just what is possible to man, at his best, but also alert us to the complexities and contingencies that so often hamper the realization of our potential.

It is this fuller representation of man's condition that constitutes the humanist legacy left by the Greeks and that was given new life and forms in the European Renaissance that took place several centuries ago. Michelangelo's greatness, it is worth remembering, does not only rest on the heroic image of man he projects in his *David* but also on the serene image of suffering he conveys in his *Pietà*. If in today's world, we are to witness the kind of new renaissance York envisions,

we shall have to be sensitive to the full scope of this legacy, being similarly willing to embrace all aspects of human life, positive and negative. If not, the dream of a renaissance, I'm afraid, will peter out in the creation of artworks ultimately deemed inadequate and false to the true nature of human experience.

## Notes

1. The notion of Greek *paideia* is suggested in the German term "Bildung," which suggests a more complete and well-rounded education of an individual than does the English word "education." The same idea is, however, implied in the English culture of politeness that occurred in the eighteenth century, but which rapidly deteriorated into a concern with polished manners rather than any true cultivation of the soul.

2. This recalls Rand's similar statement in *The Romantic Manifesto* that "that which is not worth contemplating in life, is not worth re-creating in art" and that art, consequently, should present the positives of human existence—"man's greatness, intelligence, ability, virtue, heroism"—and not its negatives (Rand 1975, 166-67).

## References

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