

Symposium on "Rand, Rush, and Rock"

Replies to Chris Matthew Sciabarra's Fall 2002 article

Lyricist Neil Peart:  
A Brandenian Pedigree

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In her essay, "The Goal of My Writing," Ayn Rand ([1963] 1975) explicitly states her personal artistic aims, saying that the primary purpose of her writing is "*the projection of an ideal man*" (162). Occasionally, concrete evidence of that aim is captured quite decisively in her writings.

There's a passage in *The Fountainhead* (1943) that confidently backs up this notion. It is when Dominique Francon (the heroine) sees Howard Roark (the hero) for the first time. While Roark is working in her father's granite quarry, Rand casts this emotion through Dominique's eyes: "She stood very still, because her first perception was not of sight, but of touch: the consciousness, not of visual presence, but of a slap in the face" (207). She then goes on to say that Roark's "was the most beautiful face [Dominique] would ever see, because it was an abstraction of strength made visible" (207).

This is Rand at her best. Mental fitness never looked so healthy, so admirable—or so scarce. From this vantage point, I often hear complaints that, while many readers profess to love the Roarks and the Galts, these characters are too far removed from reality. Rand's heroes, it is said, are too confident, too exacting and too strong; therefore, they exist as myth, and not as fact. Rand, however, insists they are real. She writes in a postscript to *Atlas Shrugged*: "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" ("About the Author," in Rand 1957, 1085).

Neil Peart, pronounced (p-ear-t, like ear) is Rush's chief lyricist, drummer, and as of late, travel-adventure writer (*Ghost Rider: Travels*

on the *Healing Road*, 2002). In Chris Matthew Sciabarra's paper, "Rand, Rush, and Rock" (2002), Peart's name, more often than not, is invoked as being the predominant figure associated with Rand in progressive rock literature. Interesting as that may be—for as Sciabarra suggests, it "might lead Rand scholars toward hitherto untapped and potentially fruitful areas of research" (161)—I would speculate about another, complementary connection between Peart and the writings of psychologist Nathaniel Branden, Rand's associate for nearly two decades. As unusual as that may sound, such a connection might reveal a psychological aspect to Peart's lyrics, which offer portraits of individuals who bear a striking resemblance to the heroes so admired in Rand's novels.

Branden distinguishes himself among other self-esteem theorists in the mental health profession in that his life's work consists of asserting a new theoretical understanding of self-esteem. Self-esteem, he argues, is the central component of human well being. Focusing attention on some of Branden's insights could shed light on the psychological content of Peart's lyrics. While my comments here are limiting and cursory, it is my hope that they will spark further investigation.

If I had to point to the primary Rush songs that address self-esteem and its facets, they would be: "Closer to the Heart" (*A Farewell to Kings*, 1977), "Tom Sawyer," "Limelight," and "Vital Signs" (*Moving Pictures*, 1981). In "Vital Signs," for example, Peart explores the character of self-esteem as entailing both a "mental and environmental change" as well as a "human interface and interchange." In the same song, Peart points out the difficulty of attaining or even defining an exalted self-esteem because for every "ounce of perception," there's "a pound of obscure." Branden (1983, 3) alludes to the same phenomenon when he remarks that "the assumption that we all know what [self-esteem] means is mistaken." In fact, Branden suggests that the very process of achieving self-esteem "contains all the elements of great myth or great drama" (xv).

"Tom Sawyer" portrays this drama of self-disclosure; Peart (1985) himself sees this as the "difference between what people are and what others perceive them to be." In "Closer to the Heart,"

Peart provides a similarly vivid expression of the Brandenian concern "with the ultimate human encounter: the relationship of the 'I' to the 'me,' of the ego to the self" (Branden 1983, xii). So, too, when Branden reaches beyond the self-alienation of the common man that is "a mirror reflecting the predicament of most individuals" (xiv), Peart suggests that we should "put aside this alienation and get on with the fascination" because the stranger within is actually "a long-awaited friend" ("Limelight").

None of the books reviewed by Sciabarra suggest any link between Peart and Branden. But exploring this possibility might help to illuminate the psychological conditions necessary to *becoming*, not merely projecting, ideal men and women. Both Branden's work and Peart's lyrics show us that life isn't mundane, but rather, a force to be reckoned with.

As for me, I'm on stand-by, waiting for the emotive poet visionary to do what is difficult and to construct a language around the experience of self-esteem that will get it to impinge on our senses in ways that we have not seen, but will help us see. It would be a language that speaks from heights; it should be valued. And that might come in handy when we consider the advice from evolutionary biologist Sir Peter Medawar (1959, 103) and "a handful of astute biologists": "Nature does *not* know best," because "the bells which toll for mankind are—most of them, anyway—like the bells on Alpine cattle; they are attached to our own necks, and it must be *our* fault if they do not make a cheerful and harmonious sound."

## References

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