

## Discussion

Rejoinder to Sky Gilbert

# Rand as What?

*Karen Michalson*

If my review of Sky Gilbert's play *The Emotionalists* gives the impression that I am "dismissive" of Gilbert's main plot, which centers on Ayn Rand's affair with Nathaniel Branden, then I haven't done my job as a reviewer, because I haven't clearly conveyed my complete impression of Gilbert's play. When I wrote that "Ayn's story is tawdry, bathetic, and somewhat embarrassing" (Michalson 2004, 472), I assumed that readers would know from context that I meant that Gilbert intended his Rand plot to have those qualities, and that I, the humble reviewer, was being descriptive, not pejorative.

The Rand plot *is* (intentionally) bathetic. It is also funny, witty, extremely well-written, and probably a hoot to see performed. As Gilbert (2004, 480) points out, "hypocrisy is always funny, and enormously cathartic, on stage (see *Tartuffe*)." Of course it is. Hell, I indulge in this time-honored technique in my novels because it *does* work. But because it works so well, presenting hypocritical characters for their comedic value has been done over and over and over since *Tartuffe*, and that is why I had so little to say about Gilbert contributing yet another addition to the repertoire. It's funny. It works.

Now let's talk about the truly interesting dimension of Gilbert's play, the Marcel Pin plot, which, according to Gilbert, the majority of other reviewers have dismissed.

In Marcel's story, Gilbert wrestles with stuff that hasn't been done quite so often, stuff that disturbs, discomfits, and elicits uneasy reflection rather than laughter. That is why I am far more interested in this plot, and why I found *The Emotionalists* worthy of my time in the first place. As I wrote at length in my review, there is a dark, closeted issue that surrounds many people who have been strongly

attracted to Objectivism and gotten burned, an issue that in other contexts throughout history has fueled self-destruction, assassinations, and bloody revolutions.

That is the issue of raised expectations and destroyed hopes. What happens to bright adolescent readers of Rand who grow up believing that the free market is the arbiter of all that's good and worthy and then discover that the free market has no place for them and their best efforts? The results are horrific, beyond scandalous. Unemployed philosophers, underemployed scholars, and deserving but unrecognized artists who are reading this can email me at [arularec@aol.com](mailto:arularec@aol.com) with their war stories. Because, I suspect, this group of readers will "get" my review in the ways that I intend, and will most likely find Marcel's story of more than passing interest.

Marcel's horrible denial of his core self, of his very sexuality, functioned for me as a metaphor for all those recovering Objectivists who have felt their own core selves destroyed by the philosophy which admonishes that, above all, one must honor the self. One response to this deadly experience of promise and destruction, horrible as it is, is Marcel's ugly self-destruction, his attempts to become something he isn't in order to feel worthy of the Objectivist ideals he has embraced. (Note to Gilbert: I am not saying that your disposition of Marcel is ugly, I am saying that I think you intend us to see Marcel's self-destruction as ugly. I must be clear on that, considering the confusion over what I meant by describing your Rand plot as "bathetic.")

I have no idea why the Toronto papers found the Marcel plot too hot to handle, whereas I found it the most riveting part of Gilbert's play. Perhaps that is why I don't write reviews for the Toronto papers. Gilbert charges homophobia on the part of the other reviewers. From my perspective, which does not necessarily exclude Gilbert's—for as he says, no two people reason alike—I see a lot of reluctance on the part of most people to discuss why we live in a society that promises "if you work hard you'll succeed" but then has absolutely no room for the vast majority of talented intellectuals and artists who work damn hard and deserve to succeed. When it comes to the arts, the free market is not a meritocracy. If it were, nobody would buy rap CDs, or Madonna's barely literate children's books, and

plays like *The Emotionalists* would enjoy more than a one-time brief run.

An artist, like Marcel Pin the floral arranger, who believes the Objectivist dictum that the free market is the judge of the worthiness of his talent, is in for a time of it, especially if his work is original and thought-provoking enough to scare off investors who make money from placating the masses rather than from discomfiting them with thought. When one factors in the media-driven meme, left over from nineteenth-century Romanticism, that genius is a rare quality that always gets recognized, especially when coupled with hard work, the loud implication is that the majority of thinkers and creators who haven't gotten lots of media attention aren't really all that talented. And that's where the ugliness starts. Often, it's where the self-destruction begins.

Consider John Kennedy Toole, who wrote one of the very few inarguably brilliant comic novels in the English language (an extremely difficult form to pull off). Despairing over his genius never being recognized by the philistines who have hijacked the publishing industry, he killed himself at age 32. Eleven years later, due through the heroic efforts of his mother, a small university press published Toole's book *A Confederacy of Dunces*. It won the Pulitzer Prize, and is now universally acknowledged as a modern classic, and as one of the very few great comic novels ever written in English. Toole, and others like him, remind me of Marcel, in that Toole destroyed his life and Marcel destroyed his very self because they realized they would not be valued for what they could truly achieve or for who they truly were.

Such acts of self destruction do not come from low self-esteem — they come from people who have been taught to value their selves and their talent (a lesson Objectivism teaches), and who despair that their value is hidden while mediocre atrocities get public validation. That is why Marcel Pin drew my attention; one can't work in the arts without meeting dozens of Marcel Pins, who believe the system will bestow recognition on them and who need this recognition as greatly as Marcel needs Ayn's. For me Pin, a self-described artist (florist), stood for every neglected artist who has destroyed his self because the promise of his hard work and talent was destroyed by the indifferent reality of market forces driven by the pocket books of masses who

don't understand art in the first place.

And since nobody wants to talk about that sort of thing much—well, being another “grown up adolescent who never stops rebelling,” I thought I'd start the conversation.

If, as Gilbert speculates, I am following Rand by “bashing mediocrity,” let's just say there's a lot of mediocrity around that needs to be bashed, and I prefer to be on the side of writers like Toole. And Gilbert. Having something—many things—in common with another writer does not mean that I regard that writer as a guru. At the risk of using another Randism, albeit tongue-in-cheek, check your premises.

Which is why I want to gently chide my colleague that it truly is “a scholarly mistake to speculate on the motives of another academic” (Gilbert 2004, 482)—although it is certainly an irresistible parlor game and one I've taken guilty pleasure from on many occasions. We're writers, we speculate on motive, it's OK. But if I did relate to Rand as a guru, it would be difficult for me to have the agenda I described above concerning that sometimes destructive nature of Objectivism, and which I described in great detail in the first part of my review. Sorry to disappoint.

I did use the Randisms Gilbert notes. For several reasons. First, because I've always thought it good form to occasionally adopt the voice of the subject you are writing about. It's fun, and I happen to do that sort of thing exceptionally well. So well that when I opened an essay I wrote for Mimi Reisel Gladstein and Chris Matthew Sciabarra's *Feminist Interpretations of Ayn Rand* (1999) with a parody—a *parody!*—of the worst excesses of socialist feminist scholarship in order to make a point about myth-making and fiction writing, some readers complained that I was obviously a crypto-socialist, and had clearly come under the siren song of Marx and company. This is one reason I prefer to stick to fiction writing; there's less danger of being confused with a fictional character. Which is not to say it doesn't ever happen, but at least it's kind of charming when it does.

By the way, fellow literary scholars will recognize that the phrase “dull thorns of mediocrity” is actually my riff on the much-maligned line from Percy Bysshe Shelley's “Ode to the West Wind.” “I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!” where the speaker asks the wind to

lift him out of the mundane, mediocre nature of life. At least, that's what I was thinking when I wrote that phrase. It's kind of fascinating that it passed for a Randism, but I don't deny it has a Randish sort of ring. Literature makes strange company, and all that.

Finally, I can't deny that many of the ideas in my fiction are Objectivist-influenced, and that Rand is the writer, that, even given what Gilbert calls the "destructive" nature of her philosophy, who first taught me to question all premises. Including hers. She also gave me a fine eye for seeing those areas of life where excellence is torn down by mediocrity. But whenever anyone has cared to ask (which is rare), I have maintained that I am not, and never have been, an Objectivist. For one thing, Rand's aesthetic tastes are awkward and silly. I write literary fantasy full of magic, mysticism, and all kinds of irrational stuff! I prefer candle light to electric light, trains give me headaches, I play rock 'n' roll, and I love dogs! I never went through the gold-plated-bracelet-emblazoned-with-a-dollar-sign phase that Gilbert experienced in his adolescence, and later rejected. But I can understand the attraction. For people under a certain age, I believe such hero worship may be a necessary step in getting to full intellectual and creative independence.

But I have also observed the pain that intense identification with Objectivism has caused some people, and I saw that pain brilliantly exposed in Gilbert's rendering of Marcel's story, and so I wrote about it.

And that is not such a "very bad thing."

## References

- Gilbert, Sky. 2004. Rand as guru: Will it never end? *The Journal of Ayn Rand Studies* 5, no. 2 (Spring): 479–83.
- Gladstein, Mimi Reisel and Chris Matthew Sciabarra, eds. 1999. *Feminist Interpretations of Ayn Rand*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.
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