

Centenary Symposium, Part I

Ayn Rand: Literary and Cultural Impact

Reply to Kirsti Minsaas, “Art and the Pursuit of a Cultural Renaissance” (Fall 2003)

Toward an American Renaissance

Alexandra York

While appreciative of Kirsti Minsaas’s (2003) largely sympathetic review of my book, *FROM THE FOUNTAINHEAD TO THE FUTURE and Other Essays on Art and Excellence*, I would like to offer several clarifications and corrections.

I do not consider myself to be a writer who endeavors to “tread” on the “bridge” of Romanticism that Ayn Rand considered herself to be “from the unidentified past to the future” (Rand 1975, vi). While in agreement with most but certainly not all of Rand’s views, I held the solid core of my own philosophic and aesthetic views long before (at the late age of twenty-five) I ever heard of Ayn Rand. My philosophic views evolved from everyday common sense and direct observation of reality and—later, in college—from my love for Aristotle and dislike for both Plato and Kant. My aesthetic views came from personal study and experience in the fine arts: ballet (from the age of three), piano (from the age of five), drama (from the age of seven), voice (from the age of fifteen) and study of the visual arts from college on. This is not to claim that I was uninfluenced by Ayn Rand—I was and am proud to be—but to make clear that her work acted as confirmation rather than as enlightenment toward my own development. I do not “follow” Ayn Rand. I follow myself, as do all independent-minded people. In fact, one of my own criticisms of Objectivists and Rand scholars in general is that many of them tend to view both life and ideas narrowly through the lens of Rand’s work and often seem to assume that all who have been exposed to her ideas “absorbed” them only from her, without benefit of their

own observations, logical thinking and influence from many and various other thinkers. When I quote specific writers, including Rand, in my work, it is for the express purpose of highlighting their ideas with the hope that my readers will explore those writers' works themselves.

Minsaas (2003) correctly notes that I am an activist who does not pretend to scholarship, but I do make every effort to be accurate in my subject matter. I am immensely grateful to scholars who are involved with "controversy" and "unanswered difficulties" in their areas of expertise, but scholars are not my target audience and I have little interest in "active engagement with other art theorists" (89). The goal of my writing is not to argue (or prove) but to point the way toward a healthier, more life-affirming culture and to encourage individuals toward the redemptive powers of beauty and a more fulfilled and more *alive* personal existence.

Minsaas also correctly recognizes that the major portion of my audience is made up of artists, art lovers, and educators. But a significant part of my audience is also made up of Objectivists. Therefore, my perennial challenge is to try to open intellectual doors to those art lovers who are not philosophically inclined, while not boring those who are already knowledgeable. At the same time, I try to open aesthetic doors to the philosophically inclined and to expand the horizons of their artistic sophistication. It is to meet this challenge that I choose to write on the arts, because *art* bypasses the intellect and appeals directly to subconscious values, while *words* (ideas) can be understood and evaluated consciously. *Many* people in all walks of life (scholars included) hold conflicting value systems. I try to approach them intellectually, emotionally, and aesthetically in an attempt to connect with and stimulate and/or reinforce their rational values wherever they may be located, implicitly or explicitly.

As an aside that may be of interest to readers of this journal, my essay "Art as Spiritual Experience" (York 1998) was actually written with Objectivists in mind, as it has been my longtime and depressing observation that too many of them, admirably focused as they are on reason, deny or distrust their feelings, sadly depriving themselves of the joyful emotional rewards to be garnered from the hard work they

have invested in living a rational life and, to one degree or another, failing to experience the bliss of reason and emotions in perfect harmony.

Minsaas (2003), however, complains incorrectly about “a striking paucity of examples” of “the kind of art I advocate” and that I give “no indication who these artists are” (93). Within the essays, there are descriptions, of course—this is not a picture book—yet I can understand how that can seem not enough. But on the very cover of the book are *seven* beautiful images of sculpture and paintings of the type I obviously champion, with the names of the artists and the titles of the works appearing on the inside cover page for reference. Seven, to my mind, in full four-color, is a pretty good sampling of what I mean.¹

As far as my treatment of “cultural epochs” is concerned, I do not “discuss” any given period, nor do I want to. I choose those aspects of a culture or era that are relevant to my mission, emphasizing what I consider to be primarily operative during that time—positive (ancient Greece) or negative (twentieth-century America)—with no attempt to exhaust history but with a desire to accurately salute or condemn a dominant *esprit* in order to further my cause.

Regarding Homer, Achilles, and the heroic ideal, I must with some alarm correct Minsaas’s erroneous and seriously misleading quoting of me, and then simply disagree with her further assessments on the subject. I did not write that “in the figure of Achilles in *The Iliad*”—those are her words—“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” (quoted in Minsaas 2003, 90). About Achilles, I wrote only this: “Homer clearly approached the domain of philosophy in his epic poems, especially in the *Iliad*, where he displays high concern for the *arête* in the character of Achilles” (York 2000, 40). My theme throughout the entire passage to which Minsaas refers is *arête* as it relates to *paideia* and how Homer introduced and explored these ideas (notice I say he “displays high concern”) in his works and characters. I *do* say: “It is with this poet [Homer], that we encounter

for the first time the notion of an integrated *hero* . . .”

Heroes are made, not born. In fact, the heroic struggle (psychologically as well as physically) is part of what Homer so brilliantly dramatizes and what contributes to making his work so timeless. But since Minsaas dwells on the subject of heroes, offering her own thoughts, I will take the same opportunity to declare that I do not consider the “tension between their heroic aspirations and their earth-bound limitations” to be “tragic” (Minsaas 2003, 90). I have scanned previous articles written by Minsaas and am thus aware of her scholarly preoccupation with tragedy. Although certainly valid and worthy, it is far from my own concern with individual excellence and achievement.

For me, heroic tension is *the* supreme challenge for a hero, especially a “flawed” one. It is a challenge to confront and overcome obstacles (including internal, self-imposed ones) in order to *become* a hero. I am not captivated by heroes merely “held up as models for imitation” (90). I am, however, vitally intrigued by the complexity of heroism, and the very subject of heroic conflict fascinates me to such an extent that the main character of my novel *CROSSPOINTS: A Novel of Choice* is a deeply flawed potential hero, a sculptor who will or will not correct his flaws and who will continue to self-destruct or rise to his greatest capacities and live a life of eudaimonia. And since Minsaas considers my treatment of Aristotle’s meaning of the term *eudaimonia* to be “somewhat inaccurate” (92), I shall cite the quote that I offer in my book (taken from *Nicomachean Ethics* as interpreted by Ricken [1988] 1991, 166) and let other scholars come to their own conclusions:

The end or good of human beings lies in the activity that the rational soul [mind] of human beings exercises due to its highest capabilities and in its best condition. Happiness consists, not in having or receiving, but rather in being active. Happiness requires effort. It is a function that human beings must exercise. The higher the exercised capabilities are, the more intense the experience of happiness will be.²

I must now address Minsaas's allegation that, like Plato and Rand, I insist on positive art. Not so. In 1992, I curated and produced an art exhibit in New York City titled "ROMANTIC REALISM: Visions of Values." It was in that show's catalogue, showing the works of many painters and sculptors, where the title essay appeared for the first time and where I define Romantic Realism as regards the visual arts. The essay is included in *FROM THE FOUNTAIN-HEAD TO THE FUTURE and Other Essays on Art and Excellence*, the book under review here. In it, I state very clearly that

Romantic Realists do not deny and may even dramatize human struggle, suffering or absurdity, but if they choose to explore the underbelly of life, the best of them do so with a higher purpose. It takes little imagination to bewail the ills of existence or to stamp one's artistic foot at reality through irony or retreat into either angst or the endless distraction of novelty; it takes even less imagination to propagandize and promote political agenda through the "media" of art. Artists can address human struggles, to be sure. But rather than resorting to the easy outlets of whine or tantrum, they can express the struggle as an act of affirmation, by respecting the power of human sight rather than degrading it and by offering visions of why the struggle is worthwhile so that life might be enhanced and encouraged toward the better. (York 2000, 56)

Now, I am addressing twentieth-century nihilism in that essay, but my central theme applies to Greek or Shakespearean tragedy as well. In great works of art, by limning the negative or the "tragic," the positive is always indirectly illuminated, if one will but look in that direction. Otherwise, the tragedy becomes an end wallowing in itself, which is surely indulgent and arguably seldom desired by sincere tragedians of any epoch. While I agree that Aristotle's catharsis through pity and terror can be psychologically beneficial and provoke intellectual contemplation (one of the high goals of any honest art), I believe that cathexis in the direction of the positive has far greater

power to enrich character with a penetrating and enduring effect, not to mention the pure, immediate *pleasure* of aesthetically and spiritually experiencing affirmative intellectual values. Furthermore, in my speech “THE FOURTH ‘R’ IN EDUCATION: Reading, WRiting, ARithmetic and ART” (Hillsdale College, Michigan, 1992; *Vital Speeches of the Day* 1993; reprinted in York 2000, 127–39), I go to great pains to explain how art education can help young people approach *all* of the highs *and* lows *and* in-betweens of life in a safe psychological environment. So although I champion positive art (especially in today’s dismal, cultural wasteland), I in no way insist on an “exclusive priority to art that beautifies and idealizes life, dismissing all forms of negative representation” (Minsaas 2003, 94).

Finally, even though her tangential comments appear to have little to do with a critique of my book of essays, I must take exception to Minsaas’s assertion that Michelangelo depicted a “serene image of suffering” in his *Pieta* (94). Now, of course, he did three *Pietas*, but I assume she is referring to the first, the most familiar one (with Mary holding her dead son in her lap) that resides in the Vatican. And, surely, hers is a conclusion not to be reached without pause, because compared to the second “Florence” *Pieta* (his self-wrought, apparently self-damaged and certainly not-finished-by-him, personal funerary monument containing his own self portrait), as well as his last work ever (the “Milan” *Pieta*), both of which express a progressively more heart-wrenching poignancy of individualized emotional pain, his first approach to this subject speaks nothing of suffering. (I have seen all three works.) It speaks, instead, of *serene acceptance* and *fulfillment of mission*, hence its calm beauty. In fact, given Michelangelo’s three-time treatment of the same subject matter, one could almost imagine one was witnessing the sculptor’s own spiritual state as he, ever closer to his own death, began to express a more personalized *human* compassion that *does*, in the later works, display a deep, internal suffering.

All of the above having been said, I am acutely appreciative of Minsaas’s close attention to my call for an American *Paideia*, the establishment of which I consider to be of paramount importance if there is to be any hope of fostering future generations of leadership

that might lastingly rescue our present morally and spiritually impoverished culture. There are no signs of this phenomenon in sight; in fact, our education system on all levels is spiraling ever downward, along with the humanities in general. Plus, we have by now exported our sensationalist, materialistic habits to the entire world with disastrous ramifications that will return a thousand-fold to hasten our own internal erosion if we do not correct and redirect our ways.

Nevertheless, as I have written before, times of crisis such as ours can also be times of opportunity, so it is crucial to have a destination point toward which we can aim, even if there is yet no road to get there. And we do have Greek *paideia* as a model. For those who did not read Minsaas's review, the following paragraph from my book will give some idea of the scope of the task:

Paideia. The word translates poorly into modern language because, as with all things Greek, the word encompasses a pulsing, living wholeness of concept that seems foreign to our compartmentalized thinking habits of today. [It] means "education" or "the upbringing of children," but only in the broadest definitional sense possible. The operative meaning of the word is philosophical, not anthropological. In no way does it confine its content to a shallow description of societal distinctions such as formal schooling or national characteristics; rather, it embraces the sum of a culture, including "civilization," "tradition," "literature," "art," and "education" in the deepest sense of a multi-faceted but harmonious intellectual environment within which to cultivate the character of human beings in order to approach the potential inherent within each of us. (York 2000, 39)

In closing, I would like to suggest that any reader interested in my work should read it directly. The scholarly format has value, but since the reviewer chooses the arena of discussion in the opening round, questions and misunderstandings tend to prevail.

I would like to offer one last observation for Objectivist-oriented

readers of this journal to complete the circle from my opening paragraph, in which I referred to Rand's declaration that, with regard to Romanticism, she viewed herself as "a bridge from the unidentified past to the future." That may have been true and understandable from Rand's perspective as a novelist at that time, but I offer the following with all due respect to her: Romanticism is its own bridge—always has been (with or without the label) and always will be—because its primary impulse stems from the desire to emotionally express deeply held values, a desire that is inherent within the human spirit. Even at the time Rand wrote those words, Romanticism was perhaps not well, especially in literature, but it was alive in the forms of film scores and the visual arts. Men and women now in their 80s, although unappreciated in their youth, were then painting and sculpting and *teaching* not only the aesthetic values of our Greek-inspired Western-heritage but also, albeit implicitly, the corollary philosophical values as well. Those visual artists' students have now come of age and much of their work is truly exemplary from a technical standpoint and beautiful to behold. Most of them are not philosophically enlightened, which diminishes the content power of their work to a fair degree, and that is one of the reasons I write—to encourage them to expand their minds, hence their work.

Regrettably, most so-called "Objectivist" visual artists whose works I have seen need more finely-tuned technical abilities and appear overly literal in their presentations. They push the philosophy explicitly, without any real fire of inspiration; consequently, the content of their work escapes the uninitiated and states the obvious to those of similar persuasion.

But Rand was, I think, on target when she claimed that literature might well be, in a general sense, the first art form to actually break ground and pave the way out of our present cultural morass and on to an actual, demonstrable renaissance of Romanticism in the big world beyond the "Objectivist community." Ideas—philosophy—must come first. Words. But next in importance: words as *art*—fiction—which are accessible and potentially persuasive to *all* people, whatever their scholastic, philosophic or artistic inclinations, as Rand herself knew so well and proved so eloquently.

And there are those of us—each with our own ideas, our own agenda and our own voice—plying words of fiction today, resonating in our own way the eternal verities that evolved from Aristotle to Aquinas to Rand and on to the future (I did not name my essay book *FROM THE FOUNTAINHEAD TO THE FUTURE* by accident). In that regard, perhaps we are all bridges.

Next, as painters and sculptors follow their own minds, find their own voices, and develop nuance and poetry in their work, the visual arts will flourish in greater maturity, full of the colors, the shapes, the immediacy and the emotional impact of those same eternal truths.

Last to be recognized on the cultural horizon of promise will come Romantic music (and fear not, it is being composed as we speak!): the abstract, emotionally charged sounds that above all the arts most directly stir our inmost souls.

So onward and upward. If a renaissance *is* in the air, let us inhale deeply for a breath of it and get on with the work. As a wise bumper sticker (affixed to my writing room door) says: The best way to predict the future is to help create it.

Notes

1. Those interested in seeing more can check the web site of ART (American Renaissance for the Twenty-First Century): <<http://www.ART-21.org>>. Two of the essays in the book are flagged as appearing in art exhibit catalogues. See nearly 50 more examples.

2. As I write now, I have recently read a re-published and thought-provoking work on the subject of eudaimonia that some may wish to explore. It is David L. Norton's *Personal Destinies: A Philosophy of Ethical Individualism*. Incidentally, I have always found Rand's statement about happiness as man's ultimate end, although resonating Aristotle's thoughts, to be rather flat and without any specificity of meaning, in contrast to the depth of insight imbuing Aristotle's substantive identifications on the subject.

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