

Completing Rand's Literary Theory

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Ayn Rand was that most delightful of philosophers—one who proposes large and interesting theories, and allows them to remain uncompleted. It's like an intellectual party that began a long time ago and is still going on. Rand, the host, had the fun of announcing her principles; we, the guests, have the fun of developing them—while making sure, of course, to keep asking what she might think about what we're up to.

Nowhere is the interest and the uncompletedness of Rand's theories more evident than in her ideas about literature. In *The Romantic Manifesto* and her lectures on writing, she laid out much of the material that could form a literary theory. Some of this material she organized and began to shape. Some of it she simply checked off on her inventory list. But she never collected or inventoried all the material that would be necessary to finish the building. She didn't intend to do that. She left that task to others. So it's interesting to consider what the building might look like, if it ever were completed.

I want to share some thoughts about that. First, though, I want to say a word about the kind of building I have in mind. It's not the palace of artistic principles for which Objectivist aestheticians, most notably Louis Torres and Michelle Marder Kamhi (2000), have located many of the blueprints. Nor is it the cottage of practical tips that aspiring writers want to find in Rand's teaching and advice. Rand left materials for both kinds of structure, but I'm interested in something that comes between them. I'm thinking about a mid-sized structure. I'm thinking about the structure of ideas that we build when we try to relate artistic principles to literary practices—when we try to understand how the principles actually work. I believe that

when we try to extend Rand's literary theory, we identify aspects of literature that we otherwise might not see. We also get a sense of confidence from the realization that literature isn't just a matter of feeling or special inspiration. It's also a matter of logic.

Let's start by looking at the foundation of the structure, Rand's definition of art and her concept of the artist's way of working. Art, she says, is "a selective re-creation of reality according to an artist's metaphysical value-judgments. . . . Out of the countless number of concretes . . . an artist isolates the things which he regards as metaphysically essential and integrates them into a single new concrete that represents an embodied abstraction" (Rand 1969, 22–23).

Notice that the emphasis is on selection, and therefore on choice, judgment, intention. Rand's literary theory is an *intentionalist* one. But it does not propose to assess works of art in respect to their psychological motives. It makes no difference to this theory whether Shakespeare wrote to make money, to resolve covert sexual conflicts, to preach a theory of naturalism, or simply to have a good time. What matters is the literary result of his motives and intentions. So this is a *result-oriented* or *effect-oriented* theory. Rand is interested in the ability of a literary artist's intentions to produce a certain kind of effect—the integration of a multitude of things that exist in reality into a fabrication, a verbal "re-creation," of reality.

Fine. Now, at this point, an Objectivist literary theory needs to answer two obvious questions: How does the "re-creation" happen? And how does anybody perceive that it's happened?

Part of the answer lies in a word and a phrase that Rand never emphasized: *pattern* and *pattern recognition*. Both the writer and the writer's audience work through patterns. A fully developed Objectivist theory of literature would be very much concerned with how patterns are formed and detected.

To illustrate: Here is the beginning of a little story that I call "Life Was Good."

Life was good. That's what Joey Smallwood thought as he surveyed the neighborhood from the deck of his brand-new

skateboard. There it was, all of it—the pizza joint; the liquor store with its glittery rows of bottles; the pigeons at their usual perch; the big japonica bush near the corner; the broad front porch of the family home where Joey loved to sit and watch the sunset, talking with friends; the old Chevy four-door parked in front of the garage. Mom was home from work, he noticed. Then he thought: it's time for my nap.

Are you getting bored? I am! This is a boring story. But what's the matter? Isn't it a re-creation of some kind of reality? Well, perhaps; it has a lot of those "concretes" that Rand mentions, but there's something missing. The story lacks any sense of an organizing principle. Here are "concretes"—but how are these concretes connected? In other words, what is their pattern? We don't know. And the effect is boredom.

Suppose, now, I add one sentence:

After a long day of skateboarding, even a forty-year-old can use a nap.

Now we have a pattern. Now we know why the author has surrounded Joey with agencies of pleasure—skateboards, fast-food joints, liquor stores, front porches, naps. Now we know why Joey has time to observe the neighboring japonica bush. Now we know why all those things are in this story. They're there because Joey is a lazy, good-for-nothing creep. And did you notice what happened to the mother? She's changed from a mere datum hovering somewhere on the periphery of our attention to a figure standing near the center of the explanatory pattern: now we know who does all the work in the family, don't we? And it's not Joey. There is a pattern, and the pattern is complete.

Completeness, or at least consistency, is a sign that we're seeing a re-creation of reality and not just a listing of things that are real. But observe: a re-creation of reality must be even more strongly patterned than reality itself often seems to be. We can throw a story aside at our first suspicion that it lacks a meaningful pattern; the same,

alas, cannot be said of every encounter with reality itself. Yet how is the audience enabled to see what the pattern is? How is this revelation accomplished?

Our Objectivist literary theory would need to posit two alternatives: the pattern can be either *explicit* or *implicit*; the audience can either be told about it or be led to discover it through experience. In her writing and teaching, Rand is very much on the side of the implicit and experiential way of doing things. And that makes sense. Consider what would happen if I began my story in this way:

Joey Smallwood was aptly named. He was a lazy, good-for-nothing creep.

Here, my attempted re-creation of reality is doing something that reality itself very rarely does. Reality seldom announces its themes. To find them, one must first experience reality. In the original version of my story, that is what I forced my audience to do. I let the audience experience Joey's world, and even become a little bored with it. Then I let the audience know the one crucial fact that, once known and experienced, would complete the pattern. The final effect, I thought, was worth the price of the initial boredom. If I had not arranged the story in that way, if I had made the pattern explicit at the beginning, I could have eliminated the details that illustrated Joey's creepiness. The story would have moved a lot faster, but the audience would have missed the final gratification of figuring something out. Was the ultimate effect worth the price of the momentary boredom? You decide. But it's clear that a theory of literature that concerns itself with the communication of meaningful patterns must include the concept of literary *costs* and *benefits*. These are essential tools of critical evaluation, tools that can be used either by the audience, when it is assessing how good a work of literature is, or by the author, when he is first intending what the pattern of the work will be.

An Objectivist theory of literature would also have to concern itself with a characteristic of reality that bulks very large in Rand's philosophic theory but is not, I believe, explicitly present in her

literary theory. The characteristic to which I refer is *priority*. It's a many-sided issue. Let's look at some of its sides.

Reality exists prior to our interpretations of reality. And our interpretations of reality exist prior to the patterns that we find in works of literature. If a reader is to recognize the patterns that an author intends to be recognized, the reader and the author must already have met on the ground of some common prior understanding. To make this very simple: if I write "skateboard," and you don't know anything about skateboards and the people who tend to use them, you're going to have a hard time understanding the reality I'm re-creating in my story. If, however, we have a common understanding of skateboards, we have at least one *priority point* in common.

Should such points be lacking, readers won't understand the story or even what *type* or *genre* of story it is. They won't be able to distinguish irony, satire, and parody from words that are intended to be read "straight." If the audience of the Joey Smallwood saga regarded it as perfectly normal for forty-year-old males to take naps in the afternoon and let their moms do all the work in the household, then the audience would still be wondering what the point of the story could possibly be. It's because my audience shares my understanding of what it means to be a decent person and what it means to be a creep that it immediately recognizes the satirical intent in those crucial words, "Even a forty-year-old can use a nap."

An author needs to decide what the priority points are and how far away they lie. If you locate them too close to your readers, they will already know everything you're trying to do—so why do it? If you locate those points too far away (or imagine that you have), you will end up mystifying your readers with casual allusions to obscure topics or lecturing them about what a skateboard is. You may also forget that your audience has an organized view of the world—not just a list of concretes—that is already present in its imagination. The audience's worldview, like the author's, results from a wealth of experience and a wealth of explicit and implicit deductions from experience. Any literary theory that fails to recognize that the reader's worldview already has a pattern, a pattern that any competent author has to deal with, is an incompetent theory.

Let me try another experiment. Suppose I replace the last line of my story, the one about Joey's being forty years old, with a new line:

It was good to be out of jail. As usual, the charges had been dropped because of insufficient evidence.

There isn't a reader in the world who won't immediately conclude that, no matter how hard it may be to convict Joey in a court of law, Joey is an habitual criminal. What's the proof? No proof, just the reader's experience of reality, an experience that has already convinced him that people who are always getting arrested nearly always deserve to get arrested.

Now, this idea may not be true. It's possible, in fact, that I intend to use my story to show my readers how wrong public opinion can be. My success in showing them that, however, would depend on my ability to identify and dramatize some point of prior agreement with them about the dangers of hasty assumptions, the vindictiveness of police officers, the inadequacies of the legal system . . . whatever.

Here's how Rand deals with a similar problem in *The Fountainhead*. Howard Roark, the hero of that novel, is an atheist. Rand does not wish her audience, which is largely composed of nonatheists, to mistake him for a nonhero. Neither does she want to get into a fight with her audience about religion. If she did, the audience would probably misidentify the kind of story she's writing, because it would appear to be patterned as a polemic against religion rather than a story about individualism. The audience would mistake the *subject* and *emphasis* of the story—two things that should matter to any literary theory. This is where it all comes together: *intention, genre, emphasis, subject*—all these vital elements have to be established by *patterning* and *pattern recognition*.

To guide her audience's pattern recognition, Rand begins her references to religion at a point where she and her readers already have a common view of reality. On the second page of the novel, she describes Roark walking into town. "The road," she says,

led past the first houses to a church. The church was a

Gothic monument of shingles painted pigeon blue. It had stout wooden buttresses supporting nothing. (Rand 1943, 10)

And so on, as she describes the church. Rand's audience may not agree with her about theology, but it will probably share her understanding of Gothic monuments painted pigeon blue. In the literal sense, she hasn't even touched on the topic of religion, but the blue Gothic monument gives her a place to start in creating a pattern of antireligious associations and therefore of antireligious experience.

In the larger sense, the author's "place to start" is a *baseline* of commonly accepted attitudes and ideas, an extended set of priority points, if you will. The idea is important in both a philosophic and a rhetorical respect. Philosophically, it's a way of keeping Objectivist individualism in agreement with its own assumptions. Objectivist theory has never assumed that the creative mind functions in a vacuum. The mind works with an *objective* world, which is a world that can be apprehended by other minds as well. Objectivist theorists, however, have sometimes talked as if creative individuals had escaped forever from other people's experience of this world—their sad, distorted, incompletely conceptualized experience. Nevertheless, an author who wishes to communicate with an audience must work from the baseline of the audience; and the philosophically interesting fact is that this happens all the time. Regardless of how wrong or silly the general audience may be—and any list of bestsellers will confirm the worst of Objectivist fears in this regard—a baseline can be identified and used.

This is where *rhetoric* becomes important. Even the most iconoclastic polemic or satire depends for its success on the audience's ability to believe that the author is (A) evoking reality, (B) assessing it appropriately. Satires of the bourgeoisie are commonly read and enjoyed by members of the bourgeoisie itself, just as satires of aristocrats were commonly sponsored by members of the aristocracy. The rhetorical device—or trick—is to assure the audience that the author is, after all, standing close to the audience's own baseline. Often this takes a good deal of rhetorical manipulation, as the author

strives to appropriate the reader's baseline and move on from there.

Candide, that perpetually open box of literary tools, provides some memorable instances. "Monsieur the Baron was one of the most powerful lords in Westphalia; his castle had a door and windows" (Voltaire 1968, 101).¹ Thus, on the first page of his story, Voltaire wins the confidence of his readers—any readers—by showing that he shares the universal experience of human life. Everyone knows that real power isn't equivalent to owning a door and windows. And everyone can follow the logical progression that the words suggest: obviously, some of the "lords" of Westphalia don't even have doors and windows.

In another passage, Voltaire refers to a nobleman who was so arrogant that "everyone who met him was tempted to hit him" (146). This is a different approach to the baseline. Arrogance is a lot less concrete than the possession of a door and windows. What you may regard as arrogance, I may regard as simple self-respect. But if we harbor any doubts about whether Voltaire's nobleman ought to be convicted of haughtiness, behold! *Everyone* was tempted to hit him. If we ourselves had met him, we would have been tempted to hit him, too. Of course, in logical terms, this is nonsense. The "proof" that Voltaire's assessment is correct is only what Voltaire himself makes up. It's a rhetorical trick, and the experience to which it appeals is more conceptual and verbal than directly personal. No one today has any direct experience of the European aristocracy of the eighteenth century. But people who read *Candide* still see that passage and reflect, "That's right. I also would have wanted to smack him." Even eighteenth-century aristocrats, who had a wealth of experience of themselves, were free to respond by admiring Voltaire for his satire of all those *other* aristocrats.

As to the differing understandings of what "arrogance" means, Voltaire can rely on the fact that on this planet, arrogant people are always considered bad (even by proponents of "egoism"). And just as there is something universal about certain human attitudes, so there is something universal about certain literary effects. If you want more evidence, refer to the passage in *The Fountainhead* in which Rand describes an avant-garde author:

Lois Cook was thirty-seven. She had stated insistently, in her publicity and in private conversation, that she was sixty-four. (Rand 1943, 255)

The audience for which this joke fails to work is unlikely to be discovered. The discovery would require a complete reversal of normal human reactions to the difference between youth and age. Or, proceeding to more exclusively literary effects, consider a passage from the Parisian sequence of *Candide*, where the Marquise de Parolignac discusses the writings of the Archdeacon Trublet: “Ah!” she says,

that tiresome man! How curiously he relates what everybody knows! How heavily he discusses what isn't worth the trouble to notice lightly! How witlessly he steals the wit of others! How he spoils what he steals! How he disgusts me! But he won't disgust me any more. I've read enough of [his] pages. (Voltaire 1968, 191)

Try to find someone who thinks that the effect of those sentences would be enhanced if they appeared in reverse order.

Literary devices such as these are grounded not in the experience of a specific group of people but in the experience of mankind; indeed, they go far to justify Rand's assumption that there *is* such a thing as “man,” whatever postmodernists and radical relativists may hold against the concept. No theory of literature can afford to omit *common experience* and *common sense*, even when the theory's special object of concern is the importance of individual expression.

Since the beginning of the Romantic revolution in the later eighteenth century, “expressive” theories, those that focus on the author's creativity, have been conventionally opposed to “mimetic” theories, those that focus on the author's ability to reproduce a reality that is accessible both to author and to audience (Abrams 1953). One may, of course, construct any number of theories that explain or justify the ability of literature to dramatize the self in its own terms, just as one may construct any number of theories that explain or

justify its ability to portray a commonly perceived reality in commonly accepted terms. The challenge is to present a theory that accounts for the individual's ability to *communicate* ideas of the self, or anything else, that may be *uncommon*.

Rand's example is interesting. Certainly she had uncommon ideas. Yet she showed that expressive uses of literature, attempts to concretize or dramatize the individual's unique experience, may require as much attention to the problem of audience as didactic uses, those that attempt to teach something to other people.

Rand denied that her primary goal in writing was to persuade her readers that she was right and they were wrong. She said that "[t]he basic purpose of art is *not* to teach, but to *show*—to hold up to man a concretized image of his nature and his place in the universe" (Rand 1969, 26). Of course, showing is often teaching. But you can see the connection between this statement and her idea that art is a "re-creation of reality according to an artist's metaphysical value-judgments." The re-creation, however, must be correlated in some way with the normal reader's pre-existing vision of reality. There's no point in showing people an image if they're not going to understand it. And there must be some literary means of ensuring that the correlation takes place.

To think about this issue, we need to add two other concepts to Objectivist literary theory—the concepts of *perspective* and *control*. An author needs to control his creation so as to identify his perspective and enable the audience to share it or at least not mistake it for something else. If my readers believe that Joey Smallwood is the hero of my story, something is seriously wrong with the perspective I'm offering them. Probably I have provided my work with inadequate *control devices*.

Rand clearly believed that her unusual ideas about politics would lose the emphasis she intended them to have if she failed to make a dramatic correlation between them and the ordinary reader's ethical ideas. That is one reason why she made the bureaucrats and politicians of *Atlas Shrugged* so repellent in ordinary moral terms. Suppose she had described 50% of them as ruthless, power-hungry incompetents, and the other 50% as normal, decent people handi-

capped by some silly political ideas. Any normal reader would conclude that she viewed people's ethical character as only distantly, if at all, related to their politics. But that is not her perspective. She controls the reader's response by constructing a highly visible pattern: people who think incompetently also act unethically. That pattern is a control device.

Here is another example. Because most of the heroic figures in *Atlas Shrugged* are industrialists, there is a danger that readers will conclude that they are heroes *because* they are industrialists. That's how literary codes usually work: readers with common sense understand that authors with common sense select their material so as to imply such cause-effect relationships. To keep her readers' perspective in line with her own, therefore, Rand makes sure that her novel includes industrialists who are abject fools, as well as people from other segments of society who are exemplary in ethics and intelligence. It's a technique that goes back at least as far as Homer's *Odyssey*. Homer also had to work with the audience's conventional and commonsensical ideas. As the composer of an epic poem about a warrior king, he knew that his audience might assume that the work is meant to exalt kings and warriors per se. That was evidently not his intent; the pattern of the *Odyssey* points in a different direction. The poem's exemplars of right thinking include a goddess, a king, a queen, a garrulous old man, a callow young prince, a nurse, and a swineherd; and its exemplars of psychoepistemological criminality include a god, various members of the ruling class, maidservants, and a goatherd. One can only conclude that, in the world of Homer's thought, character counts for more than social status; and when one reaches that conclusion, one has been maneuvered into it by Homer's control device.

Rand's literary theory consistently emphasizes the importance of plot. This emphasis must be qualified, however, by the realization that it is often pattern, not plot, that controls the reader's perspective on a work of narrative literature. Invoking, once more, the example of Homer: both Odysseus and his enemies kill people—so what? That's a matter of plot. But how shall we regard all this killing? That's a matter to be decided by the pattern of contrasting moral

characteristics, a pattern which indicates that killing is allowable, even laudable, if it's bad people who get killed.

As I have suggested, re-creations of reality need to be more patterned, more controlled, than reality usually appears to be. When I see a skateboarder whizzing past me, I usually see only one frame of the action. I don't see where it started; I don't see where it ends. I don't have access to all the patterns of knowledge that might indicate whether I should cheer the skateboarder on, or call the cops. It was the importance of patterning that Aristotle had in mind when he said that imaginative literature is better than history. He didn't mean that imaginative literature has to be organized so as to represent an ideal; he meant that imaginative literature is more thoroughly or clearly organized than history, more capable of revealing instructive patterns (see Aristotle, *Poetics* 1451b; Cox 1986). I want to emphasize the fact that this theory applies to literature in general, not just to the kind of literature that Rand herself produced. Even a writer who intends to project a highly ambiguous view of the world will have to pattern that world so as to exclude the unambiguous. In this sense, an ambiguous work of literature is just as controlled and patterned as the most dogmatic work you can think of.

There are, of course, many types of literary patterns. A finished literary theory would distinguish patterns of action, patterns of character, patterns of imagery, patterns of values, and patterns of perspective—the kind of patterns that appear, for instance, in a story that contrasts one perspective with another. The more one thinks about the possibilities of literary patterning, the more one sees how right Rand was to say that the artist *re*-creates the world. She could have used the word “creates,” but she didn't. She didn't want to convey the impression that art is a merely subjective thing, without cognitive or experiential relevance to a real world outside it. But notice also that she could have used the traditional language of literary theory and said that the author “imitates” the world. She didn't do that either, because she knew that art is capable of embracing an indefinite number of individual perspectives on reality.

A fully realized Objectivist theory of literature would follow this idea in a number of directions. One would be a reconsideration of

the literary methods that Rand herself had the most trouble with, comedy and tragedy.

Rand distrusted comedy and tragedy because she distrusted the perspectives she thought they tend to introduce. She was wary of tragedy because of its tendency to project a world in which man is doomed to failure. She was wary of comedy because, if you're not careful with it, it will project a world in which all values and accomplishments—the best parts of “man” as Rand used that term—are debased and disparaged. Her fears were largely misplaced, I believe, but by thinking about what she said we can gain some insight into a distinction that ought to be emphasized in any Objectivist literary theory. It is a distinction between two ways in which authors work with perspective, two ways in which they effect changes in their readers' perspectives. I'll call these two ways of working *cognitive transformation* and *emotional transformation*. They often occur simultaneously, but for analytical purposes they can easily be distinguished.

To produce a cognitive transformation in a reader's perspective, an author adds a fact or an argument that alters the way in which reality appears and is understood. Sophocles provides a pair of convenient illustrations. In *Oedipus Tyrannus*, the protagonist discovers a fact—he has killed his father and married his mother. Not surprisingly, his perspective on reality changes. He comes to believe, as the final chorus puts it, that no man can be counted happy until he is dead. The reader's perspective may undergo a similar change. In *Antigone*, no new facts are introduced, but the arguments of Antigone and her antagonist Creon show what it is like to view the individual's relationship to law and social order from two radically different perspectives. I would suggest, indeed, that the quarrel is never resolved. The plot, which involves Creon's political defeat and repentance, seems to indicate that it is, but when two opposing arguments of approximately equal cogency are presented, the reader may be inclined to look more at the pattern than the plot, and to surmise the presence of a *subtext* in which the author implies the unresolvability of the problem—in this case, a tragic unresolvability.

Whatever one thinks about *Antigone*, however, it is clear that the play is constituted largely by a play of perspectives, and that the

perspectives are established and manipulated by means of argument. The assumption is that we are learning something new, whether that something is a new insight into the individual's rights and duties or a new insight into the difficulty of defining these things. Fine. But what new things do we learn from Shakespeare's tragedy of *Macbeth*? Do we learn for the first time that murder is wrong? If so, then my life is in danger from anyone who hasn't read *Macbeth*. But of course, what occurs in *Macbeth* is an emotional, not a cognitive, transformation. *Macbeth* allows us to experience what the world looks like from the standpoint of a great man who is gradually betrayed by his ambition.

Yet here is the most significant thing: our perspective may be transformed, at least temporarily, but we still keep our grip on our own cognitive processes. We don't automatically assume that *Macbeth* represents every great character in the world, and that greatness is therefore doomed to defeat and degradation in the malevolent universe in which we live. We know it's not, and furthermore, we suspect that Shakespeare has the same prior understanding of the world. Why? Because there is plenty of evidence that he knows at least as much about the world as we do. Besides, and this is the crucial point, we know that tragedy is a literary method that he has chosen to employ, perhaps for the purpose of identifying human problems that would be harder to dramatize in a heroic play. We know that he is *re-creating* the world, not merely imitating it. For this reason, we also know that anyone would be wrong to suggest that tragedy automatically presents a malevolent universe. It doesn't.

The same logic can be applied to comedy. Some comedy goes to work on our perspectives with fact and argument. Molière argues about religion; Aristophanes shows what's wrong with Athenian democracy. But that's not what Wilde does in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. He shows how amusing life can be when you refuse to take it seriously. Now, why would anybody want to do that? Perhaps to enjoy the experience of standing above life, of reaching a perspective similar to that of Howard Roark at the beginning of *The Fountainhead*, when he laughs and "dive[s] down into the sky below" (Rand 1943,

9–10). This experience, the experience of viewing life from a distant pinnacle, is at least remotely analogous to the experience one can gain from tragedy. As sad as *Oedipus Tyrannus* may be, as guilty as it may be of suggesting the malevolence of the universe, it is doubtful that anyone ever went home from a performance of that play and committed suicide. Actually, people enjoy it. The enjoyment appears to come from the pleasure of seeing aspects of life that one might not have seen if one refused, even in play, to entertain a tragic premise.

And there is another thing to remember. When watching a play, one always knows that one is watching a play. As Samuel Johnson said, some over-serious literary theorists would lead you to believe that when a person goes to a history play by Shakespeare, he “really imagines himself at *Alexandria*, and believes that his walk to the theatre has been a voyage to *Egypt*, and that he lives in the days of *Antony* and *Cleopatra*.” “The truth is,” Johnson continues, “that the spectators are always in their senses, and know, from the first act to the last, that the stage is only a stage, and that the players are only players” (1971, 275, 276). We can go farther. What one enjoys in a work of literature isn’t simply the reality that is being re-created; it is the consciousness that someone is re-creating it.

It is this play of consciousness that Rand misses in her theories of comedy and tragedy, which describe those forms as if they were simply delivering a verdict on reality and not providing people with new ways of enjoying it. In discussing comedy, indeed, Rand generally speaks as if it were simply directed *at* something. But observe one of her own uses of comedy, as recorded by Isabel Paterson in her literary column of 31 January 1943:

We heard this story from an author, Ayn Rand, who has just finished a novel she’s been writing for seven years, “*The Fountainhead*.” We remarked that she looked tired, and had a right to. She said she felt like the mouse which met an elephant; and the elephant said to the mouse: “How can there be such a poor little miserable creature as you?” To which the mouse replied: “Why, you see, I’m not feeling very well today.” (Paterson 1943)

Ayn Rand comparing herself to a mouse? Sure, why not? She wasn't laughing *at* herself. She wasn't saying that she had no value, or that *The Fountainhead* was the product of disease. She was enjoying the experience of looking at herself from an unusual perspective, a perspective from which she could see herself, as from a distance, and—if you want to use some solemn terms for this small but revealing incident—enjoy her ability to transcend her apparent weakness or insignificance by self-consciously re-creating and laughing about it. A similar transcendence appears in Rand's use of tragedy. When she created the tragic figure of Gail Wynand, I'm sure she did not feel that she was succumbing to the dark side of the Force. Nor should she have, even if such characters had been the only ones in her stories. Her ability to adopt the tragic point of view would still argue for her ability to transcend the tragic situation by re-creating and assessing it. Preston Sturges, the film director, planned to call his autobiography *The Events Leading Up to My Death*. Was he succumbing to a malevolent view of the universe—or was he doing something exactly the opposite?

However we decide such questions, the answer will probably be irrelevant to our decision about whether the work has literary value, and how much of that value it has. In thinking about literary value, it may be useful to notice an approach that Aristotle shares with modern economists. As Ludwig von Mises (1949, 44–45, 119–27) explained, the history of economics was long troubled by a false question: Why are some commodities (e.g., gold) more valuable than some other commodities (e.g., iron), when we know that in certain cases the latter have a higher market price than the former? There are times when I may attach a much higher value even to dirt than I do to gold: when the dirt shelters the remains of beloved ancestors, when the dirt provides the only path by which I can escape from death, and so on—examples, ridiculous and otherwise, can be multiplied at will. So it's not gold or iron that is valued in itself, but so much gold or iron or whatever else is perceived as useful in satisfying specific human wants.

Similarly, Aristotle, in his literary theory, asks, not what kind of stories, characters, and verbal effects are valuable in literature, but

what kind of stories, characters, and verbal effects are valuable in comedy, tragedy, or epic. There is no a priori reason to think that something that works in one genre will work in another. The fact that Aristotelian literary theory is the theory of genres is a point insisted upon by the so-called Chicago critics, whose rationalist and intentionalist assumptions make them closer to Objectivist literary theory than critics of any other school.² I use the word “works” advisedly. In the Aristotelian (as in the Objectivist) view, the author is a craftsman trying to make a particular kind of object. He defines that object and makes it in the best way he can. The audience is expected to judge his skill in accordance with the requirements of making that kind of object. One asks how good a “chair” is, not how good “furniture” is. It’s true, of course, that one can say that someone is a good “carpenter,” not just a good “chair-maker,” if that person is good at constructing several kinds of furniture. But the former label follows and is dependent upon the latter. And it does not imply that the good carpenter knows how to make everything from cocktail trays to the organ of Saint Sulpice. The carpenter is “good” or even “great” because he does certain particular things in a good or great way. One may dispute whether Shakespeare, who wrote comedies, tragedies, history plays, and sonnets, was a greater or lesser poet than Homer, whose works are only two, and both of them epics; what is certain is that neither Homer nor Shakespeare would be mentioned in this context if they had not mastered their specific genres.

If there is a fundamental issue in literary evaluation, it is the question of whether a given work *fully exploits its genre*. By now, the reason for my insistence on genre should be clear. The reason for “fully” is self-evident. It is another appeal to common sense: a job done fully is better than a job done partially. Probably no one has ever produced all the effects of which any literary genre is susceptible. There is always something more that Homer and Shakespeare might have done. But fullness is the standard, and they make a very near approach to it. What are the implications of this standard?

One is that if a work is generically capable of producing two effects instead of one, it ought to produce two, so long as the work

continues to enhance its genre. A screwball comedy supported by some robust social satire and interesting insights into psychology is better than one that is just a screwball comedy—provided that the social satire and the interesting insights don't ruin the comic effects. *War and Peace* is certainly a fuller exploitation of its genre than *Gone with the Wind*. It is more than a story about love and war; it is a theory of history, a critique of social customs, a work of speculative theology, and many other things. And to a considerable extent, Tolstoy makes those various things cohere. Where he fails to do so, where he merely delineates character, tells a story, or preaches his philosophy, he fails to exploit his genre as fully as he might. (The same can be said of Rand's failure to make philosophical exposition cohere perfectly with the other aspects of her fiction.) The question is not whether the parts of *War and Peace* are valuable in themselves; the question is the degree to which they contribute to its total effect.

Coleridge can assist us here. Discussing the nature of poetry, he says that a poem “propos[es] to itself such delight from the *whole*, as is compatible with a distinct gratification from each component *part*” (Coleridge 1983, vol. 2, 13). A similar idea applies to other genres. For what reason would one *want* a work of literature *not* to provide as much pleasure in each part as is consistent with the pleasure to be derived from the whole? Suppose I am writing a history of the Great Depression. It includes charts and graphs. Shall I eliminate them, because they are not intensely moving? I am unwilling to assume that knowledge of the subject, such knowledge as can only be conveyed by charts and graphs, provides no pleasure. It may be a modest and subdued pleasure, but it is pleasure nonetheless, and the pleasure of the whole would be less without it.

To be sure, common sense and common experience inform us that no matter how many charts and graphs, or harrowing events, or challenging debates, my work contains, there will still be people, even intelligent and cultivated people, who find no pleasure in it. They simply do not like economic history. There is a lot of beautiful furniture that I don't want in my house. One may realize that Homer's *Odyssey* fully exploits the potential of the epic form, and therefore recognize it as a great work of literature, despite the fact

that one is not attracted to it oneself—although one should also recognize that there is such a thing as an acquired and educated taste. Taste can improve as one learns more about the skill required to work in a genre that originally did not seem interesting. One's taste for the *Aeneid* is greatly stimulated when one learns to notice the cunning by which Virgil manipulates his placement of words. This has nothing to do with the story of the *Aeneid*, but it has everything to do with the gratification to be derived from its parts and the delight to be gathered from the whole.

My discussion of literary standards has, however, been veering away from a question that has been of perennial concern to literary theorists, a question that goes beyond matters of technique and form. It arises from Rand's aversion to tragedy and comedy, genres that, she believed, are likely to convey a false idea of reality. The question is: What is, or ought to be, the relationship between art and truth, between the re-creation of reality and reality itself? To put this in another way: Are there certain literary practices that are aesthetically wrong or infeasible, simply because they project a false view of reality?

To see what an Objectivist literary theory might do with this issue, let's start with our idea that the author's conception of the world must correlate somehow with the audience's conception of the world. There are some conceptions of the world that are so false, and so obviously false, that almost no one entertains them. If they appear as crucial premises of a work of literature, the work will very likely fail of its intended effect. I'm sorry, you cannot write an effective Aristotelian tragedy about the Martians imprisoned in the pyramids of Gizeh. Of course, one could say, as Rand says of Tolstoy, that from a technical, "purely literary viewpoint," such a tragedy might be good, but that reading it would be a "boring literary duty" (Rand 1969, 55). Boring or worse. But how can something be good from a "purely literary viewpoint" if its literary effects are that bad?

You may be thinking: Oh, she just means that Tolstoy is not to her taste. Maybe. But you don't want to say that literary theory has nothing to do with literary judgment, do you? Or that judgment has nothing to do with taste? Or that taste is neither good nor bad? Or

that bad taste can't be educated? Oh, no! Then shouldn't literary theory say something about the conditions, if any, under which a literary work may fail for (reputedly) extra-literary reasons?

From here on, I am speculating. But one promising avenue of speculation is suggested by the place where Rand's aesthetic begins, the idea that art is a "re-creation of reality according to an artist's metaphysical value-judgments." If that's true, then we may infer that a re-creation that ceases to be a re-creation of reality ceases also to be art.

That doesn't mean you couldn't write a story about Martians imprisoned in a pyramid. And it doesn't mean that such a story couldn't be art—depending on the type or genre of the story that you chose to write. Although Rand as a theorist was very little occupied with problems of genre, they are essential to literary evaluation. *The Fountainhead* would be assessed very differently if it were regarded as a history of architecture instead of a novel. Embedded in that work, however, and in every other competent work of literature, are signs indicating the genre to which it belongs. If the signs embedded in the Martian story indicated that its genre was symbolic narrative or screwball comedy, it might meet the reality test after all; its relationship to reality would simply be metaphorical or ironic. If, however, it was cast as an historical novel, it would not meet the reality test, and anyone with taste enough to understand what literature is would reject it as literature. It might be "art" in some purely nominal sense, in the sense of something that aspires to *be* art and can therefore be classified as failed art or, perhaps, as bad art. But it would not be a re-creation of reality.

A work can be tested against reality in a number of ways. One way is to test the author's perspective. Let's go back to my story about Joey Smallwood. Suppose I changed that story from a little Objectivist satire of a free-loading jerk into an intransigent, industrial-strength version of that great antagonist of Objectivist art, the "naturalist" novel. Suppose I turned it into nothing but a list of all the idle, unconnected things that Joey did and saw in a normal day, without the faintest indication of an ironically unfavorable assessment of the consciousness that could fasten on and appreciate such things.

Suppose that the list was 1000 pages long. Ghastly!, you say. But suppose that all the things in the list were evoked with great verbal skill. Would that be literature? My answer, at least provisionally, is No—or, as Joey would say, “Not.”

Here I don't have to argue that certain subjects or certain means of developing them are inappropriate to literature or to the genre of fiction. I can argue, instead, from the difference between works of literature and things like, say, tomato sauce. You can love or hate a work of literature, and you can love or hate tomato sauce, and you can call your reactions matters of “taste” in both cases, but here's the difference: you can love or hate tomato sauce without reference to the people who made it, but you can't do the same thing with literature. If we are in our senses (as Dr. Johnson believes we are), we are always conscious, in reading a work of literature, of the shaping perspective of its author. Indeed, our evaluation of the author's perspective is a part, and ordinarily a crucial part, of our evaluation of the work itself.

I do not mean this in any crude sense. One may know that Wagner was a political crackpot and still appreciate the aesthetic vision that informs his operas. One is aware of the crackpot element, but it does not fully constitute his perspective. Now consider the perspective of an author who could write the 1000-page story that I just mentioned (and you would *have* to consider it, and consider it very closely, as you struggled through those 1000 pages). That perspective is wrong, and it is not wrong in the comparatively venial sense of suggesting opinions that aren't right. It is wrong because it is hopelessly inadequate to the re-creation of reality. It's not a matter of being false to the concretes of reality. An ant perceives the same concretes that I perceive. She perceives the same world; but she lacks the capacity to penetrate its depth and significance. An author who took the ant's view of human life, or who, for instance, wrote “novels” solely about the daily life of ants and grasshoppers, might be able to write a good sentence, but he would be out of touch with reality. What is more, the reader would know that, and the reader's knowledge would be inseparable from his experience even of the author's fine sentences. There are not two worlds of art, one in

which the reader appreciates fine sentences and one in which he sneers at the perspective of the sentence-writer. At some point, the reader stops reading the sentences. He may say, "This story isn't real to me." And if he says that, he's right. It's not real.

You've noticed, by now, that I keep talking, and very confidently, too, about "the reader" and "he" and "one" and so forth, as if there were only one reader in this world, and that reader is a well-educated American male, much like myself, who must have precisely the reactions that I've summarized here. Perhaps, somewhere, there is a reader who would say, "I love this story about grasshoppers; it is *very* real to me." What then? And what about the problem of time? Is there literature that met the Sumerians' reality test but doesn't meet ours, so that works that were once art no longer are?

I have answers to these questions, and more. Whether the answers are right or not is another matter. But I'm not going to divulge my answers now. I said at the start that I thought of the effort to develop Objectivist theory as a long conversation involving many people. I will be interested to hear what other readers of literature contribute to that conversation.

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Notes

1. All quotations from Voltaire appear in my translations.
2. For the Chicago way with genre, see especially Olson 1976 and Hirsch 1967; 1976.

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