

Merely Metaphorical? Ayn Rand, Isabel Paterson, and the Language of Theory

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The facts about Ayn Rand's relationship with the novelist and critic Isabel Paterson (1886–1961) have been related more than once (Branden 1986; Cox 2004; 2007). Rand sought Paterson's acquaintance in late 1940 or early 1941, became her intimate friend, was strongly influenced by her political ideas, and quarreled decisively with her in 1948. They saw each other only once more, in 1959.

There was, however, an interesting literary sequel to the relationship, one that has not been widely discussed. After Paterson's death, her executor, Muriel Hall, arranged for the republication of *The God of the Machine*, Paterson's work of political and historical theory, which first appeared in 1943. Hall met with Rand, trying to interest her in writing an introduction to the book (Muriel Hall, interviews). Rand never wrote one, but when the book came out she reviewed it in *The Objectivist Newsletter*, which she edited. Later, when Robert Hessen, Rand's former secretary, and his wife, Bea Hessen, inaugurated the Palo Alto Book Service, they too republished *The God of the Machine*, and Rand readily authorized the use of her review as a preface (Rand 1983; Robert Hessen, interview).

Rand's 1500-word review essay (Rand 1964) is remarkable in several ways. Most of it consists of warm praise for a "sparkling," "brilliant," "illustrious" book. But there are two major caveats. First, Rand feels impelled to warn her readers about "a touch of mysticism, which comes up once in a rare while" in *The God of the Machine* but, fortunately, is merely "tacked on to the text" and has no place in its argument for capitalism and individualism (42–43). Second, she

worries about Paterson's treatment of "a country's political system" as a "machine" that "should be constructed according to the principles of mechanics" (42).

She summarizes Paterson's ideas about political machinery in this way:

If a political system is properly constructed, it protects freedom and creates "a long circuit of energy"—of production, communication and trade—required to develop and maintain civilization. If it is improperly constructed, it can "short-circuit," blow up and destroy a human society. (42)

Having outlined Paterson's theory, as she interprets it, Rand criticizes her for not having "define[d] the exact social-political equivalents of the engineering concepts [she] uses." For this reason, Rand suggests, Paterson's theory "has to be regarded as a hypothesis, which is suggested and left undeveloped" (42).

This is curious. When *The God of the Machine* was published, Rand hastened to tell people that it was "the best and most complete statement of the basic principles of our side," "a political treatise that presents a complete and consistent credo of individualism in social and economic relations," "the greatest book written in the last three hundred years . . . the first complete statement of the philosophy of individualism as a political and economic system," "a book that will live forever." Further, she claimed, people—even people "without formal education"—have "no trouble reading and understanding" it (Rand 1995, 78, 84, 102–4). At that time, she clearly did not regard Paterson's presentation as hazy or hypothetical. Now, reassessing the book, she seems to be aware that there is something peculiar about her current view of it—or, as she says, something peculiar about the book itself. She suggests that it embodies a "paradox": "the author's failure to demonstrate her theory does not diminish the actual value of her book." Rand tries to resolve the paradox. She argues that Paterson's thesis—that "a free society requires a specific political structure"—needs no "reference to engineering." Paterson's study of the history and logic of government is sufficient to show "what that structure has to be and why, what are the consequences of structural breaches, and why a monolithic, structureless totalitarian state is

doomed to productive impotence, bloodshed, chaos and starvation” (Rand 1964, 42).

The reader has probably noticed that although Rand takes issue with Paterson’s “engineering concepts,” she herself uses a number of them—not the “concepts” that Paterson derived from electrical engineering (“long circuit,” “short circuit”) but those she derived from architectural engineering. Rand writes about the significance of “structure” and “structural breaches,” and she adopts as her own Paterson’s unique and counterintuitive view of the totalitarian state, representing it not as excessively structured, which it appears to be, but as “structureless.” To Paterson, both despotism and pure democracy are without “structure,” because they lack the complicated checks and balances of a regime of limited government (Paterson 1993, 25–36, 121–22).

It is noteworthy that, even while criticizing the terms Paterson uses, Rand declines to call them “metaphors” or “images,” choosing instead the less obvious word “concepts.” Nevertheless, she is uneasy about their proximity to metaphor. She says that when Paterson “uses the literal terms of mechanical engineering in regard to political systems” she “creat[es] the impression of a merely metaphorical discussion.” Reluctant to declare that this impression is correct, Rand considers two other possibilities. Paterson’s “engineering” theory, she says, “is, perhaps, an attempt to integrate a wide-scale abstraction; as it stands, however, it has to be regarded as a hypothesis, which is suggested and left undeveloped.” To summarize: Paterson’s theory looks like a metaphor; it may be an attempt at a large abstraction; but it should be regarded as a hypothesis.

Here Rand is writing well below her usual high standard of lucidity. Obviously, a “hypothesis” may also be “an attempt to integrate a wide-scale abstraction,” and both a hypothesis and an abstraction may be expressed in “metaphor.” (Of course, if a hypothesis turns out to be wrong, or an abstraction turns out to be incomplete, metaphor will then be *mere* metaphor.) Rand’s attempt to situate Paterson’s expressions *among* the three categories is remarkably inconclusive, given her ordinary acuteness and decisiveness, and the fact that she had already had more than twenty years to meditate on the problem.

But Rand was not the only person to have trouble with Paterson’s

language. Four generations of libertarians and conservatives have praised *The God of the Machine*, and squinted hard at its apparent metaphors—sometimes, like Rand, while finding their own uses for them.¹ Paterson knew that objections were coming. In her letters and conversations, she maintained that her “theory throughout is intended to be read and understood in the most practical sense, not as analogy or metaphor” (Paterson 1943a). In *The God of the Machine* itself, she summarizes some of her imagery and adds: “This is not a figure of speech or analogy, but a specific physical description of what happens” (Paterson 1993, 62). Paterson the novelist and critic knew better than to make such a rigorous distinction between specific descriptions and figures of speech, but Paterson the political theorist was determined to prevent her central terms from being mistaken for mere adornment or illustration. What she would say about “flying” buttresses, or “male” and “female” electrical connections, or plans that “go awry” and businesses that “go bust,” I do not know; but when it came to theory, and her own theory, she refused to acknowledge the possibility that figures of speech may have definite descriptive effects.

All speech and writing are symbolic in some way. It’s hard to say or write very much about anything without relying on figures of speech. Yet some figures of speech are closer than others to literal description, and therefore to usefulness for the kind of book that Paterson wrote, a work of theory that is supposed to have some purchase on “physical” reality.

Think about these figures of speech:

1. “My love is like a red, red rose.” — Robert Burns
2. “Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?” — Elisha Hoffman
3. “There are barriers to our communication.” — Virtually everyone
4. “Is Atlas Shrugging?” — Ayn Rand (1966)

Burns’ famous simile means something to anyone who has ever been in love. It may, in fact, mean almost anything. It expresses a feeling, but it has little or no descriptive value. The refrain of Elisha Hoffman’s gospel song has a more restricted application. It makes specific

reference to specific religious ideas: the imputed merit of Jesus' sacrifice (which involved the shedding of blood) can remove ("wash" away) the taint of sin. This language brings forward a "hypothesis" and several "abstractions." It also conveys a "metaphor," a "figure of speech" that attempts to provide a "description of what happens."

My third example is, perhaps, simultaneously more metaphorical and more immediately descriptive than the second. Everybody knows what it means not to be able to "communicate" with someone else. You can't "get through"; there's something in the way; there's a "barrier." Of course, "barrier" can refer to many things. Maybe your friend has a broken cell phone. Maybe your friend is angry with you. Or maybe your friend just doesn't "speak your language" anymore. Yet in all these situations, the metaphor of a "barrier" works well enough to describe the problem. It doesn't say everything, but it does say something. And it says something specifically different from what other metaphors would say. "We're just sick and tired of each other" has quite a different meaning.

The fourth example is still more specific. When Rand wrote an essay called "Is Atlas Shrugging?" (Rand 1966, 149–66), her figure of speech conveyed a very particular meaning, with a very particular relationship to her hypothesis about the rebellion of the productive part of the population against the unproductive part. "Is Atlas Shrugging?" isn't just a metaphor; it's a question that can be answered with a yes, no, or maybe, on the basis of specific evidence that significant numbers of people are or are not working at significantly less than their capacity, thereby "shrugging" off the burden of work in a collectivized society. (On this occasion, Rand's answer to her question was *Maybe*.)

One other example may be useful. During the 1980s, pundits debated whether President Reagan's economic policies encouraged poor people to "rise" or merely provided a way for small amounts of wealth to "trickle down" to them from the rich. Each of these opposing figures of speech indicated a specific way of viewing the effects of economic policy. Each of them unified discrete impressions into a coherent picture, a conjectural vision of reality that was subject to testing (though not perhaps to scientifically precise testing) by facts that might refute it; and each of them probably helped to identify facts that might otherwise have been missed. They encouraged people to

investigate the various ways in which the poor may either improve their condition (“rise”) or receive small increments (“trickles”) of wealth that will benefit them only marginally. Neither of these figures of speech, these broad abstractions and metaphorical hypotheses, captured all the relevant phenomena; nonetheless, they fulfilled some important functions.

What functions, if any, are served by Paterson’s “engineering concepts”? In exploring this topic, it’s important to recognize that (as I’ve already suggested) there are two major types of imagery in *The God of the Machine*: images drawn from mechanical and architectural engineering, and images drawn from electrical engineering. Of the images in the first group, those derived from architecture are, perhaps, the more salient, and they appear to have had considerable influence on Rand.

1. Architectural images

Paterson uses architectural imagery to convey her version of the common idea that America’s constitutional system depends on checks and balances. Of course, “checks and balances” is itself a metaphor, though none of Paterson’s critics appears to object to it. Rand uses it in her own statements of political theory (Rand 1964; Rand 1966, 302). What is special about Paterson’s use of the metaphor (or concept) is her intrepid pursuit of its implications.

For her, the balance achieved in a checked or limited government must result, as it would in a literal building, from an opposition of thrusts. In the architecture of American government, such thrusts can be found in the pressure of the Senate against the House, the Congress against the president, the states against the federal government, and many other pressures that Paterson discovers. If the force of one of the opposing entities overwhelms the other, something worse will happen than the enactment of bad legislation: the whole structure will collapse.

As in a literal building, even good things can be dangerous, if they unbalance the structure. To use an example that is not in *The God of the Machine*: the dome of Hagia Sophia is a magnificent artistic achievement, but if it were not for the ugly buttresses that thrust inward against the walls, the outward thrust of the dome would destroy everything beneath it. (Indeed, the dome fell twice and had

to be rebuilt, with more attention to checks and balances.) One of Paterson's own examples is the stresses that developed in the American political system during the mid-nineteenth century. The northern states were clearly in the right about the slavery issue. Because of their free institutions, they enjoyed a more extensive economic and political development than the southern states. This thrust of North against South damaged the structural integrity of the Union. The result was the Civil War and, after it, a chronically unbalanced relationship between the federal government, which had won the war, and the individual states, some of which were more or less arbitrary creations of the victorious central power (Paterson 1993, 141–42, 170).

Using architectural imagery as a method of intellectual exploration, Paterson identifies aspects of history and government that might otherwise remain invisible. One example is the problem of the Western states that were created before there was a rooted political community to balance the thrust of the central government (170). Another is the problem, which she strongly emphasizes, of creating a solid "base" for political structures. No such base, she argues, can be found in democracy. Truly democratic action is the movement of an atomized mass of public opinion, shifting this way and that, and likely to take the whole building with it. A lasting political regime must be built on less mobile features of the landscape. One of them, she suggests, is local political communities with constitutionally protected powers, separated by state boundaries that can impose some limits on political landslides. A second is a franchise limited to the possessors of "local residence and allegiance and real property." People whose self-interest is connected to something incontestably permanent are less likely than other people to be carried away by shifts in public opinion (122–25, 159–60).

Theories of this kind cannot be tested like ideas about cancer in rats. Political history affords no controlled experiments. It does afford a great many examples of direct or plebiscitary democracies in which regime continually replaced regime, without effective resistance from independent and diverse bases of power. We may debate the probable effects of real-property qualifications for voting. Will they succeed in limiting the state's ability to unbalance the political structure by infringing on individual property rights, or will they

simply increase the power of landowners to win the state's favors for themselves, thereby unbalancing the structure in another way? But whichever side one takes in this argument, one is arguing within the framework established by Paterson's theory and using it to investigate the real conditions of political life.

That's what Rand was doing when she appropriated Paterson's image of unlimited government as a "structureless" institution. The image, as I've noted, is strongly counterintuitive. We ordinarily picture a dictatorship as a thick structure of laws, rules, and bureaucrats. Paterson sees the other side of the issue: no matter how many laws are made, no matter how many bureaucratic decrees are issued, they will never amount to a self-balancing (and therefore self-maintaining) political order. Thinking in this way, one can identify attributes of modern tyranny that don't fit the ordinary picture. In *Atlas Shrugged*, Rand accurately depicts unlimited government as arbitrary, capricious, unreliable in both senses of that word—and thus, in its lack of "structure," eminently vulnerable to self-demolition. Had she lived to see the collapse of the Soviet Union, she would undoubtedly have made this point again: a dictatorship's exertions of force are (to use Patersonian language) uncompensated thrusts that have an atomizing and destabilizing effect on society.² No "structured" government could be swept away as easily as government is swept away in the final pages of *Atlas Shrugged*.

2. Electrical images

The concepts that Paterson drew from electrical engineering and electrical machinery, the concepts that stand behind the second noun in the title of her book, are a more individual contribution than the concepts she drew from architecture. Using this second kind of engineering imagery, she describes human society as a "machine" that runs on "energy" and channels that energy through "circuits," in the way in which electricity is channeled within a literal machine or a literal communications system.

To approach her theory in a more deliberate way: We know that individual people subsist on energy, and society subsists on the exchanges that people make of the products of their energy. When I trade something that's mine for something that's yours, we create a "circuit" of energy. Every human community operates by means of

such exchanges, and such circuitry. Every successful community devises ways of enabling the circuitry to expand and the energy to flow farther and stronger. One of these devices is money. In a small community, people trade the products of their energy on a small scale, perhaps trading only literal goods and services, not coins or checks. The use of money permits a vast expansion of the circuit of production and exchange. Money allows investments to be made and profits to be taken across enormous distances of space and time. Money permits the creation of “the long circuit,” capable of mobilizing the creative energy of producers and consumers all over the world:

Every want operates directly to stimulate a supply; every supply is a stimulus to discover a want. (Supply creates demand as much as demand brings out supply.) Throughout the longest series of exchanges, every person has a direct interest in getting the goods through, or producing them; so that the general sequence creates the long circuit of energy, by an unbroken transmission. (194)

Producers in India discover new markets for their goods in Indiana. To make more of the goods at lower prices, they buy cost-saving technology from inventors in Idaho. They invest their profits in new industries in the Ivory Coast. By “linking” to the “long circuit” and using it to trade what is less valuable for what is more valuable to them, producers and consumers continually create more wealth, release more energy, and strengthen the current of rewards flowing through the circuit.

There is obviously something to this theory. An exchange of commodities is visibly a “circuit”: you give me something; I give you something in return. A “long circuit” of commerce plainly exists in this world, and it could not have been created without the use of money. It has, just as plainly, increased the world’s productive energy. No one can deny that the amount of energy available for use today is stupendously greater than the amount available in pre-industrial, pre-monetary societies, or that it is used more efficiently. The energy that I can release by typing symbols into my computer is unquestionably greater than all the energy available for productive use in the Assyrian empire. So far, Paterson’s figures of speech seem fairly close to

“physical description.”

It should also be apparent that a break in the circuit of production and exchange will cause a reduction or cessation of energy-in-use. The Indian manufacturer who ships his products to Indiana but does not receive sound money in return will soon cease to ship his products to Indiana. If he can't find another market, he will have to fire some of his workers, whose energy will thereafter remain merely potential. If you put your energy into the circuit of production and exchange, and you don't get a sufficient return for your investment, your extension of the circuit will soon go dead.

So, as Paterson emphasizes, the long circuit requires protection. Its existence depends on people's ability to seek profits and collect them. Laws and social customs that protect individuals' lives and property are therefore useful parts of the social “machine,” while laws and customs that interfere with the flow of energy can damage or destroy it. Suppose that a government debases the currency, confiscates private property, inhibits exchange, and channels the flow of money away from profit-making investments and into the hands of unproductive bureaucrats, who use wealth (and therefore the energy that produces wealth) to give themselves still greater control of economic life. Now the energy that could have flowed into productive channels is directed against the machine itself and placed in the service of unlimited government. Under these conditions, the “long circuit” contracts. People hesitate to invest and produce, or produce for distant or future markets, because they feel less likely to receive an adequate return for their investments of energy. Ultimately, they will produce only what can be consumed within their own families, or traded in circuits of exchange that are disconnected from government, in the so-called black market, which exists to serve only the trusted few. The “long circuit” will, quite literally, become a “short circuit.”

Again, Paterson's approach has much to recommend it. Some of her highly imagistic theory is based on apodictic certainties, such as the idea that production cannot continue in the absence of reward. Much of it identifies and generalizes from historical experience. Out of this ensemble of principles and observations she evokes a distinctive perspective on government, a perspective very different from the perspectives evoked by ordinary “figures of speech.” If, for instance, one pictures the state as the “negotiator” of rival interests, as the

“traffic cop” of the old civics texts, or even as the “night watchman” of the nineteenth-century liberals, one will miss certain features of the state that Paterson sees. Her description of government as (amusing phrase) an “end-appliance” calls attention to its costs as well as its possible benefits (82). Her image emphasizes the fact that governments consume energy but cannot be said to produce it, either in the literal or in the extended sense.³ Instead, they live on the products of their constituents’ energy; they are end-appliances—like your toaster, or like the electrified fence that surrounds a prison. It’s up to you to decide whether such appliances are worth anything, and how much they are worth.

This is not the place to attempt an exhaustive summary and assessment of Paterson’s theory. Her account of the “long circuit” is much more detailed than I have space to show. It is clever and challenging, and vulnerable in the ways in which clever and challenging theories are usually vulnerable. It is open to questions and possible refutations at a hundred points. My purpose here, however, is to discuss its relationship to figures of speech and metaphors.

Paterson, as I have said, denied the relationship. A passage from *The God of the Machine* that has been quoted in part now needs to be examined more fully:

Personal liberty is the pre-condition of the release of energy. Private property is the inductor which initiates the flow. Real money is the transmission line; and the payment of debts comprises half the circuit. . . . The possibility of a short circuit, ensuing leakage and breakdown or explosion, occurs in the hook-up of political organization to the productive process. This is not a figure of speech or analogy, but a specific physical description of what happens. (62)

Paterson is operating on the assumption that there is a world of difference between a figure of speech or metaphor and a specific description. Yet the passage itself shows that “figures of speech” can achieve several degrees of literal descriptiveness. To say that energy is “released” is just another way of saying that potential energy is made available for use by being transformed into kinetic energy; and “released” is no more metaphorical than the more technical “trans-

formed.” Now consider the idea that the existence of private property “induces” an energy flow. In the context of Paterson’s argument, this refers to the fact that people consent to participate in economic exchanges when they believe that they will be able to keep as their property any profits that accrue. Otherwise, they wouldn’t bother to turn their potential energy into kinetic energy, produce something, and try to sell it. If this is true, and I believe it is, then Paterson’s exotic figure of speech isn’t far from a “physical” or literal description of normal human life. Yet the energy in question is not equivalent to the literal energy that animates the brain and nerve. What is actually “transmitted” is the commodities produced by energy. “Energy” here is a figure of speech that rhetoricians call a metonym: a reference to one thing in terms of another thing, which is associated with it. That doesn’t mean the word isn’t descriptive, but it isn’t as directly descriptive as the “inductor” image, or as Paterson’s description of government as an “end-appliance.”

“Real money is the transmission line, and the payment of debts comprises half the circuit” is part metaphor, part simple fact. Money isn’t literally a “line,” but it does transmit the desires of buyers to sellers and enable sellers to deliver their goods to buyers. And when I pay my debts for the goods you gave me, I am plainly completing the second half of a circuit of exchange. If evidence could be cited to show that producers provide goods to consumers without any expectation of a reciprocal flow of economic rewards, or that the materials we require for daily life are drawn to us without the aid of any monetary “transmission line,” then Paterson’s terms would be discredited; but such evidence is lacking. The Patersonian idea of a politically produced “short circuit,” and its various possible effects, is more challenging, but granted the existence of “circuits” of exchange, and of government’s ability to disrupt them or use their “energy” for destructive purposes, the image is clearly pointed at real events. Whether it provides an adequate generalization about the nature of such events is a question that may require further investigation.

However that turns out, our ability to question and analyze the theory in the way we have been doing is sufficient demonstration that, whether it is true or not, it is hardly vague or mystifying. It is a theory (and a set of metaphors, if you will) that can be analyzed, comprehended, and critically examined. It fulfills the principal functions of

theory, which can also be functions of metaphor. It unites discrete facts into a coherent picture. It presents conjectures that are subject to the test of plausibility and of facts that might refute them. It assists in identifying facts that might otherwise be missed, and it provides a new perspective on phenomena that have been viewed in other ways.

To appreciate the importance of perspective, it is helpful to consider Paterson's "figures of speech" in their historical context. "The machine" and its "energy" were intellectual obsessions for many theorists of the twentieth century. There were both rightwing and leftwing theories and images of "the machine." Henry Adams, on the cultural right, contrasted the energies of the industrial "dynamo" with the spiritual order of "the Virgin," his name for the mysterious cultural potency at work in pre-industrial Europe. (With characteristic coyness he calls the virgin "symbol *or* energy" [Adams [1918] 1999, 325; emphasis added].) The "technocrats," on the political left, were inspired instead by the alleged triumphs of Russian communists and American efficiency experts. They had no use for the "virgin." They believed that the defects of "the machine," the industrial world, could be eliminated by making that world more explicitly machinelike, by ending the idiosyncrasy and presumed wastefulness of "the profit system" and replacing private ownership with what Thorstein Veblen called a "soviet of technicians" (Veblen 1963, 166). The technocrats' talk of economic engineering was metaphorical, but it was also taken as descriptive, as the substance of accurate theory, with a real reference to the real world, and it was put forward as a blueprint for political action.

Paterson was intimately familiar with these ideas. She knew some of their inventors. She thought there was something to the various theories and metaphors—but she thought that a lot more work needed to be done on them (Cox 2004, 139–45, 259–60, 275). Her own idea was that the "the virgin" and "the dynamo" are by no means opposites; that the industrial machine originated in a spiritual force—the freedom of the individual mind—that Adams had mistakenly associated with the "virginity" of a pre-industrial age (Paterson 1993, 156). "Creative intelligence" was the true dynamo of the industrial machine—a machine that (*pace* the technocrats) would certainly leak, break down, or explode if any soviet of engineers tried to control its source of energy (62, 130).

So we have three theories, three sets of “machine” imagery: Henry Adams’, the technocrats’, and Isabel Paterson’s. Which, if any, offers a specific description of reality? Events have not been kind to the technocrats’ views. Today it would be hard to find an economist, or even a politician, who actually pictures the American political economy as a machine that can be managed effectively by either “technicians” or “soviets” or the two of them together. Technocratic programs continue, but the grand metaphor, the unifying vision, has been lost. By contrast, many intellectuals continue to be interested in the opposition that Adams sees between the spiritual order and the system of industrial capitalism. This is a harder issue to debate; it depends so much on the meaning one assigns to the word “spiritual.” I have no doubt, however, that the majority of educated Americans, not to mention the majority of conservatives, libertarians, and Objectivists, would agree with Paterson when she said, “*A machine economy cannot run on a mechanistic philosophy*” (156). If the “machine” keeps running, it can’t be because the individual spirit, the individual power of choice and valuation, is repressed. But if this is true, why have Paterson’s “figures of speech” had so hard a time with conservatives, libertarians, and Objectivists?

One explanation, I suppose, is that many of them have a different sense of the world from hers. She responded to the world as something that exists, and interprets itself, in a literary way. “The great body of literature and of information handed down in books,” she wrote, “actually comprises the world we have lived in, both mentally and physically. Every one who lives in this country lives in books; and that would be true even of an illiterate person. He is living in books he has never read” (Paterson 1941). To someone who writes like that, descriptions of fact ought to be literary, in the best sense of the term: colorful, intense, poetic, as intense and poetic as her own sense of the world at large. Those would be true “descriptions.” “Metaphor” and “figure of speech” were terms that could be reserved for second-rate attempts at communication. Rand was inclined to the same assumption: witness her reluctance to say that Paterson was operating in a “merely metaphorical” way.

Economists—and many of the leaders of libertarian thought have been economists—often have different impressions and expectations of language. They may also be as reluctant as Paterson or Rand to

notice how much of their own language is metaphorical. “Inflation,” “hard money,” “the business cycle,” and many of the other stock phrases of economics are just as metaphorical as Paterson’s, but their use has been accepted in professional practice, and their metaphorical quality is easily ignored, even by scholars who are very sensitive to her “figures of speech.” Murray Rothbard, a chieftain among libertarian economists, called *The God of the Machine* “this wonderful book.” Yet there was, according to him, an irritating quality in Paterson’s language: “Though you may grasp her meaning in a general sense, the metaphors become annoying when you realize that for Mrs. Paterson these metaphors were real, and she intended to write scientifically of human action in the sense that a physical scientist writes of chemical interaction” (Rothbard 1993, 33–34).

There may be another difficulty for libertarians and conservatives. For good reason, they detest the project of social engineering that so many twentieth-century theorists endorsed. Paterson detested it too. But because she retained the vocabulary of engineering, she made some of her admirers uneasy, and worse than uneasy. Bruce Ramsey, a libertarian financial journalist who writes sympathetically of *The God of the Machine*, finds its language provocative, in both the favorable and the unfavorable meanings of the term. Some of it he considers “fine metaphor,” brilliantly “perceptive”; but some of it irritated him so much that he once threw his copy of the book away. Its engineering analysis, he says, “appeals to the same corner of the soul as Technocracy and Scientific Socialism: each is trying to do the same *kind* of thing, world-explaining and system-building” (Ramsey 2006, 31).

Yet there are also essentially literary objections to Paterson’s use of language. Albert Jay Nock, a cultural critic esteemed by both libertarians and conservatives, rendered virtually idolatrous praise to *The God of the Machine*, refusing to be troubled by its “engineering idiom”: “I can’t see but what it is sound enough, and probably effective” (Nock 1949, 181–83; 1962, 145–46). But other sympathizers have dismissed Paterson’s “idiom” as simply bad writing. William F. Buckley, Jr., who did everything he could to entice Paterson to write for his fledgling magazine, *National Review*, has recently pronounced her engineering images incomprehensible, very unlike the products of the “acute verbal intelligence” to be found in her columns in the *New York Herald Tribune*. He quotes with disapproval the

“Private property is the inductor” passage (Buckley 2004).

Certainly, the woman who wrote:

The possibility of a short circuit, ensuing leakage and breakdown or explosion, occurs in the hook-up of political organization to the productive process.

was less easily comprehensible than the woman who wrote:

A lot of American principle is contained in the two words: “Just don’t.” Much of the rest is encompassed by the suggestion of minding one’s own business. The whole is summed up in the word “liberty.” (Paterson 1940)

In fact, the aphoristic style is somewhat more common in *The God of the Machine* than the engineering style; and even at its most complicated, the book is a very long way from meriting Buckley’s characterization of “not readable.” Its language, however, is not to his taste, and there is no point in quarreling with him about it.

Rand’s objections were more complicated, and more mysterious. She did not accuse Paterson of using ugly jargon. She did not object to her use of unconventional terminology. She did not worry about any associations with “social engineering.” She had no aversion, in practice, to the use of explanatory imagery. In *Atlas Shrugged*, she followed Paterson in picturing the world as a system of energy generation and communication, a system that breaks down when it is short-circuited by the state. Taggart Transcontinental, the railroad that draws the novel’s diverse characters and pursuits together, is both a symbol of the long circuit of production and exchange and the physical embodiment of such a circuit. *Atlas Shrugged*, indeed, can be read as Rand’s attempt to “demonstrate” quite a few of Paterson’s “hypotheses” (Cox 2007).

I am unwilling to conclude that Rand was simply loath to credit Paterson with influencing her own work, preferring to quibble, instead, about the language that her friend had used to describe the “long circuit.” There is another possible explanation, one suggested by Ramsey’s discussion of Paterson’s book. Ramsey focuses attention on the first noun in its title, and in doing so, complicates the issue

considerably. Paterson, he says,

offers society as a *machine*, although a machine that cannot be run without its unpredictable, literally incalculable “god,” the individual creative mind.

In the end the treatment of government as a problem in engineering does not work, and for a reason Paterson identifies and put into italics: “*Physics has no name for the exact function which is delegated to government.*” That’s another way of saying that, because of the individuality of human beings, human government is too different from a machine to be treated as a problem in mechanics. I didn’t catch the full import of that when I first read the book . . . I did see Rand’s review, in which she said it was a brilliant book, but that the engineering part worked only as a metaphor. (Ramsey 2006, 31; Paterson 1943, 82)

For Paterson, individuality *was* the crucial issue. We know that machines must be tended and directed by the choices of human beings. In the same way, we know that every movement of the economic and social “machine” involves the agency of individual people, people whose decisions cannot be predicted like the movements of a literal machine, once it is set in motion. We can say that if Congress decides to raise taxes, it will probably prevent a certain amount of human energy from manifesting itself in the economy, and if it raises taxes to 100 percent, and somehow manages to enforce its edict, it will destroy the economy. But one cannot say that a tax raise will happen. That’s up to individual people to decide. Whether this makes government “too different” from a literal machine to be “treated as a problem in mechanics” is open for discussion. Yet Ramsey is right about the irreducibly unpredictable nature of human action. And as he says, Paterson incorporated this view in her book. “Once a machine has been devised,” she says, “its performance is calculable. But no pre-estimate is possible of what machines man may invent” (Paterson 1993, 140).

So far, there is nothing peculiar, nothing vaguely metaphorical or hypothetical about Paterson’s view of the individual’s relationship to

the machine. In holding that social and economic trends, once set in motion, will have certain effects, but that human beings have to start or stop them, and human actions are unpredictable, she is saying the same thing that Ludwig von Mises or Friedrich Hayek or virtually any current economic or political theorist would say. The peculiar thing is the fact that so many of Paterson's own contemporaries assumed that human action is susceptible of calculation and planning. They took the "machine" metaphor seriously—but not seriously enough. They studied the machine, while omitting the minds that operated it. Or they assumed that those minds would adapt themselves without insuperable difficulty to the welfare of the machine.

Why they reasoned in that way, and why many of our contemporaries, while rejecting their logic, endorse their political and economic programs, is a problem in intellectual history that far exceeds the scope of this essay. The important thing to say in this place is that they were wrong, and Paterson was right. She wanted to represent more of human action than the mainstream economic and social thought of her age could show. She examined the economic machinery of the modern world; she also examined the entity without which the machinery could not exist or endure, the individual mind, with all the unpredictable properties of choice that make it the "dynamo" of creative "energy" (82, 130). That, in the human and social sphere, was the "god" of the "machine."

This "metaphor," "hypothesis," or "abstraction" invited investigation of a further problem. A dynamo doesn't literally create energy. It is part of a process that transforms energy, making it usable for future creative endeavors. One can logically ask, Where did all this energy come from? Where did it start? "Physics," in Paterson's view, had "no name" for that, either. But philosophy had a name for it—a very familiar name. Addressing the ultimate philosophical problem, Paterson concluded that there had to be an original source of energy, and the source had to be divine. Like the human machinery, the universal machinery has a "god," a real God, who endowed the world with all its potential energy and, by giving man his own attributes of intelligence and free will, started the dynamos of the world (69–70, 151–52).

Paterson approached the metaphysical question from roughly the same direction as Henry Adams' great ancestor, John Adams. Writing

to his friend Thomas Jefferson (2 March 1816), Adams expresses irritation about proponents of human liberty who assume that human life is the product of accident or fate:

Why . . . should We abhor the Word God, and fall in Love with the Word Fate? We know there exists Energy and Intellect enough to produce such a World as this, which is a sublime and beautiful one, and a very benevolent one, notwithstanding all our snarling, and a happy one, if it is not made otherwise by our own fault. (Adams 1959, 465)

Because she believes in a universe of intelligence, not fate, Paterson is able to affirm the conclusions of the Declaration of Independence, which states that “all men are . . . endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights.” She insists that without this reference to God, any philosophical account of rights would be missing an “axiom”; it wouldn’t be able to say what rights were based on (Paterson 1993, 69–70). In her opinion, rights are inherent in man’s nature and position in the universe, and his nature and position were decided by God.

Thus, by pursuing the implications of the machine “metaphor,” Paterson makes a place in her theory both for man’s individuality and for God’s creative power. To Rand, this was not a gratifying philosophical event. She regarded belief in God as “mysticism,” and “mysticism” as a philosophical error of the first importance. Yet she wanted to recommend Paterson’s book—and she did so, by obscuring the connection between something she admired (individualism) and something she detested (God), stipulating that Paterson’s apology for individualism was brilliant but her “mysticism” was irrelevant and the “engineering” imagery that connected the two was largely a distraction.

She was wrong, and pretty obviously wrong, on the last two counts. But I am not arguing that she was consciously obfuscating the issues. Everything we know about her indicates that she had the kind of intellectual integrity that scorns any conscious temptation to evade a central intellectual problem. Yet she did obfuscate certain issues, in what I would call not a conscious or an unconscious but a preconscious manner. Another way of saying this would be that she

had excellent peripheral vision. She could see philosophical dangers coming in from the side, and she took instinctive steps to avoid any she did not want to run into.

Examples are easy to find. One is her view of biological evolution. Because she did not believe in God, she must have accounted for the existence of the world in a purely evolutionary way. Or so one would think. Yet because she did not want to picture man's heroic race as originating in a bunch of apes (Nathaniel Branden, interview), she diverted questions about her view of the matter by saying that she had never studied evolution and was "therefore . . . neither its supporter nor its opponent" (Rand 1982, 54).⁴ Another example appears in her economic theory, where she argues that in a free market people choose the "best" commodities; free choices lead to good choices (Rand 1966, 17–18). She is trying to bridge the gap between economics and ethics or aesthetics. But everyone knows that people often make bad choices in the marketplace—bad choices by any standard one could choose. Rand senses that objection, and evades it. She knows she cannot claim that people make the "best" choices according to some "intrinsic" standard of value. She knows that's not true, and that her friend Mises has demonstrated that it's not. Yet she is unwilling to say that economic values are "subjective," as Mises said they were (Mises 1949, 1–3, 21, 95–96, 119–27, 329), because she scents a possible conflict with her own philosophy of Objectivism. So, without any more specific consideration of the troublesome features of Mises' philosophy than she gave to those of Paterson's (in fact, with less), she claims that while economic values are not "*philosophically objective*," they are "*socially objective*," because they represent "the sum of the individual judgments of all the men involved in trade at a given time, the sum of what *they* valued, each in the context of his own life" (Rand 1966, 16–17). In other words, one might say, they are subjective.

Rand doesn't stay for that counterargument. She proceeds to justify the objectivity of market values by asserting that "within every category of goods and services offered on a free market, it is the purveyor of the best product at the cheapest price who wins the greatest financial rewards *in that field*" (17–18). An obvious question comes to mind: "What does 'best' really mean in that sentence?" She doesn't entertain that question, either—perhaps because the next,

apparent but unfronted, question might be, “Are you saying that *Forever Amber* made so much money because it was the best novel at the cheapest price?” To which, of course, she would have to answer No.

I believe that *The God of the Machine* presented a similar problem. Paterson’s “engineering” metaphors led directly to the God of the Machine in the strongest sense of the phrase, to the God of the universe and to theism, which was anyplace but where Rand wanted to go. In a way, she had been there before. During the years immediately following publication of *The God of the Machine*, she argued with Paterson about this issue, very unsuccessfully. Her most significant statement on the matter that is still extant is a letter she wrote to Paterson on 4 August 1945 (Rand 1995, 180–86). Here she argues that:

1. The conception of the divine intellect held by Paterson and other theists is incomprehensible, because all it seems to mean is that “God’s mind is something which man’s mind is not.”
2. “An omnipotent being, by definition, is a totalitarian dictator. Ah, but he won’t use his power? Never mind. He *has* it.” This God should not, and does not, exist.
3. The idea of God’s infinity violates the basic “conception of an entity—which means a limit.”

Those aren’t the best arguments in the world. And because they have nothing to do with the idea that the cosmos must have had a creator, someone who infused it with energy and enabled human beings to make creative use of that energy, they were unlikely to make any impression on Paterson. They didn’t.

In 1959, when the two women met for the last time, Paterson apparently tried to start a discussion about what she regarded as Rand’s limited conception of the cosmos, and man’s place in it. Rand refused to participate (Cox 2004, 358). Five years later, in her essay on *The God of the Machine*, she again refused, leaving difficult problems vague, accusing Paterson of leaving them vague, and maintaining that they weren’t important to the book anyway. Paterson’s engineering imagery and her belief in God were shunted off to separate tracks,

where no one would notice that they were originally part of the same train.

This method of dealing with disagreements would certainly have irritated Paterson, and she would have been right to be irritated. Arguments for and against God's existence have not exactly been neglected, these past few hundred years, but arguments about Paterson's system of thought have barely gotten started, and Rand was doing her best to avert them. Of course, Paterson fared better than most of the other people with whom Rand partly agreed. Ordinarily, Rand neglected even to mention their names. Much of the history of Objectivist thought consists of dialogues reduced to monologues. But I think it's time that Paterson's ideas were debated, not applauded whenever they bear an analogy to Rand's and ignored whenever they don't.

I also believe that whenever Paterson's ideas, or Rand's, are debated, more attention needs to be paid to the problem of words and images than either Rand or Paterson, engaged as they were in high-stakes arguments about fact and reality, permitted themselves to pay in their writings on political and philosophical theory. Rand was wrong in acting as if arguments can be dismissed with labels ("mysticism") or arraigned because they look like metaphorical discussions. Paterson was wrong in implying that metaphors don't describe reality. Readers of Rand and Paterson will be wrong—indeed, much wronger—if they accept such positions without investigating their warrants and implications. Examining ideas without examining the words that project them is like trying to choreograph a pas de deux for a single dancer. I'm sorry; it will not work.

Notes

1. Thus Brian Doherty (2005, 50, 52) refers to Paterson's "often-strained metaphors of human societies as different sorts of energy transmission systems," then refers (accurately as well as engagingly) to the "long-circuit series" of Paterson's influences on intellectual history, and her knowledge of the fact "that the individual mind was the dynamo that moved the world."

2. Thomas Jefferson was reaching for a similar idea when he wrote that under the absolutist monarchy the French people were "ground to powder" by "abuses of power" (Jefferson 1905, 1.127).

3. Paterson would say that even in the case of a government-owned power plant, the dynamo is really the brains of the people who run it, the people who would run it more efficiently if government were not in the picture and they were

competing freely with other energy providers. She holds that the basic function of government is to stop things, not start them. An agent of the government arrests a thief (which is good), or he keeps private people from damming a river so that the state can monopolize its energy resources (which is bad). But that is what government, *qua* government, does: it keeps things from happening that would otherwise happen. It is a “brake” (Paterson 1993, 85–88, 23).

4. Rand was not the only radical individualist who took evasive action toward the theory of evolution. In 1989, at a dinner in Philadelphia on the occasion of the Libertarian Party’s national convention, the author was conversing with Murray Rothbard when this issue came up. Knowing that Rothbard, a brilliant conversationalist, would be sure to say something interesting, I asked him whether he believed that evolution occurred. “No,” he declared. “What about the fossil evidence?” I asked. “Fakes,” he replied. “All of them?” “A lot.” “Well,” I continued, “what do you think happened?” “First you had a lot of different animals,” he said (brightly, as always). “Then some of them died off.” “Are you still an agnostic?” I asked. “Oh yes,” he said. I was too surprised to ask the obvious question: If you don’t believe in God, then how do you think the animals got there in the first place? About that time, Robert Sirico of the Acton Institute, a libertarian who is also a Roman Catholic priest, held up a glass of water and said, “Any time, Murray, any time”—meaning: “I will baptize you at any time you want.” Rothbard smiled and shook his head.

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