



Alice in Wonderland

By: David Ramsay Steele

A Review of *The Passion of Ayn Rand*
by Barbara Branden.

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1. The Ayn Rand Phenomenon

Walk into any decent bookshop in any part of the English-speaking world, and you are liable to find a shelf or two entirely taken up with the works of Ayn Rand. Week in, week out; year in, year out. If you're a bookseller, this is a sight better than Erich von Daniken or Leo Buscaglia.

Some of Rand's books are novels, some are on aesthetics, some on political philosophy, some on epistemology and metaphysics. These are books which, in the words of the old sixties ads for *Catch-22*, "will change your life". They make converts. Typically, the future Randist begins with that bulky megaseller, *The Fountainhead*. Reading *The Fountainhead* is an overpowering emotional experience. It is a spellbinding story with a certain amount of preaching sprinkled in. The reader may find the ideas, and even more, the hints of ideas, alluring. The novice moves on to *Atlas Shrugged*, even bulkier (1,084 pages) but still phenomenally popular. The story is less spellbinding, indeed, less than spellbinding, and there is much, much more preaching sprinkled in, but by this

time the reader has acquired a taste for Rand's distinctive form of rhetoric, and is ready to graduate to her nonfiction works, *For the New Intellectual*, *The Romantic Manifesto*, *The Virtue of Selfishness*, even *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*. Here the budding Randist finds, declaimed in strident, bad-tempered prose, a new gospel, a system of ideas, a creed applicable to all aspects of life. Among the articles of this creed are: that there is no God; that laissez-faire capitalism is the best possible economic system; that limited government is the only correct political order; that the United States of America is the best society in human history and virtually always entirely in the right in its conflicts with other powers; that cigarette-smoking is both harmless and morally virtuous; that Hume and Kant are loathsome villains, whilst Aristotle, Aquinas, and Ayn Rand are the great heroes of philosophy; that Rachmaninoff is a hero of music, while J.S. Bach and Richard Wagner are among the villains, with their "malevolent sense of life"; that Dostoevsky and Hugo are great novelists; that, in more recent times, Ian Fleming and Mickey Spillane are also outstanding writers - and of course, Ayn Rand; that a photograph can never be a work of art; that liking horror stories always indicates a mystical outlook and therefore mental sickness. And, most famously, that altruism or self-sacrifice is the great vice and source of all vices, whilst egoism or selfishness is the great virtue and source of all virtues.

There are many readers of Rand who graduate in this way, just by reading the books, without authoritative guidance, and they will perhaps tell you that the above is a caricature, that there is no creed, that some of these items are just

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Rand's personal opinions, with which they (the readers) happen to disagree. But in the old days there was an organised Randian church. It was called the Nathaniel Branden Institute. It lasted from 1958 until 1968, when it terminated due to the messy and spiteful falling out of Rand and Nathaniel, the rock upon which she had hoped to found her church.

When the Nathaniel Branden Institute (NBI) was in operation, there could never be any doubt in the minds of its apostles, adherents, apostates, or excommunicates that Randism or Objectivism was indeed a creed. If you didn't smoke, you had better have a damned good reason - a certificate signed by several Objectivist physicians might be safest. If you were married to a theist, you had better get a divorce. If you were depraved enough to enjoy Bach, better change your musical tastes pronto.

Like many cults, the Randist network of NBI (which existed only in North America) used group pressure, scorn, and contempt to humiliate and degrade those individuals who betrayed wretchedness by signs of deviance - in this case, by liking Tolstoy, feeling a duty to help one's relatives, growing a moustache, entertaining the thought that there might be a God, feeling tolerant towards homosexuality, or being concerned about the disappearance of living species due to industrial pollution.

Ayn Rand is, on many counts, a remarkable figure. The mere sales of her books constitute an outstanding achievement, but I cannot think of any historical parallels for someone who used a popular art form to successfully promote an all-encompassing doctrine, especially one that was so eccentric a mix of disparate elements, and one that was so out of fashion when she began to propound it. We have to imagine something like Ferdinand Lasalle writing

Jack London's novels, but even this does not come near the prodigious strangeness and strange prodigiousness of Rand's accomplishments. She has had a significant impact upon the world, but there are unmistakable signs that the impact is only beginning. She has had a traceable influence upon the Reagan administration, which might have pleased her (she died in 1982) even though she fiercely opposed Reagan, because - and if you don't know already, shut your eyes and see if you can guess - he was anti-abortion, a clear demonstration that he was evil and sick, even though he might be posing as an anti-communist.

It is often claimed that Rand gave birth to the modern libertarian movement. This is an exaggeration, but it is true that the overwhelming majority of leading lights in the early libertarian movement of the 1960s had earlier gone through a Randist phase, and even today the peculiar quirks of Randist jargon ("facts of reality", "whim-worshipper", "Robin Hood ethics", "blank out") pop up occasionally.

2. A Riveting Tale

The tale told by Barbara Branden is absolutely riveting. It is considered high praise to say of a book that, having once begun it, you can't put it down, but for me the more significant accolade is that having finished it you can't put it down, and that is certainly true of this amazing and fascinating story. It recounts Rand's life, partly on the basis of personal recollection and partly on the basis of detailed research. The portrait of Rand is outrageously vivid, yet patchy. There was something abnormally potent and enthralling about Rand, and although those who never met her can hardly reconstruct exactly what it was, Branden's book is impressive testimony to its existence and approximate contours. Yet there are puzzling gaps and murky areas.

The organism which was later to denote itself as "Ayn Rand" was born in St Petersburg during the abortive Russian Revolution of 1905, and given the name Alice Rosenbaum. The daughter of a self-made chemist, she emerged as a distant, precocious child. By the age of 10 she was already making snap judgements about everything and everybody in the world, turning these judgements into unshakeable dogmas, demanding as the price of non-belligerence that people accept these dogmas, and seething with violent indignation against anyone who denied, or for that matter, failed to personify, these dogmas. In one of the taped interviews which Rand gave Branden decades later, Rand says: "By fifteen, my sex theory was fully formed." (34) As the context makes clear, the 15-year-old's theory of sex incorporated views she had held passionately since at least the age of 10.

Alice and her family suffered hardships during the civil war following the Bolshevik *putsch*. Bolshevik repression served only to encourage in her breast precisely those counter-revolutionary feelings the persecution was designed to extirpate. By chance, Alice avoided the liquidation which the heroine of her first novel, *We The Living*, could not escape, and in 1926 she contrived to visit relatives in Chicago. Like droves of others before and since, Alice had to lie to get into the US, pretending her visit was intended to be temporary. Despite this, immigration controls were not prominent among the state interventions later denounced by Rand.

On the boat over, Alice changed her name to Ayn (rhymes with MINE!). In one of Branden's many infuriating omissions, she explains that "Ayn" was taken from the name of a Finnish writer whom Alice had not read, but says nothing more about this writer, or whether Rand subsequently read her - or him. It goes without saying that the

Finnish Ayn was a ferociously evil, mentally sick, whim-worshipping mystic, like everyone else, but readers need to be told how this discovery was made, and any little details associated with it. Some years later, Ayn Rosenbaum selected the name "Rand" from her Remington-Rand typewriter. As Rand remarked, criminals and writers usually keep their initials when they change their names.

From Chicago, Rand moved to Hollywood in search of fame as a screen writer. Awkward, pathetic, and still far from fluent in English, she seems to have aroused feelings of warm altruism and Christian charity in many people, who went to great lengths to help her. In Russia she had admired De Mille's pictures, so she went to the De Mille studio, to be given the usual polite brush-off. In the street she spotted De Mille in the flesh, and stood gawping at him, provoking his curiosity. De Mille got her a job, and the De Milles took the little Russian waif under their protective wings. Working as an extra on "King of Kings", she instantly fell in love with, and later married, another extra, Frank O'Connor, who was to spend most of his life boozing and living off her books, the epitome of the "mooching bum" she was always cursing in her apoplectic writings. With De Mille's help again, she got a job summarising and adapting screenplay proposals. During the thirties she became aware of the strong bolshevik sympathies of Western intellectuals, and worked on her first novel and her play, *Penthouse Legend* (better known as *Night of January 16th*) which introduced the gimmick, since imitated several times, of having more than one ending, with the choice made by the audience or, as in this case, by a jury selected from the audience. Both novel and play were modest successes, and Rand became known as that then freakish creature, a writer and intellectual who was a strong anti-communist and in no way sympathetic to socialism.

In the late thirties and early forties she worked on her second novel, *The Fountainhead*, and worked for the Wilkie campaign against the re-election of Roosevelt. She met many of the leading figures of American conservatism, which in those pre-Buckley days still contained strong elements of classical liberalism. She was later to fall out with all these conservative acquaintances. With the sale of the movie rights to *The Fountainhead* for fifty thousand dollars, Rand moved from obscurity to fame and from poverty to comfort. In 1947 she appeared as a 'friendly witness' before the House Un-American Activities Committee, investigating Communist infiltration of Hollywood. Branden makes some gestures towards defending Rand for this discreditable activity.

As *The Fountainhead* was beginning its delayed success, and while working on *Atlas Shrugged*, Rand heard from two young admirers, who were to change their names to Nathaniel and Barbara Branden. (It has been contended that the name "Branden" is derived from "ben-Rand", but Branden doesn't confirm this.) They both became worshippers of Rand, and introduced her to other acolytes. In 1958, NBI was formed to indoctrinate enquirers and followers into the complete system of Ayn Rand: her opinions on art, politics, and metaphysics were presented to the "students of Objectivism" as sacred truths. But even before the formation of NBI, Nathaniel had first married Barbara on Rand's recommendation, then commenced a once-a-week sexual arrangement with Rand, 20 years his senior, with the full knowledge and consent of his and Rand's spouses. This "rational" affair continued for a decade, as NBI expanded, Rand's fame grew, and Rand and Nathaniel lectured together to the unsuspecting flock. The great break between Rand and Nathaniel came after an interregnum in the affair, following which Nathaniel refused to recommence it because of his involvement with another woman, an

involvement which he had kept from Rand's knowledge. Rand's discovery of how she had been deceived led to the expulsion and anathematising of Nathaniel, the break-up of NBI, and the demand that all true followers of Objectivism should join Rand in pouring scorn, hatred, and lies upon the Brandens. Apparently, Rand's theory was that since Nathaniel had behaved so immorally, he had forfeited any right to decent treatment, so any kind of stories could be fabricated about him - including the charge that he had misappropriated the funds of NBI. The question was even raised at an Objectivist discussion of whether it would be moral to have Nathaniel assassinated. (Bear in mind that these "rational" people were kept in the dark about what Nathaniel was supposed to have done, and were expected to follow Rand blindly in attacking Nathaniel.) Much, one supposes, to Rand's vast annoyance, her denunciations of Nathaniel and intrigues against him did not halt his extraordinary success as a pop psychologist. His fame as both writer and therapist has grown remarkably. His *Psychology of Self Esteem* (21 impressions since 1969) deals at length with problems of insufficient self-esteem, but says nothing about the problem of excessive self-esteem.

The soap opera continues. Some of it you can catch up on by reading *The Passion of Ayn Rand*. The orthodox Randists, led by Leonard Peikoff, have put it about that anyone who utters a word in praise of the book is to be shunned, boycotted, and cut off root and branch. Outside the ranks of the Elect, voices have been raised that Branden's omissions and misleading emphases call for correction, and we can expect numerous further memoirs and polemical commentaries. I very much doubt that any of them will be half as well-written or gripping as this one.

3. A Selective Picture

I am not one of those blessed by past personal contact with any of the original Randist apostles. I cannot pronounce on the numerous allegations and counter-allegations which Branden's book has stirred up. But it is clear from a modest amount of background knowledge, plus a careful examination of *The Passion of Ayn Rand*, that it is a piece of special pleading. The author is, I am sure, telling the truth and nothing but the truth, as she remembers it, but she is not telling the whole truth. She places facts in that light which best suits her purposes. On my first reading, I concluded that Rand had treated Branden very badly, and Branden had responded with continuing adoration, despite some criticisms. On my second reading, I concluded that the author was all the time working very hard to give me exactly that impression - which by no means implies that it is untrue, but does put it in a different perspective. The attitude Branden has towards Rand is one that individuals generally hold only towards their parents: a burning anger, a rage for self-justification, contained by a rigid insistence that the parent is good and worthy. In Branden's case, this seems to be bound up with her urgent need to deny the patent fact that Rand had a blighting effect upon her (Branden's) life, as Rand did on the lives of most of those she knew.

This book contains many statements describing Rand as an extraordinary intellect - "the brilliance and intricacy of her mind" (173), "her astonishing intellectual powers ... vast intelligence" (303) - yet it contains no evidence for these statements. It is asserted that Rand's conversation was tremendously high-powered and persuasive, but no attempt is made, by this veteran of hundreds of these conversations, to reproduce any of the searing insights or masterly analyses. I conclude, on the evidence of Rand's writings, that this is because there were none: undoubtedly

Rand possessed an uncommon personal magnetism, especially for docile souls who craved for someone to tell them what was what, but she was no great thinker in any field. (There are two or three isolated witticisms. Asked who, in her proposed kind of society, would "look after the janitors", Rand replied: "... the janitors.").

Branden does mention Rand's "series of angry ruptures with people who had been her friends" (153) but somewhat plays this down. Rand fell out nastily with almost everyone, a propensity which some Randists have inherited. There is no mention here, for instance, of Rand's breaks with Rose Wilder Lane or Edith Efron.

Branden's angry worship of Rand is revealed in her constant desire to catch Rand out in mistakes, and yet defend Rand strenuously against the unpleasant inferences which might be drawn from these mistakes, though such inferences are often all too obviously warranted. Branden's apology for Rand's behaviour over the alterations to *We The Living* (114-15) is noteworthy. The first edition of *We The Living* reflects Rand's political ideas shortly after her arrival in the US, including her Nietzschean contempt for the fate of the common herd. Some time later, Rand brought her views more into conformity with Anglo-Saxon liberalism. She removed from later editions the passages praising ruthless elitism, but stated in her foreword: "I have not added or eliminated to or from (sic) the content of the novel ... all the changes are merely editorial line-changes." Branden tries to defend this by a soft-focus exegesis of the shrill anti-common man message of the first edition. This not only glosses over Rand's lack of candour about the changes; it leaves unexamined the broader question, Rand's reticence about her own change of views and therefore about the sources of that change of views. For any non-Randist with an interest in fiction there is also something

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quaint about the assumption, undoubtedly made by Rand and shared by Branden, that a speech by a "good" character must coincide with the author's own opinions.

Rand had a very poorly developed sense of humour, which she defended by being almost opposed on principle to humour. She had great scorn for the notion that one should be able to laugh at oneself. By taking up this position, she deprived herself of many long hours of rich amusement. Rand and all her circle were people who took themselves too seriously. Her laissez-faire liberal views aside, she is typical of a certain kind of left-wing intellectual who tries to subject her whole life, including her sexual relationships, to "rationality". Rand's affair with Nathaniel was supposed to be rational. According to Rand, the person one loves represents one's highest values. Since Rand was the noblest person Nathaniel knew, as well as being the most rational person in human history, it was right and proper for them to go to bed once a week. When it came out that Nathaniel no longer wanted an intimate physical involvement with his intellectual mentor, because she was too old and he had found someone else, Rand's sexual jealousy was rationalised in the verdict that Nathaniel was morally depraved. This sort of thing would be merely comical, if it were not that the personal misery was magnified by everyone's determination to be, as they thought, rational.

Human sexual impulses are largely the outcome of past competition among genes. Human feelings and responses are those which have tended in the past to cause some genes to reproduce themselves more rapidly than others. Our endowment of sexual emotions did not come about in order to enhance the happiness of individuals or the well-being of society, but in order (as it were) to enhance the copyability of little bits of DNA. If you try to make something

rational out of that, you make a fool of yourself. Behaviour may be legitimately described as "rational" or "irrational" insofar as the means chosen are well or badly suited to achieve the ends sought. It makes no sense to speak of ultimate ends (like whether or not you wish to stay alive or to avoid suffering) as rational or irrational.

4. The Randist Legacy

Branden tries to defend Rand's humourlessness by relating it to her singularly logical mind. She was inclined to sloppy thinking. She took herself too seriously, partly because she was humoured by the likes of the Brandens, who tolerated her cantankerousness on the mistaken grounds that she was a great thinker - though even great thinkers should not be humoured when they take themselves too seriously. This did a disservice to Rand, as such humouring generally does, because it enabled her to live increasingly within her own world of fantasy, unchallenged by effective criticism. Perhaps she was too set by her twenties for any criticism to be effective. Be that as it may, gullible followers are never scarce.

Branden's desire to place Rand's tantrums in a favourable light often leads her to make dubious judgements. Branden remarks upon "how rare it had been in her life that a hand was held out to her in simple human kindness." (169) On the evidence of Branden's own book, this is far from the case in her 1957 autobiographical note to *Atlas Shrugged* ("About the Author"), Rand asserts: "I had a difficult struggle No one helped me..." It appears from Branden's account that Rand was a constant beneficiary of charity and kindness until she started making big money from *The Fountainhead*. When she arrived in Chicago, she was looked after by the relatives who had made it possible for her to get out of Russia. She declared then that when she became rich, she

would buy her aunt a Rolls-Royce. When she did become rich, she didn't even reply to these relatives' letters. On arrival in Los Angeles, Rand stayed at the Studio Club, a philanthropically-subsidised home for young women seeking their fortunes in Hollywood. She was often behind with her rent, but was not evicted. After *We The Living* was published, Rand gratefully sent an autographed copy to the Studio Club's director. The Studio Club subsequently had to close for lack of funds. At every turn, people went out of their ways to help Rand by recommending her writings and finding her jobs and contracts. She habitually repaid kindness with indifference or with venom.

The most unsuccessful part of Branden's book is the final chapter, a listing of numerous people of prominence in many fields who have been influenced by Rand. Many of these people are prominent and avowed libertarians. Surely Branden should have mentioned the fact that Rand despised and detested libertarianism? (She does mention Rand's hostility specifically to the Libertarian Party, attributing this to the fact that some LP members were anarchists.) Rand always denounced the libertarian movement, its philosophy, its methods, its goals, and its personalities. Among other things, she castigated it for "plagiarism" of her ideas, an instance of her colossal presumptuousness, since a political movement is free to be influenced by any published writer, libertarians have always been frank or over-generous about what they owed to Rand, and Rand herself took the ideas from others.

Although Rand's influence is indeed enormous and still growing, Branden overstates it. This is part and parcel of the *ostinato* "rooting for Rand" theme in Branden's book. It only spoils the absorbing account of an intrinsically fascinating figure to keep insisting implausibly that she is a world-shaking

genius. The method of listing people prepared to say "Rand changed my life" is not convincing. The majority of confirmed meat-caters in the US had some early contact with McDonald's, but this doesn't mean we can confidently attribute the prevalence of meat-eating to the influence of McDonald's. People with an appetite for certain kinds of ideas will gravitate to the purveyors of those ideas. Alan Greenspan does not appear to owe any of his economic ideas to Rand - economic theory was apparently the one area where she did not personally hand down the total truth. Murray Rothbard was a libertarian before he met Rand, and would have been a prodigious free market propagandist aside from his brief association with Rand. The fact that Billie Jean King was inspired by reading *Atlas Shrugged* is not of great consequence for anyone else. Some of the most effective proponents of libertarian ideas, like Ludwig von Mises and Milton Friedman, do not show evidence of the slightest Randist influence. (Mises met and admired Rand, but there is no taint of Randism in his writings.) As for the relationship between Randism and Reaganite conservatism, it should be obvious which is the flea and which is the dog.

The major effect of Rand upon libertarians has been to favour the doctrine of natural rights, though most libertarian writers who do accept natural rights (Rothbard, Nozick, David Friedman, for example) adhere to forms of the doctrine which aren't particularly close to Rand's, and to date this preoccupation with natural rights has not borne any fruit in the shape of a coherent explanation or defence of the doctrine (that is any advance upon Spencer). I doubt that Randism will ever have any appreciable direct impact on philosophy or politics, though it may perhaps have some small impact on literature, by helping to rehabilitate the supreme importance of a good story. The Randist influence on the libertarian movement

has slumped in the past 10 years, a thoroughly healthy development, but also an inevitable one, as young people first captivated by Rand find the dogmas beginning to chafe. Randism will never have any influence on *National Review/American Spectator* conservatism, enmired as that is in its own equally threadbare, but more popular and more intelligently-argued dogmas, associated with religion, traditionalism, and state-worship. Randism's influence within the libertarian movement will continue to dwindle away: Rand is becoming to libertarianism something like Fourier to socialism. The only home for born-again Randists will be in the narrow church of Peikoff and Schwartz, The Ayn Rand Institute and The Intellectual Activist. While pouring abuse on libertarianism (mainly because it permits a wide range of philosophical and strategic views, encompassing approval of God, anarchy, sexual and chemical deviation, and the natural rights of dispossessed Palestinians) the Objectivist cult offers a warm embrace only to those who swallow the Randist creed in every detail. After all, how could a rational person co-operate politically with anyone who didn't like Rachmaninoff. Given the vast readership of Rand's writings, and the dazzling appeal of a creed which offers a solution to all intellectual, personal, and social problems by learning to mouth a few catch-phrases, I expect that the cult will achieve a very large membership during the next few years, comparable to Scientology or La Rouchism - with about the same intellectual level, the same deleterious effects on the minds and lives of the cult members, and the same, absolutely negligible amount of influence on political thought.

5. Atlas Wincend

Rand's best work by far is *The Fountainhead*, an extraordinarily

gripping story based on the idea that a person who knows what he wants and strives for it without being afraid of other people's reactions is admirable, while a person who is continually taking his bearings from other people's evaluations is sadly warped. Rand's original title was *Second-Hand Lives*. The characters are stylised, diagrammatic representations of notions from Rand's ethical and psychological theories, but she has taken some pains to make them different from each other, internally consistent, and believable. The book is especially attractive for readers who know nothing of Rand's ideas, for the characters' bizarre motivations then seem to be sometimes inexplicable. and this adds an intriguing air of mystery to an otherwise cut-and-dried narrative. Judging from Branden's account, it is an enormous pity that Rand was made to shorten the novel by eliminating one major character. Inclusion of Roark's first cohabit, the film star Vesta Dunning. would have made Roark less conventionally well-behaved and his egoism more of a challenge. (Rand. who never fully mastered English, mistakenly used the term 'egotism' in *The Fountainhead*. Instead of correcting this in later editions, she attached a note explaining that she had been misled by a faulty dictionary - and. to prove it, citing the dictionary in question!) In this work Rand displays an extremely astute dramatic sense - inclined to run into crude melodrama, but there is a welcome niche in fiction for crude melodrama. Somehow this talent of Rand's was lost when she came to perpetrate that crashing failure, *Atlas Shrugged*. In *The Fountainhead*, the preaching is kept within bounds, and is generally not too jarringly inauthentic. The one bad lapse is the long speech in which Ellsworth Toohey lays bare his own motivations - but Rand had put herself in an impossible position with her ethical theory. For Rand, a villain must be a completely self-sacrificing person. Toohey is an intelligent villain who wants power. but

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somehow it has to come across that in wanting power he is not being selfish - which would be virtuous! If Toohey had been dedicated to a mistaken ideal - based on the theory that everyone would be happier in a world of self-sacrifice - it would be convincing, but we would have no reason to hate him. If Toohey had known that universal self-sacrifice would lead to universal misery, but wanted it for the selfish motive of getting power for himself, this would have been detestable, but dangerous to Rand's egoistic message. Toohey has to want to do his bit towards a goal which (it is made clear) can arrive only after his death, to know that the goal will make everyone completely wretched, and to want it for that reason. But this just makes him an unbelievable loony, bereft of any plausible link to real persons like Lewis Mumford and Harold Laski (who were among Rand's models for Toohey).

The film of *The Fountainhead* retains enough of the book that it must deeply puzzle any reflective person who sees it, unaware of the ethical and political baggage. Gary Cooper is a disaster as Roark. Branden claims that the film was shot nearly unchanged from Rand's script, but surely this must be wrong. As I recall, the film plays down or conceals altogether the crucial fact that the building dynamited by Roark is a government housing project. Surely Rand would never have willingly permitted that.

The Fountainhead illustrates Rand's disgust for people she called "second-handers". There is a strange oversight in the treatment of this subject by Rand and her followers. The second-hander is someone who thinks relationships are more important than ideas. The heroic or independent person is someone who thinks ideas are valuable in themselves and that relationships are merely instrumental. Neither Rand nor Branden ever seem to have noticed that the first is virtually a definition of a woman's

personality, and the second, of a man's personality. Branden does note that Rand had problems with her own femininity, that when she was young she had a fierce crush on a beautiful female tennis-player, that Rand wore short hair and a cape, chain-smoked. and for a while even carried a cane, that she was always strangely drawn to beautiful women. Naively or wisely, Branden who psychologises a lot on other matters, does not speculate about this. Perhaps subconscious perception of Rand's gender ambiguity helps to account for her otherwise inexplicable spell, as, according to W.W. Bartley II was the case with Wittgenstein.

The Fountainhead continues to be a huge commercial success, but Branden cannot resist her usual extravagant overstatement. She refers to "the odyssey of *The Fountainhead*, unique in publishing history..." (180). Literally this is correct: the career of every book published is unique. But Branden makes clear that what she means is that Rand's novels are unmatched in their contrast between a slow start and subsequent multi-million sales. There have actually been much more extreme contrasts, for example *The Great Gatsby*, *Steppenwolf*, and *Lord of the Rings*.

In *Atlas Shrugged* a future United States is sinking into interventionist chaos, with more and more government controls causing more and more disorganisation. The rest of the world has long since collapsed into the barbarism of starving "peoples' states". One by one, all the most brilliant intellects in the US - businessmen, artists, scientists, businessmen, philosophers, businessmen, businessmen, and businessmen - mysteriously disappear. The heroine, who manages a large railroad corporation, becomes aware that there is a conspiracy behind the disappearances. The plot is that of a mystery story, but there is no mystery: the solution is obvious before page 50, and is

hammered into the reader's head on each of the next few hundred pages. The great achievers are going on strike, because they are fed up with the way everyone else is living off their achievements whilst maligning and persecuting them. The achievers have disappeared into obscurity, and every year they all take a holiday together at Galt's Gulch, a utopian haven in the mountains, based on gold coinage and the mutual respect born of rational greed.

The book has many virtues, including a fundamentally sound plot and a lucid, unpretentious narrative style. It was the first major work I read connected with twentieth-century free market ideas, and I was at first dazzled by its seeming audacity and its eerie, anachronistic, dreamlike quality. I was also inspired by its hints of a fully-worked out theoretical system, a metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical structure which somehow supported the author's political conclusion. It was a great disappointment to find later that this system did not exist. The various speeches and allusions in *Atlas Shrugged* - so obviously far-fetched and logically slipshod, but perhaps defensible as rhetoric within a novel - are themselves quoted at length in Rand's fiction essays on philosophy, art and politics. The horrible, pitiful truth finally dawned: this is all there is to Rand. She really believes that this mouth-frothing sloganeering is philosophy, is reasoning, is the way to persuade rational people.

All the faults of *The Fountainhead* have become horribly magnified, and most of its saving features have been lost. *Atlas Shrugged* doesn't contain any convincing characters, only cardboard cut-outs which move jerkily this way and that, while the ventriloquist-author has them spouting her doctrines. The good characters all agree exactly with the author's views on sex, business, music, philosophy, politics and architecture - the only exception is that sometimes one of

the good characters hasn't quite grasped a significant point, and when the penny drops and he comes into full conformity with Rand's opinions, this is a highly dramatic development. The bad guys all agree with what the author says all her ideological opponents must believe (almost entirely different from what these opponents actually do believe, outside fiction). Both goodies and baddies continually expound their incredibly shallow Weltanschauungen in Rand's stilted jargon. None of them is authentic or has a personal voice. Unlike Toohey in *The Fountainhead*, none of the villains is intelligent or effective. (Stadler doesn't count; he is stated to be a genius, but this never affects his described behaviour.)

Just as in real life Rand surrounded herself with yes-persons, hanging on her words and reciting them anxiously back to her so in *Atlas Shrugged* she creates a world of zombies mouthing her patented terminology and going into the zombie equivalent of convulsions of delight whenever they hit upon another of her conceptual gems. Galt's Gulch is indeed Rand's Utopia: a society where everyone makes speeches all the time expounding Rand's opinions, the listeners all blissfully nodding their heads in agreement. The true plot of is: how some good-looking individuals were saved by coming to agree in every particular with Rand, and how everyone else was eternally damned. The book has often been described as nightmarish; it has something of the unnerving quality of a delusional system made real which we find in some Philip K. Dick novels, notably *Eye in the Sky*. (But Dick could really write, and he was doing it on purpose.)

Of all modern tendencies in fiction, Rand's novels are closest in spirit to the socialist realist works favoured by the Stalinist regime. Stalin said: "Artists are engineers of the soul." Rand said: "Art is the technology of the soul."

One of the climactic points of *Atlas Shrugged* is Galt's long speech, which explains Rand's theories, in Rand's language, over all radio and TV channels simultaneously, and helps to bring about the downfall of "the looters". Actually, airing this tedious drivel over all stations would speedily lead to a revolutionary overthrow of the government which permitted such lax regulation of the airwaves, followed by the guillotining of Galt. With cretins like Rand's villains running the US, I reckon I could take over within a week, given a handful of marines and a few rock 'n' roll tapes, except that plenty of others would get in ahead of me. Galt's speech is 58 pages long, and I suppose 90 percent of readers skip most of it, as I did on my first reading. Branden claims that it took Rand "two full years" to write (266). It feels like two full years reading it.

In Branden's judgement, part of Galt's speech takes "a major step toward solving the problem that haunted philosophers since the time of Aristotle and Plato: the relationship of 'ought' and 'is' - the question of in what manner moral values can be derived from facts." No such problem has haunted philosophers since the times of Plato or Aristotle. In the eighteenth century, David Hume raised a different question, whether values could be derived from facts (alone) at all, but this attracted no attention at the time, and didn't haunt anyone until the twentieth century.

According to Galt's speech, in a passage singled out by Branden, "there is only one fundamental alternative in the universe: existence or non-existence - and it pertains to a single class of entities: to living organisms." This is false. Any class of matter (atoms, crystals, stars, etc.), not just living organisms, may exist or not exist. Galt (Rand) also emphasises that: "to think is an act of choice ... *man is a being of volitional consciousness.*" This too is

false. Thinking is involuntary, like digestion or blood clotting. If you don't believe this, try to stop thinking for a few seconds. Galt (Rand) also keeps insisting that "existence exists". This seems to be of momentous importance to Galt (Rand), but in the only sense I can make of it (that 'existence' is something which exists in addition to all the things which exist) it is not evident, and I believe it is false. (If what is meant is that "Things which exist exist" - existence exists - then that is trite and has never been denied by anyone.) And so it goes on, 58 pages of it, one pompous vacuity after another.

There is the possibility that *Atlas Shrugged* may be produced as a TV mini-series. This would probably be its most favourable incarnation. The characterisation is not up to the level of *Falcon Crest*, but the plot is a lot more interesting, and thankfully most of the pedantic dialogue would have to be cut. Galt's speech could be eliminated altogether and something should be done about the fact that Rand's 'future' is now impossible, since she did not foresee such developments as the eclipse of rail by air travel. Maybe Dagny Taggart should run an airline instead of a railroad.

Some of Branden's misjudgements are astounding. In *Atlas Shrugged*, she refers to "the faint sadomasochistic overtones of its love scenes, the troubling violence of the sexual encounters." (299) Nearly all of Rand's romantic scenes in all her works are loudly and obviously sadistic. She was into domination. There is much grabbing of wrists, yanking of arms, ripping of cloth, and brusque insertion. Both *Penthouse Legend* and *The Fountainhead* contain rapes, performed by the heroes and presented as entirely admirable. (It is true that in both cases it is made clear that the rapees 'really want it'.)

6. Randolatry

The disciples of Ayn Rand were second-handers *par excellence*. They quavered at the thought of her disapproval. They humoured her outbursts and reverently went along with the make-believe that she was a towering intellect. Mrs Branden, for example, could have walked away from it all. Potentially, she seems to have been a better writer than Rand, but she gave that up for the sake of her submission before the cult. All this was done in the name of reason and self-interest. It is a familiar spectacle to see individuals suffering the cruel and vindictive humiliation reserved for sinners within a religious cult, but it is appallingly ironic when this deliberate humiliation is done in the name of that person's self-interest. Rand and her circle - including the Brandens - helped to introduce a lot of entirely pointless misery into the lives of their followers, and I am afraid Branden is insufficiently clear about expressing her regrets for the harm that she participated in doing, even though she was also one of the victims.

Randism was and is a religious cult. ('Religion' is 'a system of faith and worship'.) Branden has often described Objectivism as a cult, but in this book she withdraws this label. She now states that although Objectivism has some of the features of a cult, it cannot be a cult because of its commitment to reason and individualism (352). Well, there is a lot of talk about reason and individualism, just as among Bolsheviks there is a lot of talk about science. But reason does not consist in shrieking the word 'reason' all the time. It consists in subjecting one's ideas to rational criticism, holding every position tentatively, and being prepared to abandon any position if it is successfully criticised. Reason consists, as Socrates put it, in 'following the argument wherever it leads', especially, of course, if it leads where you don't want to go. There is no evidence that the Randists understood the most elementary

requirements of rational discourse. Branden quotes Sidney Hook, from his review of Rand's *For the New Intellectual*: "Despite the great play with the word 'reason', one is struck by the absence of any serious argument in this unique combination of tautology and extravagant absurdity." (321) That is exactly right. The Objectivists, no less than the devotees of a theistic sect, are engaged in abusing their minds by reiterating articles of faith. As for their individualism, it reminds me of the individualism of the mob in *The Life of Brian*. Trying to get the crowd to stop worshipping him, Brian shouts: "You are all individuals." The crowd drones back ecstatically. "We are all individuals." Unlike Brian, Rand was addicted to the idolatry of her besotted admirers.

Rand wrote an article called 'The Argument from Intimidation' (included in *The Virtue of Selfishness*) in which she describes the kind of *ad hominem* argument which says that only those who are in some way deficient can hold a particular point of view. In the heyday of socialism, this kind of argument was commonly employed against any voices dissenting from the socialist dogma. However, there is one writer who resorts to this kind of argument more frequently than any other, and that writer is Ayn Rand. The Argument from Intimidation is her stock-in-trade. (For example, the essay 'Collectivised Ethics', in *The Virtue of Selfishness*, opens: "Certain questions, which one frequently hears, are not philosophical queries, but psychological confessions..." Again, on the first page of the introduction to that book, we are told that to raise doubts about the advisability of Rand's use of the word 'selfishness' implies ..moral cowardice".)

As Branden points out, although Rand in principle conceded the possibility of honest disagreement or honest error, in practice she tended always to conclude that disagreement with her opinions was a symptom of sickness and therefore of

evil. Rand herself announces that she had "long ago" lost interest in debates with critics.

7. Egoistic Ethics

Rand asserts that ethics is entirely based on reason, and that the supreme moral virtue is selfishness, or rational self-interest. This is developed at times (See the 'Objectivist Ethics' in *The Virtue of Selfishness*) by biological, or biological-sounding, arguments. What is good for an organism is what contributes to that organism's survival and well-being. This seems clear enough: it is moral to do what is to one's advantage, and immoral to do what is against one's advantage. It follows that it is moral to cheat, murder, and steal, on those occasions where a rational analysis shows this to be to one's advantage. But no such conclusion is drawn by Rand. Respecting other people's lives and property, even when this hurts one's bank balance or survival prospects, is stated to be in one's rational self-interest. From a biological point of view - maximising one's chances of survival, good health, or reproduction - this is obviously not always the case. Rand explains that the standard of ethics is not the individual's bodily or biological survival, but the survival of man qua man", or man as a rational being. Thus, all Rand's biological-sounding arguments go by the board: it may even be 'selfish', in her redefinition of the term, to court death for the sake of a 'cherished value'. But there is no clear stipulation of how the nature of man as a rational being, or the values which it is permissible for a rational egoist to cherish, are to be determined. The outcome is that Rand appears to be urging egoism, but is actually urging unselfish sacrifice of one's interests to what she tells us is the life proper to a rational being. All this terrible confusion and double-talk arises because Rand cannot stomach the manifest truth that it can be to a person's advantage to violate the rights of another person. If ethics is

to tell us that people's rights may not be violated, it must tell us that we ought sometimes to do things against our own interests.

Rand's main weapon against the above point is to imply (Argument from Intimidation) that anyone who makes it must believe that "man is a sacrificial animal". Here she overlooks two points: 1) that it is generally held that many decisions are morally neutral: ethically, you may do one thing or the other; and 2) that moralists have focussed on cases where individuals ought to sacrifice their interests, not because sacrifice of one's interests per se is held to be necessarily good, but because it is assumed that there is comparatively little problem about getting individuals to do what is right when that happens to be also to their advantage.

In talking to various Randists, I have been offered two sorts of elaborations of Rand's argument. 1) It is claimed that to violate someone's rights when this appears to be to one's benefit will always be to one's net disadvantage because of the psychological repercussions to wit, the loss of one's self-respect.

This, however, throws the justification of morality onto something which is either an 'irrational whim', or some other principle of morality (what forms one's standards of self-respect) which in turn requires justification. It is not true that everyone's self-respect will suffer if they violate someone else's rights (or suffer enough to outweigh the gains). I have met people who would never be able to live with themselves if they passed up the chance to gyp some poor sucker, especially by violating his rights, the more violations the better. One might say that they ought not to be like this, but in that case one is appealing to a moral standard not derivable from that person's self-interest. (Rand holds that all morality is rational self-interest alone.) 2) It is claimed that violations of rights

wouldn't work out well for everyone in the long run. One version of this is to claim that, for instance, if everyone were a thief, wealth would be greatly reduced, and there would be a lot less to steal - which is no doubt true. However, this is not an argument from self-interest. It is an argument from the welfare of society. A rational-minded person will weigh the consequences of his actions - if he is a pure egoist the consequences for just his welfare. Any one act of theft or even any one person dedicating his life to theft is not going to make the difference between a society in which rights are generally respected and a society of interminable pillage. A rational egoist will scoff at appeals to the long-term consequences for society, especially if he is getting on in years. The rational egoist will be a free rider on other people's unselfish respect for rights. (It is even perfectly reasonable for an egoist to support laws against theft whilst himself practising theft: there is nothing contradictory about this position.)

8. The Gospel of Spleen

In one respect, the tragedy of Rand is like the tragedy of the Beatles: because she could do one or two things very well, she became surrounded by a lot of admirers who were prepared to encourage her to believe she could do any number of things superbly. By sticking to fiction, she could have become a sort of minor rightwing Jack London. As it was, she didn't write much fiction, and most of it is not outstanding.

But the tragedy, in Rand's case, begins earlier. If Branden's reconstruction of Alice's early life is at all reliable, it seems that she had the makings of a good mind, but lacked any training in critical thought. She was more intelligent than almost everyone she met, and soon formed the theory that other people's inane and unsystematic defences of conventional thinking were the only alternatives to her own half-baked

notions. Since she was quick-witted, she was always able to improvise new elaborations to these notions, without ever wondering whether some of them might be radically mistaken. By the time she was able to read arguments by people cleverer than she was, it was too late for her to learn the elements of rational enquiry: she was a messiah who announced the truth and cursed all who rejected it.

Recalling what she said to Nathaniel after their first meeting with Rand, Branden reports: "I feel as if, intellectually, I've always stood on a leaking life raft in the ocean. and as I jump to cover one leak with my foot, another spurts forth - and I leap to cover it - and then there's another... But now I have the sense that it might be possible to stand on solid ground... as if for the first time the earth is firm beneath my feet." (236) Rand fed the appetite for certainty. She spoke as if she had a fully worked-out system which accounted for everything. Such a system, if it could exist at all, would be a vast structure made up of minutely-reasoned segments. Rand's theories, such as they are, do not form a vast structure, and she had no talent for minute reasoning. The impression of all-encompassing explanation is given by bold, broad, sweeping, imprecise assertions. An unrelenting covering fire of vituperation and demeaning is maintained against anyone who might point to any of the difficulties with these assertions. Presumably some of the brighter disciples are able to keep the faith by telling themselves that these assertions can be interpreted as gestures indicating the general lines upon which a more rigorous argument might one day be built - but this is an unwarranted attitude - a kind of faith, because (apart from Randism's demonstrable errors at the broadest level) surprising refutations often spring from fine details. The doctrinal structure of Randism is bluff, buttressed by abuse of all critics.

This article is written by David Ramsay Steele.

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In every sect there is an official and an unofficial doctrine. The official doctrine is formulated, written down, and recited. The unofficial doctrine is conveyed more indirectly. It is a set of attitudes and responses. It may even be denied if an outsider detects it and tries to formulate it. In the case of Randism, part of the unofficial doctrine is that rational people can discern the truth about things at a glance, by a swift act of 'integration'. (Enemies of Randism are described as 'unfocussed': correct thinking is characterised as 'focussing'. The impression conveyed by this questionable metaphor is that the more rational you are, the more you will focus, and if you are very rational, you will be able to discern the truth just by looking because, you see, everything will be sharply in focus.) Another part of the official doctrine is that it is fine and laudable to be a spiteful person, to nurse spiteful feelings and express spiteful sentiments against everything evil and sick - everything that is not Randist. Three-quarters of Rand's essays are exercises in unremitting spitefulness. (In a review of Barbara Branden's book, Peter Schwartz declares: "Ayn Rand does not need me to defend her against lice." Circular letter to readers of *The Intellectual Activist*, 20th August 1986. To appreciate that sort of remark, you need to understand not merely that Schwartz doesn't feel ashamed of having written it, and not merely that he pats himself on the head for having written it, but that he pats himself on the head because it is such a very rational thing to write. He abandons all intelligent discrimination to let loose his infantile rage, and is able to feel that this is a worthy and heroic, because supremely rational, way to behave.)

'*The Virtue of Selfishness*' sounds like a serious challenge to conventional thinking, or at least an echo of Stirner, but because 'selfishness' is redefined, most of traditional bourgeois morality

comes out unscathed. What Randism adds is the denigration of common decencies. Randism excoriates 'whims', but since the reasoning performed by Randists is so slovenly, it amounts to a rationalisation of whims usually nasty ones. Randism is a Gospel of Spleen.