

Alyssa – a Tribute

My warm and lasting appreciation of a true genius, Ayn Rand

As I write this, I'm seventy-eight years old, a year older than Ayn Rand was when she died – on March 6, 1982. Seven years ago, in 2013, I suffered a near-fatal stroke, a sub-arachnoid haemorrhage, but was saved by the quick thinking of my wife, Rachel – who didn't panic, just got me into hospital as fast as possible – and by some brilliant modern surgery (I believe developed in the USA) carried out by Professor Stefan Zigmunt at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Birmingham, England, assisted by neuroradiologist Dr Swarupsinh Chavda. The operation involved inserting a miniscule camera and tiny stents through my veins to locate and seal the ruptured arteries. Professor Zigmunt placed the stents, Dr Chavda guided him to the ruptures.

I have made a truly remarkable recovery. I do have a few small residual physical defects, but I'm one of only about 15% of such stroke victims who survive reasonably intact. Dr Chavda told me afterwards that most simply drop dead, die in hospital anyway, or are left permanently crippled. Myself, I'm alive and well and happy and as grateful as anybody can be to those I've mentioned. Every morning when I wake up I'm conscious of the indescribable preciousness of life, and know that without those incredibly skilled doctors, and of course the many others who contributed unnamed in the background – ambulance drivers, anaesthetists, hospital technicians, nurses – I would not be here to rejoice in it.

While recuperating, I put together two e-book collections of critical essays I had written over preceding years: *Karl Popper and I* and the present one, *Ayn Rand and I*. I then got on with other work, publishing a book of poetry; a novel; writing another novel and several book reviews, and revising and greatly condensing the manifesto for a putative libertarian political party which I had first published in 1991. Altogether seven more years of productive and highly enjoyable life. I am a very lucky man.

Subsequently, a series of unrelated events led me to realise that while I had been very critical of Rand, particularly of her politics, I had not given her anywhere near enough credit for her enormous achievements – *in the face of huge obstacles*: such as getting out of Soviet Russia; learning how to write superbly well in a very different language; breaking into the sceptical world of US publishing, and developing a new philosophy which flew in the face of the insidious, omnipresent, Judeo-Christian tradition which has so undercut and distorted Western civilisation.

To balance things up, therefore, I want to make it clear – out loud and at length – that Alysa Rosenbaum (I prefer Alyssa) from St Petersburg, Russia, who wrote as Ayn Rand, had the most profoundly beneficial effect on my life, and also to join the many others who have already done so in restating, no, *trumpeting*, loud and long, just how incredibly *good* she was, both as a writer and as a philosopher.

To repeat what I said in the Introduction to this collection, I first encountered Rand in 1963, in Montreal, Quebec, shortly after arriving in Canada as a callow twenty-year-old immigrant from England. I took this slim little paperback called *Anthem* off a friend's bookshelf one Sunday morning. I'd seen it there for a while,

but because I'd never heard of the author, I had read, or at least perused, most of the other books first.

Anyhow, I opened the book, and was hooked from the first line: "It's a sin to write this." Perhaps being sent to a Roman Catholic boarding school at the age of seven and having the concept of 'sin' rammed down my throat for the next ten years had something to do with it; but the idea that it was a sin to write, evidently in secret, and in danger, was for me the grab hook of all time.

An hour or so later, I was in a state of near rapture. What an incredible book! The hundred-odd brief pages had more impact on me than anything or everything I'd read up till then. That afternoon I read it again. After work next evening, I went straight to Montreal's Public Library and to my delight found this massive novel, *Atlas Shrugged*. I don't think I need say any more. I've been a passionate admirer of Ayn Rand ever since.

Going back a bit further, when I told my father one day – I was fifteen or sixteen at the time – that I'd love to go to Oxford University he told me, emphatically, "you are not university material." My extremely expensive, private secondary boarding school (in England, a 'public school') evidently shared that view. The headmaster even suggested to my father that I should go to the local technical college and learn a trade. Perhaps my father meant 'you are not *scholarship* material (true enough no doubt) and I can't afford to send you to university without a scholarship' but that's not what he said. In any case, the lasting consequence of those parental and pastoral attitudes was that I left school aged seventeen with the conviction that I was not very bright.

However, reading *Atlas* inspired me to test that view. I first applied to McGill University in Montreal but, although I had two A Levels, in English and French, I had not passed either Latin or Maths 'O' Level, so was rejected. The first subject I had thought pointless, who spoke Latin? The second I found utterly boring, a sentiment that continues to this day. I see numbers, my brain goes on strike. Yet, eventually, I was admitted to Carleton University in Ottawa as a 'mature matriculant', I was by then 24. To my complete astonishment I got 'A's in my first essays. Not so dumb after all.

I had intended to take a degree in philosophy. But when I found out that the philosophy faculty included a Jesuit priest, a Methodist minister, a card-carrying member of the Canadian Communist Party, a linguistic analyst and sundry others of that ilk, I took history instead. It was a struggle. I was a quarrelsome Randroid trying to overcome the negative self-assessment I had brought with me from England. It took longer than necessary – including a break of two years – but eventually I was awarded my degree in History. My parents flew over from England for the graduation ceremony. My father said nothing about his earlier judgement. Neither did I. I didn't remember it at the time. I was just happy, finally, to have a BA!

What is so good about Ayn Rand? Many have criticised her style. Her writing is very economical so some find it cold and dry. But surely using only such words as are necessary is the hallmark of good writing? It also gives great power, which Rand's work has in abundance. The French have a word for it, '*dépaillé*', which means 'straw removed'. There is no straw padding in Rand's work, nor any chaff. I

don't think there's a spare comma in *Atlas Shrugged*, all 1168 pages of it. There is a bit of *over-use* of some terms, such as 'looter' but when used it is always exactly to the point.

A couple of brief examples to show how well Rand wrote will have to suffice here. This is from the account on page 49 of Jim Taggart's meeting with his cronies in a low, windowless, dank 'cellar' – the most expensive bar-room in New York – at the top of a sixty-floor skyscraper: "There was a small bar in a dark corner of the room, where an old, wizened bartender stood for long stretches of time without moving. When called upon, he moved with contemptuous slowness. His job was that of servant to men's relaxation and pleasure, but his manner was that of an embittered quack ministering to some guilty disease."

In total contrast, on page 95, here's a description of Dagny walking with Francisco during their childhood; "... later, when they went on through the woods, down a narrow path of damp earth, ferns and sunlight ...". In scarce a dozen words Rand has taken us to a summer's day beside the Hudson River. There are few pages in my copy of the book without a thin pencil mark indicating a striking sentence or insight.

Rand has also been accused of poor characterisation. That is utter nonsense. In the first three chapters of the novel we are introduced to Eddie Willers, a loyal but bewildered employee; his childhood friend and forthright employer, Dagny Taggart, the book's brave, tough, incredibly hard-working heroine; her parasitic, conniving and useless brother, Jim; Hank Rearden, one of three leading male figures, and my favourite, because of the struggles he has to fight through; his repellent wife, Lillian, and various minor characters, all depicted in lean, clear sentences which go directly to the essence of their personalities. John Galt, the main hero, has often been criticised for being remote and inhuman. But when one recalls what he set out to do, and achieved, he is a colossus, even if on a pedestal of attainment few of us can reach.

Atlas Shrugged is also startlingly prescient. There are thousands of Bertram Scudders in our 'main stream media'. Industry is manned by many an Orren Boyle. Science has its share of Robert Stadlers. And, tragically, our youth has been educated by Dr Ferris and not by Dr Akston. Most significantly, China's Covid-19 virus would probably have been no more worrisome than the common cold if the US Federal Drug Administration (a 'State Science Institute') and others like it worldwide, had not been so effective in stifling medical progress.

The plot of *Atlas Shrugged* is one of the marvels of world literature: long, complex, ingeniously mysterious, and perfectly integrated with the characters who make it unfold.

When one combines these brilliantly constructed and interwoven elements – writing, characters, plot – it is impossible to feel anything other than the uttermost contempt for those who deride Ayn Rand's ability. The worst was the former communist spy, American Whittaker Chambers, a repulsive, craven nobody, who wrote in the Roman Catholic edited journal *National Review*, "from almost any page of *Atlas Shrugged* a voice can be heard ... commanding: 'To a gas chamber – go!'" which has to be the most despicable lie and libel ever printed in Rand's adopted

homeland. William Buckley, the editor, deserved the tortures of his imaginary Hell as much as did his traitorous pal Chambers for allowing such filth into his second rate, tawdry journal.

More recently, in the UK, we have seen a similar, though less poisonous, effort from a publisher's editor who wrote a spiteful little smear piece in a soon defunct A3 magazine comparing Rand to a science fiction writer (of whom I still haven't heard twenty years later) saying 'he could really write' as if Rand couldn't. The editor's own claim to recognition at the time – a turgid, boring thesis, almost entirely devoid of concrete evidence for his case – hardly even ranks as a doorstop. Perhaps needless to say, what animated the man's spite was deep and long-held prejudice. The editor was a devotee of one of Rand's opposites, the arch-sceptic Karl Popper, whose own heroes were Hume and Kant.

Ayn Rand the philosopher has met with similar disdain. Failing to conform to any of the isms of 'modern philosophy' – subjectivism, emotivism, determinism, scepticism, cynicism, nihilism – or the sheer gibberish of clowns like Wittgenstein, she is usually dismissed as an inconsequential amateur. I once heard a contemporary philosopher, who had been highly influenced by Rand, Tibor Machan, admit to an audience in London, UK, that he found acknowledging her influence on him to professional colleagues to be 'embarrassing.'

The heart of the matter is that philosophy after Hume and Kant slowly degenerated into literal nothingness, as the German National Socialist Martin Heidegger, and the French communist Jean-Paul Sartre, would have us believe is its proper destiny. Rand, in sharp contrast, sought to redirect the discipline towards its true objective: creating a guide for human beings to show them how they might live successfully and happily on earth. Her greatest strength was her perceptiveness, her ability to think hard about a philosophical topic then to see right through to the core of it and thus to observe what was wrong with current fashionable trends.

Typical of this was her approach to concept formation in the most crucial area of philosophy, epistemology, the study of the foundations of knowledge. The American philosopher, Wallace Matson, said Rand's *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology* (in which she developed her insight that concepts are 'open-ended') was the best work in philosophy he'd read in fifty years. And, as a professional teacher of philosophy, he didn't read much else. Likewise, another doctor of philosophy, the adventurer Jack Wheeler, said Rand's contribution to ethics (in which she demolished the morality of altruism with its ideal of self-sacrifice and validated rational egoism) was 'immense.'

But Rand was not a member of the gang. She didn't engage in elaborate games with symbolic logic, nor contribute to journals where 'publish or perish' professionals competed in showing off obscure erudition to obscurantist peers. She was too clear, too blunt, too popular, too *financially successful* to be taken seriously in academe, except by a discerning few. There have been and are many highly intelligent and able men and women who have taught philosophy to students over the years but those who realise, or know, or acknowledge publicly, just how great a contribution Rand made to philosophy are few and far between.

Did Ayn Rand ever go wrong? Of course. She was human. Some instances. She was mistaken in her view of politics, numerous examples from ethnohistory and other historical records show that government is not the necessity she thought. She appeared to know little about anthropology or ethnography and hence misunderstood and misrepresented the role of chiefs in earlier societies. She tended to use her own personal taste as a yardstick for her judgements in aesthetics, particularly in the area she called ‘sense of life.’ She was mistaken in her analysis of the nature of human romantic love and was very unrealistic about it in her own life. She ignored the vital part played in human life by our inherited nature as animal beings. She also, in my opinion, rather over-emphasised the role of reason in our lives and occasionally gave the impression that emotions are of secondary importance, whereas in fact they are integral to proper human functioning – including the exercise of reason. But for someone who was breaking so much new ground, and who achieved so much in other areas, especially as a novelist, her mistakes, if they are such, hardly matter.

Other critics, such as Michael Huemer and Ari Armstrong, have questioned the foundations of Rand’s ethics, her most important contribution to philosophy, each from a different point of view. But that is the role of the critic. One of Karl Popper’s rare strengths was his stress on dis-confirmation, the need to seek out and be aware of possible flaws in any theory. It’s hardly surprising if there are some in Rand’s. She only finished writing “The Objectivist Ethics” in the back of the limo on her way to the lecture hall. It may well be that time and continued examination will transform Objectivist ethical theory – which does need some refinement, amplification and clarification – into something quite different from the slim set of premises which students of Rand’s ideas explore today.

Whatever the case may prove to be in that respect, it must be acknowledged besides that Rand could be difficult to know as a person. Barbara Branden’s excellent biography, *The Passion of Ayn Rand*, and Nathaniel Branden’s *Judgement Day*, make this clear. Rand was prickly and pernickety; took criticism badly; demanded total agreement with her every dictum; didn’t understand joshing humour, as displayed most notably in her break with John Hospers; bore grudges; was occasionally dishonest, or at least was so focussed on her own views that she was unaware of behaving in conflict with them herself; and, shame on her, didn’t like Shakespeare – or Beethoven!

Otherwise, to me, she was the closest thing to a goddess there ever was. I do not worship her, the way some of her followers do, taking her every word as Gospel. I do not worship any person or thing. I do *love* her though. And, for myself, love is quite enough. I shall love Alyssa to my dying breath.

Herefordshire, England, September 2020.

PS: As luck would have it, I finally saw the name of the ‘science fiction writer’ I referred to in a television programme guide shortly after completing the above. I’m sure he’s very good. I enjoyed a lot of science fiction at one time – a long time ago now – but never saw his name on anything I read, nor had I come across it anywhere else since.