

AYN RAND:  
A BRIDGE TO A MODERN ROMANTIC  
MOVEMENT?

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ROOTS OF OUR ROMANTICISM

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In regard to Romanticism, I have  
often thought that I am a bridge  
from the unidentified past  
to the future

AYN RAND

This paper is written on the premise that Ayn Rand and Romanticism are not complimentary entities. Ayn Rand is self-deluded in considering herself a Romantic and has misconceived her place in any future movement based in Romanticism. Her self-delusion is evident in a comparison between her twentieth century Objectivist philosophy and Romantic philosophy as developed and expounded after the nineteenth century Romantic revolution. Ayn Rand's objectivism is a nearly pure enlightenment philosophy. Only her emphasis on individualism and idealism lend credence to her claim of being a Romantic.

Romantic philosophy was the culmination of basic attitude changes in western European civilization during the course of the eighteenth century. The changes in attitudes led to a questioning of established epistemological and metaphysical constructions<sup>1</sup> to see if these constructions were valid. Validation of metaphysical systems in the past had been based on faith, but faith now gave way to doubt as a source of epistemological ground rules for grasping Reality. The result was predictable. Man no longer believed that God or Science was the unquestioned source of mankind's concepts dealing with the purpose and place of man in the universe.

Doubt was the earthquake that shook the foundations of western culture. The epicenter of the earthquake was located in Romantic philosophy's separation of subject from object. Objective Reality became a source of doubt. No one could be sure what value was or that the natural universe had value. Subjectivism became the source for

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<sup>1</sup>Epistemology is defined as: Part of philosophy that deals with the origin, nature, and limits of knowledge.

Metaphysics is defined as: Branch of philosophy that tries to explain reality and knowledge; the philosophical study of the real nature of the universe.

Thorndike Barnhart Comprehensive Desk Dictionary, (Garden City, N.Y. Doubleday & Company, Inc. 1957)

metaphysical and epistemological abstractions and these abstractions were considered as only potentially true. Truth was no longer a certainty. Because of this, "the Romantic Artist was forced to make a psychological commitment to his work"<sup>2</sup> to see his vision of Reality as truth when truth was merely a subjective, potential Reality. The ultimate conviction that could be held was to say that

a metaphysic with it's derived value system cannot be an absolute, that the only absolute, at best, is the drive to a metaphysic, the drive to order and value, never to a particular order or a particular set of values.<sup>3</sup>

The break between subject and object meant that man had to develop his own sense of values and his own value system based on the mind's structure.<sup>4</sup>

The mind had to except one important qualification in the subjective view of Reality. The Romantics discovered that their explanation of Reality still needed to be based on some kind of objective Reality. The world outside the self had to have value of it's own accord. The subject-object dualism became a problem of why the values of man and nature could not be the same. The problem was that man could not perceive or understand the immanent order and meaning in the natural universe.

Man had once had an answer to this question prior to the Romantic revolution. Enlightenment metaphysics stated;

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<sup>2</sup>Barbara Frankel. Statement made in "Roots of Our Romanticism" seminar 16 May 1977

<sup>3</sup>Morris Peckham. Romanticism: The Culture of the Nineteenth Century, New York; George Braziller, Inc., 1965): p.28

<sup>4</sup>Re Morris Peckham for detailed development of the subject-object dualism problem.



The adaptation of the organism to the environment is properly the basis of all scientific and moral decisions; the aim was to make every scientific decision a moral one, and every moral decision a scientific one.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, the natural universe already had a precise order and meaning from which man could derive all his values. The Romantics doubted the enlightenment answer because a world with a prescribed order which could be understood left no room for the use of imagination. A world of order could be completely explained. The Romantics saw too many contradictions between what they perceived and what enlightenment metaphysics told them. The enlightenment philosophers had not accounted for mysticism and imagination.

A dependence on imagination rather than on rules of order was necessarily a shaky foundation from which to produce art. The absolute assuredness of where to put the next brush stroke and what color to use in a composition (Neo-classicism), gave way initially to a chaotic search for meaningful Archetypes from the past. The emotions were expected to guide the artist not only in his search for meaningful archetypes from folklore, but also guide the imaginative re-working of the archetype chosen as a model for his work. Individualism, idealism, primacy of the creative imagination, the importance of feeling, the subjective perception of nature, and the use of symbolic imagery were all important ingredients in Romantic art.

Art had another quality which was seen only through the subjective eyes of the Romantic. Art had a redemptive function as well as an

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<sup>5</sup>Morris Peckham. p.17.

aesthetic one. Art was not a means to an end as it had been in the ages preceding Romanticism. Art was valued by the Romantics because it made possible communication with the immanent unknowable character of the natural universe allowing the artist to abstract the order and meaning through his personal metaphysical perception and to present Reality as he perceived it in a concrete form.

The search for value was rampant in the nineteenth century. The Romantic revolution was a result of this search for value. The only satisfactory means the Romantics had found for expressing their opinions of Reality was through an art based on imagination and imagery. Romantic art never did transcend the subject-object dualism nor has any of the subsequent art modes. The future of Romanticism lies in the transcendence and final unification of subject and object in a manner which does not limit the use of imagination.

Romanticism has come down to the twentieth century in many modes of expression. There has been a permeation of western culture to the extent that individuals in all levels of society have some kind of Romantic tendencies. As an individual, Ayn Rand is no exception. Though she thinks of herself as a bridge to a Romantic Renaissance, in actuality Rand's philosophy is clearly derived from enlightenment principles. Her claim to being a Romantic amounts either to ignorance of what constitutes Romanticism, or an attempt to redefine Romanticism in her own terms. Ayn Rand has attempted the latter.

Rand purposely defines Romanticism knowing that a dictionary definition agreeable to all is impossible. Volition<sup>6</sup> she says, is the key to whether or not a person is or is not a Romantic.

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<sup>6</sup>Volition is Defined as: 1. Act of willing. 2. Power of willing  
Thorndike Barnhart Dictionary.

Romanticism is a category of art based on the principle that man possesses the faculty of volition."<sup>7</sup>

Though Rand knows this definition is indefensible (as is any short definition of Romanticism), she uses it as a defense on other controversial points on Romanticism. She has obviously decided that her definition is correct though few people now or in the past would agree that Romanticism can be defined or that Ayn Rand's definition is a suitable one.<sup>8</sup>

Ayn Rand writes both fiction and non-fiction in this self-righteous, iron-willed way. Her heroes reflect her attitudes. The basic Romantic element that does continually grace the stories of Ayn Rand is Individualism. The heroes of her books are always concerned with individual freedom and they are always an abstraction of man's highest potentiality as Ayn Rand foresees. Heroes of Randian concoction are in no way as deep conceptually as those of the best Romantic writers. Nietzsche's concept of the "Overman" is by far a more abstract conception of mankind's potential. Nietzsche foresaw the Overman as a ruler over humanity. Rand states that "to rule is an unworthy occupation for a hero."<sup>9</sup> She sees man as a being able to choose his values, to achieve his goals and control his own existence. Thus, the hero goes against the false society, a society that alienates only those who do productive work and are rugged individualists, self-righteous, and iron-willed. (re. Atlas Shrugged).

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<sup>7</sup>Ayn Rand. The Romantic Manifesto, (New York:New American Library, Inc., 1971): p.99.

<sup>8</sup>Lillian R. Furst. Romanticism, (London:Methuen & Co. Ltd. 1976): see pages 1-5 for definitions which agree and disagree with Rand's.

<sup>9</sup>Nathaniel Branden. Who is Ayn Rand? (New York:Random House, 1962): p. 165.

Ayn Rand wholeheartedly supports the society and culture of the United States of America. In it's ideal form, American society is a product of enlightenment philosophy, American culture a product of the industrial revelation. In a culture based on the Industrial revelation, Laissez Faire capitalism causes an individual to sink or swim according to his ability to adapt himself to his environment. Some individuals manage to shape their own environment and these are the individuals who Ayn Rand visualizes as ideal men. Environments (nature) are for men to manipulate to their best advantage. Nature has no qualities that cannot be understood and explained by man. This attitude is a product of enlightenment metaphysics. There are no mystical or supernatural qualities in nature in enlightenment metaphysics, but for the Romantics there were. The Romantics worshipped the mystery in nature, Ayn Rand, a product of Enlightenment thought, worships REASON.

Ayn Rand calls the worship of Reason in art, "Romanticism". She derives the principle of volition in Romanticism from Aristotelianism. To Ayn Rand, Romanticism is,

the result of two great influences: Aristotelianism, which liberated man by validating the power of his mind-and Capitalism, which gave man's mind the freedom to translate ideas into practice."<sup>10</sup>

For the Romantics of the nineteenth century Aristotle was not a creditable source of ideas. Platonism was the excepted root of Romantic philosophy and Capitalism was despised even by some of the industrialists who

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<sup>10</sup>Ayn Rand. The Romantic Manifesto, p.103.



attempted to set up socialistic utopias. Volition may be a gift that man can exercise but it is doubtful that such a concept can be the solitary basis for cultural movement as broad as Romanticism.

Ayn Rand believed that volition can be used as the defining characteristic of Romanticism. She lists her favorite Romantic artists and works and claims that they are her favorites because they exhibit a full commitment to the premise of volition. Victor Hugo and Dostoevsky are the two most consistent literary figures in their commitment to volition. Friedrich Schiller and Edmond Rostand are her favorite playwrights. The two literary works which exemplify the commitment to volition the most are, Henryk Sienkiewicz's Quo Vadis, and Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter. In pictorial art Ayn Rand prefers the "sharp-luminescent" style of Salvador Dali and the "brilliant clarity of style" of Vermeer to Rembrandt's style of "deliberately blurring and visual distortion" and Cubism's "rebellion against consciousness." These two latter artists Ayn Rand would not consider Romantics.<sup>11</sup>

Volition is what makes a Romantic a Romantic in the mind of Ayn Rand. Volition must be used in all spheres of human awareness, "in regard to consciousness and to existence, in regard to man's character and to his actions in the physical world."<sup>12</sup> In essence, the concept of volition brings up the question of whether man <sup>can</sup> gain accurate knowledge about the nature of the world and Reality? Ayn Rand Says "yes!" the Romantics said "No!"

The Romantic philosophers could only answer "no" to the question of man's ability to gain accurate knowledge of Reality. The introduction of the objective-subjective elemental split into the consciousness

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<sup>11</sup>Ayn Rand, The Romantic Manifesto, p.41.

<sup>12</sup>Ayn Rand. The Romantic Manifesto, p.107.

of mankind had been a product of their thinking. The Romantics were the great teachers of subjectivism. Ayn Rand is an avowed objectivist, the exact antithesis of Romanticism.

Subjectivism makes the evaluation of all things relative to the individual. All values are derived from the mind's structure. The external world (nature) has no value except that which it is given by the mind. Objectivism gives the world an a priori value that is discoverable by the mind. Ayn Rand's philosophy doubts not the world but the ideas of the men who doubt the world. What she finds questionable as values are the concepts and ideas of mankind that do not agree with her own.

Rand is a self-proclaimed moralist, and her morality is based upon the ethical system established by the Objectivist philosophy.<sup>13</sup> The Objectivist ethics are based upon the "principle of the trader." This principle states that two people who produce goods or provide services should trade value for value in the event that they wish to obtain each other's goods or services. The trader principle extends to all spheres of human activity in objectivist ethics, from economic transactions to emotional attachments. Every human being is a separate entity and therefore can function as a trader through their own volition.

The ethics of Objectivism is dependent on the two branches of philosophy, epistemology and metaphysics. In her writings on epistemology, Ayn Rand states that all things depend on man's ability to conceptualize. To conceptualize is an ability that only man can perform. It is the ability to abstract common characteristics from a multitude of perceived units and to create an archetype which

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<sup>13</sup>Nathaniel Branden. Who is Ayn Rand, p. 197

describes the essence of a perceived object. This enables man to build increasingly more abstract concepts, and eventually systems of thought. The ability to conceptualize enables man to construct metaphysical systems. Metaphysical systems enable man to be more efficient in daily life and are in fact indispensable to life itself. Metaphysically, the ability to conceptualize enables man to be an end in himself, not the means to an end, (i.e. not the creation of a God for that god's enjoyment). Man is the supreme being in the Universe and he exists to find and keep his own happiness.

Religion is a primitive form of metaphysics and has its own ethical system. Many of the men involved in the Romantic movement were religious though in an unorthodox way. Many if not most Romantics were not believers in Christianity but did believe in some kind of deity be it a specific god or a "life force". Ayn Rand believes that "the concept of god is morally evil."<sup>14</sup> She goes further to state that if man was created by a god as in Christianity, he could not be created evil. "If man is evil by birth, he has no will, no power to change it ; if he has no will, he can be neither good nor evil; a robot is amoral."<sup>15</sup> Through reasoning like the above Ayn Rand became an atheist at the age of thirteen. She came to believe that any belief in mythology, supernaturalism, mysticism, or anything non-rational or non-definable has no existence.<sup>16</sup> This is far different from the Romantic point of view held by such artists as Goethe and Goya who believed in internal, not external ghosts and monsters that the mind can produce spontaneously.

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<sup>14</sup>Nathaniel Branden. Who is Ayn Rand, p.162.

<sup>15</sup>Ayn Rand. For the New Intellectual, (New York:Random House, 1961): p.163.

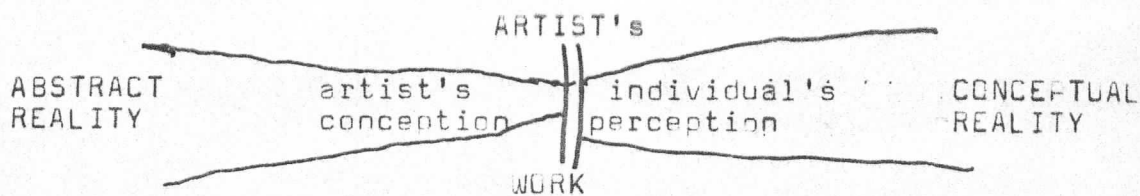
<sup>16</sup>Ayn Rand. The Virtue of Selfishness, (New York:The New American Library of World Literature, Inc. 1964): p.26.

The Romantics of the nineteenth century knew the world to be full of the unknowable, mystical, and sublime.

The Romantic artist depended on the world of the unknowables, the mysterious, and the mystical. The very basis of their art was the imagination, an unknowable unknown. Art became important to the world because of the artist's ability to re-create the unknowable reality of nature. Art produced through the workings of the imagination was the vehicle by which this reality could be brought into the domain of human awareness and experience.

Ayn Rand sees the importance of art in a similar way and this may be the only realm in which she holds similar views. "Art brings man's concepts to the perceptual level of his consciousness and allows him to grasp them directly, as if they were percepts."<sup>17</sup> The simplification of concepts to a perceptual level is inherently an interpreter's job. The artist is the interpreter of Reality for the rest of humanity, even though he interprets Reality through his own "sense of life"<sup>18</sup> and philosophy.

A diagram of the artist's relation to the abstract reality and his function as interpreter would look thus according to Rand's view:



The artist perceives an abstract reality which he conceptualizes and

<sup>17</sup>Ayn Rand. The Romantic Manifesto, p.20.

<sup>18</sup>Ayn Rand. The Romantic Manifesto, p.29. see also p.34.  
"a pre-conceptual equivalent of metaphysics, an emotional, subconsciously integrated appraisal of man and of existence."



presents as his work. The person perceiving the work re-interprets the work through his own sense of life and philosophy and arrives at a new synthesized conceptual Reality. This process is workable only as long as the art work is appreciated by the perceiver and is a legitimate description of reality.

The artist's importance for both Ayn Rand and the nineteenth century Romantics is centered around the perceptual problems of Reality. The agreement only extends to the importance of art. Ayn Rand is not a Romantic outside the world of art. Within the world of art she shares certain common traits with the Romantics. She is opposed to arbitrary rules and rule making in artistic creation. She believes that the only rules one should follow in producing art is the rule of rationality; does the work contribute to the glorification of man and the improvement of the mind of man in a logical manner, meaning that art must be an idealization towards which the observer can strive. Anything not of such an idealized nature is poor art and a result of a mistaken metaphysical belief, and therefore, not Romanticism.<sup>19</sup>

one begins to wonder if perhaps this rule is one the Romantics of the nineteenth century would have accepted. The Romantics concluded that one metaphysical system was no more correct than any other, or rather, that they could never know which was the correct system.<sup>20</sup> They did take note of the importance of having a metaphysic as does Ayn Rand. All knew that man cannot live outside of a metaphysical system.

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<sup>19</sup>Ayn Rand. The Romantic Manifesto, see debate on Naturalism vs. Romanticism. p.23.

<sup>20</sup>Morris Peckham. Romanticism: The Culture of the Nineteenth Century, p.28.

Comparisons between the ideas and values of Ayn Rand and the Romantics could conceivably continue forever. Currently a question needs to be answered. Is Ayn Rand a bridge to a modern Romantic movement? To say that she is not such a bridge would be too easy. She does not fit the description of a Romantic, but the important fact is that she has written a book<sup>21</sup> calling for a return to Romantic ideals, though her own ideals more closely resemble enlightenment ideals. However, Ayn Rand's future Romantic movement cannot occur as she foresees it. In essence, it is an impossibility. The Renaissance was not the cultural equivalent of classical Greece and Rome, nor did it resemble the classic period in anything more than a few basic principles. It was not a recurrence but an extension of Greek and Roman culture. A new Romantic movement would resemble the Renaissance in this way. Mankind cannot return to past cultural aesthetics without destroying the beauty of spontaneity. Witness the works of the Neo-Classicists. The Romantics rebelled from a culture that allowed little if any creative use of the imagination. A return to the Romantic culture of the nineteenth century would result in a similar stifling of creativity that resulted from Neo-Classicism.

Perhaps Ayn Rand may be a bridge to some kind of modern movement in aesthetics or philosophy, but any future movement will not be through her efforts alone. Many individuals are currently seeking solutions for the problems that were brought to man's consciousness during the Romantic revolution. The basic problem remains an enigma. The individual who is able to transcend and unite subject to object will be the true bridge to a modern Romanticism. Ayn Rand cannot be such a bridge, she can only be the architect of a bridge designed to reach the paradise of her own ideals.

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<sup>21</sup>The Romantic Manifesto, A Philosophy of Literature

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