

# Ayn Rand's Atlas Shrugged: From Romantic Fallacy to Holocaustic Imagination

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"The only authentic *epochê* is ... victory over desire, victory over Promethean pride."

—René Girard<sup>1</sup>

"When the SS torturer becomes the villain of the war film, he is turned into a sacrificial figure, a scapegoat, [he becomes the] structural equivalent of the Jud Süß in Nazi cinema."

—Eric Gans<sup>2</sup>

## I

NO ACCOUNT OF Ayn Rand's (1905-1982) sprawling, morally incoherent end-of-the-world story *Atlas Shrugged* (1957)<sup>3</sup> can begin elsewhere than in an acknowledgment of the way in which the novel's fascinating spectacle can draw a reader in despite himself. This spectacle is the book's secret, which the present essay aims to investigate.

The British writer Colin Wilson gives a typical account.<sup>4</sup> He first became conscious of Rand's work while lecturing in America in the autumn of 1961; university students would ask him his opinion about her. He responded that he had never heard of Rand, whereupon, as he writes, "somebody presented me with paperback copies of her two major novels,

*The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*—the latter more than 1,000 pages long."<sup>5</sup> Delving into the former, Wilson found himself "immediately put off by the rhetorical tone of the opening," which he quotes: "Howard Roark laughed.... He stood naked at the edge of a cliff," and so forth.<sup>6</sup> Turning to *Atlas*, Wilson writes, "I remembered that I had seen some of this book before...an immensely long speech, made over the radio by a man called John Galt...to justify individualism."<sup>7</sup> Rand's prose struck Wilson as "too wordy" and he had, on that former occasion, "given it up."<sup>8</sup>

When students now would ask what Wilson thought of Rand, he described her as "a typical female writer, a kind of modern Marie Corelli, much given to preaching and grandiose language."<sup>9</sup> In the autumn of 1962, however, confined to bed by a severe case of influenza, Wilson revisited *Atlas*, "determined to give it a fair trial." Pushing himself through the first twenty pages, Wilson at last finished the book, finding that he "had done Miss Rand a considerable injustice" insofar as she possessed "the ability to tell a story... with a minimum of clichés."<sup>10</sup>

In Wilson's judgment, *Atlas* "has a great deal in common with Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty Four*."<sup>11</sup> Like those, "it is a tirade against collectivism and government in-

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terference with individual freedom.”<sup>12</sup> *Pace* Wilson, while one might acknowledge a few similarities, *Atlas* shows little of the political or psychological acumen of Orwell or Huxley, and none at all of their individual stylistic felicity—but this stands as a parenthesis to the criticism. No subtlety kept Wilson riveted for two days and a thousand pages but rather Rand’s broad-stroke depiction of a grand industrial *Götterdämmerung* across the three parts of the novelistic tapestry.

Rand has the technological infrastructure of North America collapsing in ruin, often with incendiary effects, while a gangster regime that has superseded the federal government systematically loots the national economy. Moral invertebrates like James Taggart, who oversees the destruction of the Taggart Transcontinental Railway, or the Al Capone-like Cuffy Meigs, the gang-leader just before the final catastrophe, exercise a kind of morbid glamor as Rand demonstrates the drastic consequences of their larceny-dis-simulated-as-altruism. The protagonists, Dagny Taggart (James’s sister) and Henry “Hank” Rearden (metallurgist-entrepreneur), search an obliterated landscape for signs of the elusive Galt, who might be either the evil agency behind all of the massive decay (“the destroyer”) or the genius-inventor whose *deus ex machina* of a free-energy motor will save civilization.

Wilson goes on to say that Rand’s *epos* inspired him with a double response. As Wilson had “always detested the ‘fallacy of insignificance’ in modern literature, the cult of smallness and meanness, the atmosphere of defeat that broods over the twentieth-century novel,” he “was delighted by the sheer health of Ayn Rand’s view.”<sup>13</sup> He can even understand, he writes, what Rand means when she extols that *virtue of selfishness* for which so many applaud or revile her, depending on their perspective: “Selfishness has always been man’s vital principle—not in

the sense of...indifference to other people but in the sense of intelligent self-interest.”<sup>14</sup> Yet while Rand might lay claim to “a considerable intellect...it is... narrow and incurious” so that, “having established to her own satisfaction that all that is wrong with the world is lack of faith in reason and its muddled ideas on self-interest and altruism, she seems to take no further interest in the history of ideas.”<sup>15</sup>

Wilson makes this pronouncement on the story of Galt’s strike against a corrupt world: “Collectivism has been established as the scapegoat that explains the decadence of our civilization” and having found her miscreant, “rather as Hitler found the Jews,” Rand “then begins her crusade.”<sup>16</sup>

Wilson’s encounter with Rand evoked an equally telling sequel. Convinced that his own critique of “the fallacy of insignificance”—in books like *The Outsider* (1956) and *Religion and the Rebel* (1957)—had points in common with Rand’s “Objectivism,” Wilson wrote to her, outlining the similarities as he saw them, with the hope of opening communications. No reply came from Rand. Instead, Rand’s then secretary, Nathaniel Branden, wrote Wilson, rebuking him: “It is possible that you do not realize the singular inappropriateness of your letter to the author of *Atlas Shrugged*. Perhaps [a study of Objectivism] will give you a new perspective on the full context in which your letter was received and appraised—and might suggest to you a new approach.”<sup>17</sup>

Wilson had mentioned in his letter his initial dislike of Rand’s work, his change of mind, and his intention to devote an essay to *Atlas*. He then cites Branden’s final sentence: “Miss Rand would be very pleased to hear of your interest in her work—when and if you correct your offense against it in the same terms that the offense was committed.”<sup>18</sup> As Wilson says, “I was somewhat staggered by this messianic tone.”<sup>19</sup>

But the “messianic tone,” a strenuous

pontification, operates everywhere in Rand, as in her followers. So too does a naïve attitude towards history and philosophy that at times can only be described as sophomoric. Consider the following excessively rhetorical question-cum-asseveration from Rand's Introduction to a paperback edition of Victor Hugo's *Ninety-Three*: "Have you ever wondered what they felt, those first men of the Renaissance, when—emerging from the long nightmare of the Middle Ages, having seen nothing but the deformed monstrosities and gargoyles of medieval art as the only reflection of man's soul—they took a new, free, unobstructed look at the world and rediscovered the statues of the Greek gods, forgotten under the piles of rubble?"<sup>20</sup>

Where to begin sounding the seismic fissures in Rand's *Weltanschauung*, as revealed in the mass of errors assumed by this verbal tit-bit? Gargoyles are part of the Gothic sculptural repertory and have a specific meaning in context, but so are radiant saints and Holy Mothers—often in the medium of translucent glass; so too are the burgesses of the cathedral-towns, the merchant-class on whose willing largesse the great lady-churches rose. The cathedral itself represents an engineering marvel unequaled until the twentieth century, but Rand, whose architect-hero in *The Fountainhead* wants to build a mile-high tower, sees only those imps and devils. Rand seems blind to the fact that what followed the centuries of Christendom was the convulsion of the Reformation, culminating in the bloody mayhem of the Thirty Years War. "Middle Ages" is, finally, a prejudicial coinage of the theosophist-cum-socialist Auguste Comte, which Rand adopts with uncritical insouciance.

There is a moment, in *Atlas*, relevant to the foregoing, when Rearden, having just subverted the kangaroo court designed to make an expropriation of his factory look legal, discovers himself to be the

object of blackmail to the same end perpetrated by the repellent Dr. Floyd Ferris of the fraudulent "National Science Institute." The blackmailer threatens to make public Rearden's affair with Taggart *soeur*. Protectively, Rearden decides to cede the patent for his miracle alloy ("Rearden Metal") to the government gang. Numb from fighting his hopeless action against the "looters," Rearden imagines, as Rand puts it, "a long line of men [who] stretched through the centuries from Plato onward, whose heir and final product was an incompetent little professor with the appearance of a gigolo and the soul of a thug."<sup>21</sup> She means Ferris, who, however, is now tied to his looming precursor, the student of Socrates and the author of *The Republic*, *Phaedrus*, *Symposium*, and the others. A specter, it would seem, haunts *Atlas Shrugged*.

The passage is odd, not least in its specificity, since Rearden, although educated and intelligent, nowhere else in the novel demonstrates any particular knowledge about the philosophical tradition or the history of ideas: to the contrary, he has to be tutored in logic, ethics, and epistemology by Francisco d'Anconia; nor, elsewhere, does Rand mention any other figure in philosophy, except for the fictional Hugh Akston. Shortly after Rearden experiences this curiously definite vision, he emerges from reverie to hear Ferris finish up his threatening speech with a naked admission: "We're after power and we mean to get it."<sup>22</sup> Rearden suddenly grasps that Ferris and his gang *require* what they so volubly despise, the virtues namely of industry and productivity, and that his years of concession to their parasitism constitute a moral lapse on his own part.

In specifying Plato as the fountainhead of the collectivist debacle that *Atlas* describes, in singling him out as the origin of all that distorts the mob-ridden contemporary world, Rand invokes her own prescient version of the "vast right-

wing conspiracy” that figures in recent left-liberal rhetoric. A type of *sortilege* has taken place: in naming the name, Rand has put responsibility where, as she sees things, it properly belongs. Those who know Rand’s work can reproduce her argument: Plato, the grandfather of group-resentment, gratuitously and falsely *divides* the world into the realm of becoming and the realm of being, stigmatizing the former as a mere pale copy of the latter. Out of envy against men of practical ability, Plato degrades material accomplishment and insists that the philosophic life—the cultivation of bodiless spirit—is the highest value. In so doing, the Hellene glorifies non-productive contemplation and rancorous dialectic at the expense of the pragmatists, the entrepreneurs and investors, *at whom* the pseudo-intellectuals superciliously sneer as coarse and vulgar, but *on whom* they depend for their security and leisure. As the Taggart in the white hat tells Rearden, the “mystics” have always preached that, “the inferior animals who’re able to produce should serve those superior beings whose superiority in the spirit consists of incompetence in the flesh.”<sup>23</sup>

The millennial queue of reality-deniers descending out of the past and stultifying the present finds its contrast, in *Atlas*, in another linear image: that of railroad tracks on a straightaway reaching to the distant vanishing point whose instrumental abolition the rails portend. Rearden and Taggart *soeure* explicitly identify their own *will* with this image near the climax of Part I of *Atlas* (“Non-Contradiction”) when they ride in the locomotive cabin during the first run on the John Galt Line in Colorado: “She saw that the track was sweeping downward, that the earth flared open, as if the mountains were flung apart—and at the bottom, at the foot of Wyatt Hill, across the dark crack of a canyon, she saw the bridge of Rearden Metal.”<sup>24</sup> The Wyatt oil fields, which the line serves, will become, the pair hope,

“the capital of... the Second Renaissance ...of oil derricks, power plants, and motors made of Rearden Metal.”<sup>25</sup>

Rand’s notion of Plato—as the arch-offender against her own matter-oriented Neo-Romanticism—rests on a breathtaking ignorance of what it would dismiss. As acute as Rand’s personifications of militant collectivism and unmitigated power-seeking are, they cannot approach in either the acumen of their insight or the depth of their analysis the diagnosis of the identical socio-pathologies in Plato’s dialogues, where figures like Thrasy-machus, Ion, Callicles, and the trio of Socrates’s accusers at his trial embody exactly the kinds of viciousness against which the *Atlas*-author, to adapt Wilson’s phrase, launches her crusade. Rearden’s trial resembles Socrates’s trial in any number of ways, except that in Rand’s Romantic conceit the hero must—eventually—triumph over his persecutors, just as Rearden and his associates triumph over the looters in the final, precipitate downfall of the ransacked world. Socrates, too, triumphs, but not pragmatically; only in his metaphysical *exemplum* does he transcend the assembly’s corrupt condemnation and so guarantee forever its ill repute.

Rearden imitates Socrates when he confounds his accusers by the simple expedient of omitting to mount any defense. The difference is that Rand preserves Rearden so that he (and she, and we) can later gloat. Again, Rand’s misrepresentation of Plato will hardly pass for original; it replicates, without acknowledgment, a similar vehement misrepresentation in Nietzsche’s treatment of both Socratic and Judaeo-Christian morality, the two of which he describes famously as kindred versions of a *slave-morality*. Rand’s term is *the sanction of the victim*, or “altruism.”

The mention of Plato, almost exactly the halfway point in the narrative, possesses an additional significance. It has

as its context a long sequence, from the beginning of the book until the end, in which the author develops a recurring theme that lies at the heart of her fiery vision. I refer to the theme of sacrifice.

## II

In his study of *The Ayn Rand Cult* (1999), Jeff Walker offers an amusing tally of recurring items in the *Atlas* vocabulary. Writes Walker: “*Destroy* or *destruction* occurs 278 times,” “*evil*... is deployed a staggering 220 times,” and “the evil of *sacrifice* or [of the] *sacrificial* requires 135 deployments.”<sup>26</sup> So it goes. Let us contemplate some instances of the last.

In Part I, quite early in the narrative, James Taggart is discussing with Eddie Willers, one of the minor protagonists, the Taggart Transcontinental Railroad’s chief current competition. The Phoenix-Durango Line has now “got most of the freight traffic of Arizona, New Mexico and Colorado.”<sup>27</sup> In particular, due to disrepair on the Taggart Transcontinental, the Phoenix-Durango’s Dan Conway has secured a contract with Ellis Wyatt of Wyatt Oil, the biggest industrialist in the region. This rankles Taggart *frère*. He describes Wyatt to Willers as “a greedy bastard who’s after nothing but money,” a “destructive, unscrupulous ruffian,” and “an irresponsible upstart who’s been grossly overrated.”<sup>28</sup> Taggart asks rhetorically: “What does he expect? That we drop all our other shippers, sacrifice the interests of the whole country to give him our trains?”<sup>29</sup> Willers replies in the negative, adding that Wyatt *expects* nothing; he merely takes his trade to those who handle it competently. Rand emphasizes from the start the resentfulness in Taggart’s character, by expression of which he compensates rhetorically for his lack of productive ability.

Taggart, as his ire suggests, assumes that existence is a zero-sum game in which wealth can only be redistributed but never increased. The idea of a *sacrifice*, of ex-

cluding one thing *for the sake of* another, thus characterizes Taggart essentially. One might note, too, the preference in Taggart’s expostulation for the collective (“the whole country”) over the individual. To do business, to make money: this, for Taggart, amounts to, and may be dismissed as, “greed.” Quite apart from the scandalous Wyatt, any competitor can appear to Taggart and his associates as an intolerable obstacle to the fulfillment of whatever wish they cherish in a given, disconnected moment. In one of their confabulations, at the end of which they affirm again their principle that “people who are afraid to sacrifice somebody have no business talking about a common purpose,” Taggart rebukes Paul Larkin’s regretful codicil—“I wish we didn’t have to hurt anybody”—with the scornful formula: “That is an anti-social attitude.”<sup>30</sup>

Earlier in the same consultation, Taggart has posed in the form of a question that, “when everybody agrees... when people are unanimous, how does one man dare to dissent?”<sup>31</sup> The palaver concludes with a toast on a Marxist theme: “Let’s drink to the sacrifices to historical necessity.”<sup>32</sup> In these bits of conversation and exposition, Rand adds to her usage of the term *sacrifice* a linkage to the extreme conformism of *unanimity*; and she makes it clear that, within the mentality indicated by the term, to flout unanimity is necessarily anathema—a case of “anti-social” behavior.

Sacrifice of this sort, the annihilation of the one for the welfare of the remainder, stems from a distinctly *unanimous*, or *collective*, rather than from any *individual*, type of resentment. The schemers invariably justify their schedule of persecution and expulsion by invoking an imminent crisis that the victim’s immolation will avert. Even the harassed Conway, whose railroad the gang dissolves in favor of Taggart’s Rio Norte Line, says to Taggart *la femme*, “I suppose somebody’s got to be sacrificed,” not excepting himself

should the lot so fall, for “men have got to get together.”<sup>33</sup>

The *Atlas* protagonists, by contrast, rebel against the trend, even when they cannot fully articulate their reasons. On the occasion just cited, Miss Taggart objects to Conway: “Nothing can make self-immolation proper.... Nothing can make it moral to destroy the best.”<sup>34</sup> In Part II of the novel (“Either-Or”), at Rearden’s trial, the defendant tells his accusers, “If it is now believed that my fellow men may sacrifice me in any manner they please for the sake of whatever they deem to be their own good, if they believe that they may seize my property simply because they need it—well, so does any burglar.”<sup>35</sup> In defining the ideal of justice, which the procedure against him so flagrantly violates, Rearden asserts that “no clash of interests” would ever divide “men who do not demand the unearned and who do not practice human sacrifices.”<sup>36</sup> The charges against him qualify, therefore, not as juridical, but as sacrificial in some anthropologically primitive sense.

When Rearden declares, “were [I] asked to immolate myself for the sake of creatures who want to survive at the price of my blood... I would reject it as the most contemptible evil,”<sup>37</sup> he earns a round of unexpected applause from part of the gallery. Yet, alongside those who cheer for his having enunciated the ethical principle, he also notes “the faces of loose-mouthed young men and maliciously unkempt females, the kind who led the booing in newsreel theaters at any appearance of a businessman on the screen.”<sup>38</sup> Let us record the excessiveness of that adverb, “*maliciously*.”

Like the naming of Plato, the adverbial excessiveness betrays a certain authorial gratuity. A simple “*unkempt*” would have served. Nevertheless, Rand has discerned something about sacrifice that those who study it among classicists and anthropologists have likewise noticed: that it works most efficiently under dissimula-

tion. The collective murderers would never admit to harming a guiltless party. Rearden’s judges respond to his candid description of what they had planned for him with calming denials: “Why do you speak of human sacrifices?” and “you do not really believe...that we wish to treat you as a sacrificial victim.”<sup>39</sup> In private, however, the gang-leaders willingly allow how “sacrifice is the cement which unites human bricks into the great edifice of society.”<sup>40</sup>

Here we do see a resemblance to the public pillorying—as in the regular “ten-minute hate”—in Orwell’s *1984*. We might also think of the 1930s show-trials under Stalin, when one purported high-level saboteur after another was offered up in public to Marxism-Leninism. The sacrificial character of the National Socialist Holocaust is self-evident; if the sacrificial character of the Soviet atrocities were less so, it should not be. Rand came to the United States as an escapee from Lenin’s Russia.

It is the presence in *Atlas* of these genuine, if not terribly original, insights that obscures something else. It is that something else that motivates me, as I have done, to call Rand’s *magnum opus* “morally incoherent.” Let me return to that excessive adverb in Rand’s sketch of Rearden’s public detractors. The superfluous “*maliciously*” belongs to another thread in Rand’s grand narrative that twines about her plausible analysis of the “mob” or “looter” psychology as collective in its nature and based on a need for victims. In her comments on fiction generally and on her own work, Rand made much of authorial omniscience, of the artist as the creator of every detail of an imaginary universe. *She* makes the background, *she* moves the characters this way or that, and she puts the words in their mouths; they are glorious or repellent according to *her* plan. This is as it must be.

Homer, in the *Odyssey*, takes care from

Book I forward, to heighten the boorishness and menace, the aggression and glut-tony, of the suitors, the better that readers might participate vicariously in the hero's slaughter of them in the climax. A story without *catharsis* hardly a story at all. Rand knows this demand of fiction and she draws her villains in broad strokes; she does this to prepare *us*, her readers, to participate vicariously in something like—yet also unlike—Odysseus's killing of the freebooters who have, during a lustrum of his absence, pilfered his larder and threatened his wife and son.

To begin ratcheting up reader outrage, Rand has the threat to Rearden come in part from his own family. Wife Lillian will eventually sum herself up in the resentful formula, "I can't produce [Henry's] metal, but I can take it away from him."<sup>41</sup> Rand admits Lillian's feminine beauty, only adding that "the eyes were the flaw," being "neither quite gray nor brown, lifelessly empty of expression."<sup>42</sup> Rand has Rearden's mother chide him for his involvement in his business: "You think that if you pay the bills, that's enough, don't you?"<sup>43</sup> Rand describes *la mère's* voice on this occasion as "half-spitting, half-begging."<sup>44</sup> Brother Philip, a whining freeloader, begs money for "The Friends of Global Progress" and claims it to be "a martyr's task."<sup>45</sup> The preparation of our ire gets under way in earnest, however, in a chapter ("The Non-Commercial") in Part I devoted to Lillian's cocktail party on the tenth anniversary of her marriage to Henry. Rand employs a cinematic technique: the authorial eye and ear, like the tracking camera, travel among the partiers registering now this, now that conversation, acquainting the spectators with key individuals among the predators-in-guise-of-saints.

Readers should interpret that whatever later befalls these self-sanctifiers, or others like them, stems from their defective theory of men and the world. *Ethos*, as Heraclitus said, *is fate*. Before sampling

the scene, I wish to state again that, in her divulgence of the "altruist" mentality, Rand seems to me accurately to have gleaned much about late-twentieth century left-liberal piety, not least its addiction to righteous display. But, to use one of her own favorite terms, her narrative builds on a *borrowed premise*.

The soirée will therefore reveal a parliament of scoundrels. Comes first Dr. Pritchett, professor of philosophy at the once venerable but now corrupt Patrick Henry College. He is a nihilist in the style of Jean-Paul Sartre or Jacques Derrida: "Man? What is man? He's just a collection of chemicals with delusions of grandeur."<sup>46</sup> According to Pritchett's wisdom, "Man's metaphysical pretensions...are preposterous"; a man is "a miserable bit of protoplasm, full of ugly little concepts and mean little emotions—and it imagines itself important!"<sup>47</sup> In the professor's opinion, "reason...is the most naïve of all superstitions" and contradictions that be devil said superstition in fact resolve themselves *a priori* in a Platonic "higher philosophical sense."<sup>48</sup> Pritchett argues how "nothing is anything."<sup>49</sup> His precursor on the faculty, Hugh Akston, taught by contrast how "everything is something."<sup>50</sup>

Comes next Balph [*sic*] Eubank, author of the novel *The Heart is a Milkman*, who opines: "the literature of the past...was a shallow fraud" that "whitewashed life in order to please the money tycoons whom it served."<sup>51</sup> Rand unveils the repellent Bertram Scudder "slouched against the bar."<sup>52</sup> He makes radio propaganda for the gang on the order of "property rights are a superstition" and "one holds property only by the courtesy of those who do not seize it."<sup>53</sup> Comes next Mort Liddy, a so-called composer, who turns on the radio so that everyone can hear a broadcast of his new composition. It is a mere jazzed up version of a melody stolen from one of *Atlas's* minor protagonists, the *real* composer Richard Halley. Liddy's score "was Halley's melody *torn apart*, its holes stuffed

with hiccoughs.”<sup>54</sup> I have italicized the phrase “torn apart” for its archly sacrificial connotation. Think of King Pentheus in Euripides’ *Bacchae*.

Later speeches and misdeeds by the “looters” constitute but variations on the basic motifs that Rand introduces during the anniversary *fête*. In Part III, when the governmental and economic crisis has just about reached its climax, Dagny Taggart tries to survey the sum of disasters. The enormity defies full assessment, but Rand’s heroine knows the cause: “So long as living flesh was prey to be devoured, [it] did [not] matter whose stomachs it had gone to fill,” especially as “there wasn’t even any way to tell who were the cannibals and who were the victims.”<sup>55</sup> When people see life as the riot of a zero-sum game, cannibalism is the inevitable result.

The logic of the sacrificial theory of life is thus the devolution of everything into a vast crisis where “cannibal” and “victim” become indistinguishable. “Men had been pushed into a pit where, shouting that man is his brother’s keeper, each was devouring his neighbor and was being devoured by his neighbor’s brother, each was proclaiming the righteousness of the unearned and wondering who was stripping the skin off his back, each was devouring himself, while screaming in terror that some unknowable evil was destroying the earth.”<sup>56</sup> So might it have been, had the Bolsheviks triumphed worldwide, as they hoped. The Ukraine famine would have been a universal rather than a local phenomenon. Why then do I say that Rand’s story requires what it pretends to reject? What is the *borrowed premise* in the saga of John Galt?

*Atlas Shrugged* is, up to a limit, a true revelation of redistributive rapacity, even of the old call to sacrifice in its twentieth-century ideological manifestation; the novel is, up to a limit, a true revelation of ideology as a reversion to the most primitive type of cultic religiosity, collective

murder as a means of appeasing a supernatural principle. It is also—it is primarily—a *sacrificial narrative*, as most of popular, as opposed to high, narrative ever has been and probably always will be. It follows that the novel’s borrowed premise *is* sacrifice: Rand invites us to view with a satisfying awe the destruction before our eyes of those who have mistreated the protagonists, with whom she has invited us to identify. The standard Arnold Schwarzenegger or Clint Eastwood thriller achieves its effect by no different means. Michael Moore’s movie *Fahrenheit 9/11* works in the same way.

The *catharsis* in *Atlas* comes not at the end, however, but around two-thirds of the way through the story. It is the superbly stage-managed Winston Tunnel disaster.

### III

Rand exerts her full ability as a storyteller to endow the calamity in the railway tunnel with the appearance of inevitability, to make it look like the entirely predictable outcome of the nihilism expressed by the “looters” at Lillian’s entertainment and elsewhere. Tom Clancy might well have learned something about the exegesis of catastrophe from Rand’s example, but earlier popular literature offers a number of precedents. Near the end of Part II of the novel, the industrial infrastructure of the country has radically deteriorated. Trains cannot keep schedule; those that do run, run at the whim of gangsters whose principle is that to want is to get. Diesels have all but disappeared. One of the few still rolling pulls the Taggart Comet. It has broken down, stranding the Comet in the Rocky Mountains.

A coterie of gangsters begins to complain, as though the inconvenience stemmed not directly from their own sustained depredation on the economy and circumvention of the law but from inimical powers. The chief miscreant, Kip Chalmers, has come from the gang’s Wash-

ington headquarters to take over a satrapy in California. Like all the other villains in *Atlas* he talks as though his *libido* were a divinity itself demanding instantaneous appeasement on every occasion. With the diesel out of commission, however, and with only a coal-fired steam locomotive available, the eight-mile-long Winston Tunnel stands as an insuperable material obstacle between Chalmers and his goal. The railroad people timidly explain this. Chalmers explodes: "Do you think I'll let your miserable technological problems interfere with crucial social issues? Do you know who I am? Tell that engineer to start moving if he values his job."<sup>57</sup>

All competent personnel having long since severed links with the Taggart Transcontinental, those still on the job are the ones who have, in Rand's recurrent and pejorative phrase, *adapted themselves* to the prevailing conditions. None wants to thwart Chalmers because to do so would put one at risk of becoming a "scapegoat."<sup>58</sup> They conform to the novel's ambient, semi-voluntary, self-abnegating *unanimity under coercion*. Hitched to a coal-burner, the Comet heads toward the Tunnel.

In earlier instances we have observed how Rand's sacrificial imagination can betray itself by a stylistic discrepancy. So it is again with the Tunnel incident. Rand always editorializes, but she rarely editorializes in such a way as to arrest the action of the story or to jolt readers out of their suspended disbelief. Something important must be at stake to compel Rand to insert the authorial passage that interposes just before the Comet, flaring and smoking, enters the lethal bore: "It is said that catastrophes are a matter of pure chance, and there were those who would have said that the passengers of the Comet were not guilty or responsible for the thing that happened to them."<sup>59</sup> Indeed they are not guilty—by the legally normative standard of justice which Rand putatively upholds in *Atlas Shrugged* and which she accuses her antagonists in the

novel's grand conflict of repeatedly and egregiously violating. Just as Rearden is guilty of no particular demonstrable moral or legal infraction at his trial, except his competence, so are the passengers on the Comet—excluding, let us say, Kip Chalmers and his retinue—not guilty *de jure* of any proven legal transgression, as none has enjoyed due process.

Who are the unnamed "*those*" in Rand's sentence who "*would have said*," absent a hearing by the rules, that, no legitimate sentence could in the moment attach to the fated ones? We can name them as any readers who at this point in the narrative might feel uneasy about what Rand proposes momentarily to execute in her role as author, she who *makes things happen*. Note how the passive inflection, "*happened*," in the sentence, as though the event could boast of no agent, dissimulates a great deal: primarily it would dissimulate the author herself, were she not, in the writing of the utterance, betraying her manipulative and determining presence. The luckless ones must be *made out as guilty*. Rand must demonstrate that the random passengers have sinned sufficiently *to substitute* for the known "looters."

Thus "the man in Bedroom A, Car No. 1, was a professor of sociology who taught that individual ability is of no consequence, that individual effort is futile, and that an individual conscience is a useless luxury."<sup>60</sup> Thus "the woman in Roomette 10, Car No. 3, was an elderly school-teacher who had spent her life turning class after class of helpless school-children into miserable cowards, by teaching them that the will of the majority is the only standard of good and evil."<sup>61</sup> Thus "the man in Roomette 3, Car No. 11, was a sniveling little neurotic who wrote cheap plays in which, as a social message, he inserted cowardly little obscenities to the effect that all businessmen were scoundrels."<sup>62</sup>

So it goes for sixteen instances—car by

car, and over a thousand words—before, in the Dantesque circumstance of the Objectivist *contrapasso*, every Jack and Jane of the mean-spirited wretches painfully asphyxiates. Just to make sure that the sentence achieves its goal, Rand has an Army munitions train enter the Tunnel at high speed from the opposite end. The resulting detonation buries the disaster under a mountainous tomb.

A passage from her recently published *Journals*<sup>63</sup> suggests that Rand must have had actual people in mind as models of those who die, with time enough to feel the pain of their deaths. Testifying before the House Un-American Activities Committee in November 1947 on Communists in the film industry, Rand called attention to William Wyler's *The Best Years of Our Lives*, for which screenwriter Robert E. Sherwood had earned Film Academy accolades in the previous year. Rand had hovered in and around Hollywood for two decades but she had never achieved a significant screen-credit; Warner Studios even farmed out the screenplay for *The Fountainhead* to someone else.

In Sherwood's script, as Rand remarks, "a returning war hero is denied a seat on a plane, to make room for an offensive businessman who is obviously rich."<sup>64</sup> Later, the same hero "takes a job in a drugstore owned by a national chain, where he is treated unfairly, offensively and antagonistically."<sup>65</sup> Finally, "the picture denounces a banker for being unwilling to give a veteran a loan without collateral, a refusal which is treated as though it were an act of greedy selfishness."<sup>66</sup> Rand characterizes the last as "the all-time low in irresponsible demagoguery on the screen."<sup>67</sup>

Readers of *Modern Age* probably react to those scenes in Wyler's film quite as Rand does, but that is not the point. I assert that Rand plausibly thought of Sherwood himself when she sent the adenoidal, second-rate playwright to his death in the Tunnel. The parallelism leads

us to suspect that in the Tunnel episode Rand composes a *cataclysm à clef*. And what then does *Atlas* become but a grand fantasy of godlike revenge, a theater of resentment assuaged, a daydream of limitless ego? In Part I of the novel, Hank Rearden says to Dagny Taggart when they have concluded a contract by which the former will supply Rearden-Metal rails for the John Galt Line: "We haven't any spiritual goals or qualities. All we're after is material things. That's all we care for."<sup>68</sup> In the morally inverted context of Rand's universe, the denial of a spiritual component functions as the equivalent of a claim to godhead. It is the "looters" who ceaselessly invoke "the spirit." They nevertheless get interred under a rocky collapse while the materialists fling aside mountains with their rails of super-alloy.

That Taggart *femme*, Rearden, d'Anconia, and Galt all qualify as Promethean supermen *à la* the vulgate of Nietzsche we can hardly doubt. The young Rand confessed herself a Nietzschean, although later she elided the enthusiasm and denounced the author of *Zarathustra*. When the remaining gangsters torture Galt to force him *to tell them what to do in order that they might save themselves* late in Part III, they treat him *as though he were a supernatural being*. Rand describes the tortured Galt in words suggesting an Adonis-Redeemer on the wheel. When the electroshock device fails, he calmly instructs his tormenter how to repair it.

Rand could see that left-liberal envy falsely attributed to the business class—or to anyone with one dollar more in his account than someone else—a supernaturally scandalous blocking-power. Rand could not see, however, that she endowed the left-wing carpers of the twentieth century with precisely the same inflated status that they perceived in all their rivals and enemies; that *they*, the Left, had become *for her* what the reviled "*bourgeoisie*" was *for them*. In their absolute magnification, righteous *ego* and

despicable *alter* achieve sublime proportion but lose their distinctness in a kind of cosmic anxiety. Eric Gans means just this when he refers, in *Signs of Paradox* (1996), to “the descent of the absolute into the empirical world” as its “undoing.”<sup>69</sup> René Girard means just this when he speaks about the overcoming of Promethean desire as the real novelistic achievement.

If, artistically speaking, *Atlas Shrugged* were merely an effective rather than a literary novel, one would necessarily still need to remark that it remains enormously popular nearly fifty years after its publication. Such is the case. It is also the case that, despite her uncompromising rejection of them, some conservatives still try to find a place for Rand in their pantheon

or make excuses for her. A wag once said that *Atlas Shrugged* is the only book of fiction guaranteed to have been read by every Republican senator, which I take for a plausible statement. It is also often the only novel—or even the only book—to have been read by the disaffected sophomore who shows up, glowering, in one’s Survey of Literature, whose semi-literate mid-term essay denounces everything except its writer’s own savage illumination. All of which suggests that at the beginning of the twenty first century, it is the universal vulgarization more than the universal politicization of culture that poses the genuine moral problem of the age. Ayn Rand’s authorship constitutes both an early symptom of, and a major influence on, that defective state.

1. *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, translated by Y. Freccero (Baltimore, 1965), 300. 2. *Signs of Paradox* (Stanford, 1996), 188. 3. Thirty-fifth anniversary edition, with an Introduction by Leonard Peikoff (New York, 1999). 4. “The Work of Ayn Rand,” in *Eagle and Earwig* (London, 1965), 210-224. 5. *Ibid.*, 210. 6. *Ibid.*, 210. 7. *Ibid.*, 210. 8. *Ibid.*, 210. 9. *Ibid.*, 210. 10. *Ibid.*, 211. 11. *Ibid.*, 211. 12. *Ibid.*, 211. 13. *Ibid.*, 212. 14. *Ibid.*, 213. 15. *Ibid.*, 213. 16. *Ibid.*, 215. 17. *Ibid.*, 223. 18. *Ibid.*, 223. 19. *Ibid.*, 223. 20. “Introduction to *Ninety-Three*,” in *The Romantic Manifesto*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York, 1975), 153. 21. *Atlas Shrugged*, 559-60. 22. *Ibid.*, 560. 23. *Ibid.*, 858-59. 24. *Ibid.*, 247. 25. *Ibid.*, 249. 26. (Chicago and La Salle, 1999), 298. 27. *Atlas*

*Shrugged*, 9. 28. *Ibid.*, 10. 29. *Ibid.*, 10. 30. *Ibid.*, 47-48. 31. *Ibid.*, 46. 32. *Ibid.*, 49. 33. *Ibid.*, 78. 34. *Ibid.*, 78. 35. *Ibid.*, 477. 36. *Ibid.*, 478. 37. *Ibid.*, 481. 38. *Ibid.*, 481. 39. *Ibid.*, 482. 40. *Ibid.*, 498. 41. *Ibid.*, 899. 42. *Ibid.*, 33. 43. *Ibid.*, 35. 44. *Ibid.*, 35. 45. *Ibid.*, 41. 46. *Ibid.*, 131. 47. *Ibid.*, 131. 48. *Ibid.*, 132. 49. *Ibid.*, 141. 50. *Ibid.*, 142. 51. *Ibid.*, 133. 52. *Ibid.*, 134. 53. *Ibid.*, 135. 54. *Ibid.*, 155. 55. *Ibid.*, 914. 56. *Ibid.*, 914. 57. *Ibid.*, 592. 58. *Ibid.*, 596. 59. *Ibid.*, 605. 60. *Ibid.*, 605. 61. *Ibid.*, 605. 62. *Ibid.*, 606. 63. *Journals of Ayn Rand*, edited by D. Harriman, Foreword by L. Peikoff (New York, 1997). 64. *Ibid.*, 367. 65. *Ibid.*, 368. 66. *Ibid.*, 368. 67. *Ibid.*, 368. 68. *Atlas*, 87. 69. Page 188.