On Nabokov, Ayn Rand and the Libertarian Mind

The author gratefully acknowledges the following permissions:

A Contracorriente/Against the Current magazine. For material on Friedrich von Hayek, in Bell-Villada, "Bye, bye Marx, and Welcome to Our Andes and Our Tropics, Herr Doktor von Hayek!", Spring 2004 issue. Reprinted by permission.

Amador Publishers. For Bell-Villada, "Hitler Reconsidered" in *The Pianist Who Liked Ayn Rand: A Novella & 13 Stories* (1998). Reprinted by permission.

The Berkshire Eagle, copyright New England Newspapers Inc. For Bell-Villada, "Larry's Unmodest Proposal" (1985) and "A Day in the Life of a Rugged Individualist" (1995). Reprinted in full, with permission.

Georges Borchardt, Inc. For Louis Begley, unpublished "Introduction" to Vladimir Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*. Reprinted by permission.

Journal of Ayn Rand Studies. For passages from Bell-Villada, "Nabokov and Rand: Kindred Ideological Spirits, Divergent Literary Aims," Fall 2001. Reprinted by permission.

University Press of Mississippi. For selected passages from Bell-Villada, *Overseas American: Growing up Gringo in the Tropics* (2005). Reprinted by permission.

Monthly Review Press. For selected passages from Bell-Villada, "*1984*: Looking Backward at Orwell's Novel of the 1940s" (May 1984) and "No More Munichs! Or, What the Media Won't Tell" (April 1988). Reprinted by permission.

Palgrave Macmillan. For extensive reuse of Bell-Villada, "On the Cold War, American Aestheticism, the Nabokov Problem—and Me." In Kelly Comfort, ed., *Art and Life in Aestheticism*, 2008. Reproduced with permission of Palgrave Macmillan.

Salmagundi magazine. For extensive reuse of Bell-Villada, "Who Was Ayn Rand?" in Winter-Spring 2004 issue. Reprinted by permission of Skidmore College.

North Adams Transcript. For Bell-Villada, "Larry the Libertarian a hardliner on Soviet negotiations," January 25, 1986; "For Larry, the Libertarian, greed can be good, even beautiful," May 7, 1986; and "Arm the Teachers and Students." March 8, 1995. Reprinted in full, with permission.

AlterNet. For Bell-Villada, "Shooting Rampages: An American Tradition," July 26, 2012. Reprinted with permission.

On Nabokov, Ayn Rand and the Libertarian Mind: What the Russian-American Odd Pair Can Tell Us about Some Values, Myths and Manias Widely Held Most Dear

By

Gene H. Bell-Villada

With a formerly suppressed introduction to Nabokov's *Speak, Memory* by the novelist Louis Begley

CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS

PUBLISHING

On Nabokov, Ayn Rand and the Libertarian Mind:
What the Russian-American Odd Pair Can Tell Us about Some Values,
Myths and Manias Widely Held Most Dear,
by Gene H. Bell-Villada

This book first published 2013

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-4438-5040-3, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-5040-7

For Audrey Dobek-Bell, “La Osa.”

In memoriam, 1945-2013

Ad ursam, iterum

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Nabokov and Rand? In the same breath? Casual readers who are literarily inclined will surely balk at the combination. Friends and colleagues have in fact expressed surprise and indeed bewilderment whenever I've mentioned to them the title and initial focus of this volume. And yet I believe that a great deal of intellectual space and common ground is shared by these two Russian-Americans. Hence this book, in which I endeavor to map out those swaths of territory.

It bears noting that I am not the first to take on such a comparison. Back in the 1990s, when the idea for this unorthodox venture was just a gleam in my eye, I was pleased and relieved to find out that D. Barton Johnson, a professor of Slavic languages at the University of California-Santa Barbara, also was pursuing researches on the very same topic.

Each of these Russian-Americans, of course, is a problematical figure, although in divergent ways: Nabokov was the absolute aesthete, Rand the propagandist and ideologue.

In dealing with Nabokov, my ambivalent—nay, conflicted—relationship to him is here fleshed out. I am a genuine admirer of his two greatest works; am less enthusiastic about some of his other writings, a few of which I consider to be either terrible artistic mistakes or bad novels in good prose. And I have found Nabokov the man to be vain and peevish, his views on both politics and art singularly dogmatic and mean-spirited. In the course of my critical and other investigations for this study, it has been a genuine consolation to discover that I was not alone in my reservations concerning the Master, even though those dissenting opinions—from man of letters Edmund Wilson to novelist Paul Russell, and many fine scholars such as Page Stegner, David Rampton, Douglas Fowler, Dean Flower, and philosopher Richard Rorty—have not been paid much heed.

Ayn Rand is another matter. Here, I feel not the least ambivalence. Along with the vast majority of literary critics, I find it difficult to take seriously either her work while rejecting everything it stands for. As a novelist, her character portrayals are propagandistic and one-dimensional, her plots childish and implausible, her ideas simplistic and cruel. And her style is unmemorable, her humor heavy-handed, her tone relentlessly didactic. Moreover, only the Rand faithful and her personality cultists

would argue that she was an admirable, caring human being. And yet, "Randianism," one must grant, is a formidable presence and mass phenomenon in today's United States. Not for nothing is a recent book by Gary Weiss entitled *Ayn Rand Nation*. Few other writers with literary aims have achieved the broad level of cultural diffusion and ideological influence gained by Rand with her two, thick novels and her later, non-fiction statements and public appearances. Rand, quite simply, is there; she cannot be ignored.

In my examination of Rand's fiction, I have elected to concentrate almost exclusively on her two major works, *Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*. They are the source books of her thinking and as such have inspired perhaps millions of young American devotees. By contrast, her first, more realistic novel, *We the Living*, set in Soviet Russia, has exerted minimal sway in U.S. life, while the underlying messages of her experimental play, *Night of January 16th,* or of her second novel, the dystopian *Anthem*, become clear only in the wake of prior acquaintance with the ideas given flesh in the later two tomes. In analyzing her work, I have endeavored to bring out the core and corollaries of Rand's thinking, and also to demonstrate precisely *how* she puts across her preachments—how her characterizations, her plotting, as well as her deliberate omissions all serve to prop up and enhance her ideological agenda. (In the process, I have found it necessary to provide a certain amount of plot summary, given that few Nabokov fans read Rand, whereas the story of Lolita and her mad lover is something like common knowledge among the educated.)

For the record, I anticipate that some Rand devotees will label me a "Rand hater," summoning up the accusation that Bell-Villada "does not understand Rand" and has not even read her writing. These are the standard formulae usually trotted out by Rand believers, who have said those very things about my earlier volume, *The Pianist Who Liked Ayn Rand: A Novella & 13 Stories*, and who have made similar comments about recent major studies of their icon by Gary Weiss, Jennifer Burns, and Anne Heller. Let me thus preempt the Randians in their predictable fits of passion!

My observations on "the libertarian mind" later in this book are aimed at placing my literary investigations within some broader contexts. Since the 1980s, the United States has seen a series of intermittent, grass-roots stirrings on the Right, has felt the ebb and flow of a radical mass movement that is heavily libertarian-inflected. This right-wing upsurge is, arguably, the most notable ideological shift and the most vocal political phenomenon of the past few decades. Prior to 1980, one could assume that the New Deal and its successor programs were firmly, safely in place. That

legacy is now being eroded, is in the crosshairs of a constant and relentless libertarian siege. Though the trend does not command a solid majority, it poses an aggressive challenge and can set the terms of engagement and the agenda for its center-to-left adversaries, as well as blocking progressive legislation. Occasionally, through various political maneuvers (for instance, redistricting) or special circumstances such as third-party candidates or the antiquated power of the Electoral College, the movement even attains significant victories from time to time.

Libertarians are not, strictly speaking, fascists, inasmuch as they still believe in and rely on the established mechanisms of democratic governance in accomplishing their ends (although some of its prominent intellectuals—von Hayek, Milton Friedman—did support the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile). Moreover, after Reagan, they have been largely lacking in charismatic leadership. Still, the Republican Party has few remaining moderates and has thus evolved into a monolithic, far-Right alliance, a Right well-imbued with much of the libertarian world-view, of which Madame Rand was the most visible pioneer as well as the most severe exponent. She is to the United States in our time what Chernyshevsky was to late-Tsarist and Soviet Russia in theirs. (See chapter 11.)

Besides literary criticism, *On Nabokov, Ayn Rand and the Libertarian Mind* has an autobiographical component. The book at hand, it should be said, is not my first effort at commenting on literature through a personal lens. My memoir, *Overseas American* (2005), includes a great deal of literary reflection; and, in a recent essay, I examine the work of Jean Rhys and Barbara Kingsolver through the knowing eyes of a displaced individual who, like the two woman novelists (one Caribbean-English, the other American), has lived the largely unacknowledged double experience of a childhood spent outside one's passport country followed by a "return" to a land not fully one's own.[1]

In this work, I expand that autobiographical focus—in various ways and for a variety of reasons. There are many great writers whom I unqualifiedly admire—say, Shakespeare, Jane Austen, Baudelaire, Samuel Beckett, Pablo Neruda, and García Márquez, to name a few. Even though the entirety of these authors' respective oeuvre is uneven, with some titles that are less achieved or less mature than others, their overall artistic worth is not in question. (Granted, French neo-classicists may have rejected the Englishman; traditionalists, Stalinists and Objectivists, rebuffed the

[1] See "On Jean Rhys, Barbara Kingsolver, and Me: Reflections on a Problem That Has No Set Name," in Bell-Villada and Nina Sichel, eds., *Writing Out of Limbo*, pp. 411-425.

Franco-Irishman; and anti-leftists, despised the Chilean and the Colombian. Those, however, are matters of the politics of taste rather than of aesthetic appraisal.) Nabokov, on the other hand, presents a highly skewed and uneven picture, while his own critical judgments are quite questionable. Yet many Nabokov specialists and cultists tend to justify most everything about him, or they ignore his less-attractive side—be it his weaker writings, his anti-Freudianism, his blanket dismissal of all abstract thought, his support of McCarthyism, his defense of the Vietnam War, and his unpleasantness both as interviewee and as presenter of his earlier work.

My divided feelings about the high-level Russian-American artificer, I should note, have haunted me since my graduate-school days. One of my first publications for a national magazine was in fact a long, harsh look at Nabokov and *Strong Opinions* in *The Nation* in 1975. Such reservations grew and made their way into portions of my *Art for Art's Sake & Literary Life* (1996). A review of the book in *Publisher's Weekly* (22 April 1996) specifically singled out those sections, speculating that Bell-Villada's "bilious analysis of Nabokov's work is likely to raise some hackles." That sentence, which made its way onto the Internet and Wikipedia, has been cited to me on more than one occasion. For years, then, it has been impossible for me not to view Nabokov as anything but a thorny topic for discussion; and perhaps I found myself in need of a whole new volume such as this in order to play out my own Nabokovian dilemma and, somehow, get it out of my system.

Rand by contrast is an author about whom I harbor no mixed feelings. Her thoughts had already been injected satirically into the narrative and the dialogues of my 1998 novella about the pianist. When actually commenting on an author one dislikes, however, some explanation is due. In the course of this book, readers will note how, in many respects, mine was a difficult childhood, the circumstances and the male parent of which could well be described as "Randian." My father was an American businessman abroad who lived for money-making at the exclusion of all else—whether these be family, parenting, community, culture, learning, entertainment, sports, or even simple physical enjoyment. Moreover, the growth and development of his three children, I realized later in life, were matters of supreme indifference to him. Parental pride and joy were not emotions he was wont to cultivate. Like Rand's emblematic hero John Galt, he worshipped the dollar and felt he owed nothing to anyone except himself.

Hence, to confront the larger, hidden premises that had made possible such an upbringing is worth the trouble and labor, if only for the purposes of catharsis and self-knowledge. Still, I should say that, over the years, I

have made the acquaintance of Randians and libertarians who have proved to be amiable souls and appreciative colleagues, and also that (if you please) my quarrel with Rand thought and Rand cult must not, in any way, be taken by them personally.

*

The two Appendices bring to this book an added dimension. They offer diverse hues and flavors. Or, to employ a musical metaphor: changes of rhythm and tempo, like the different movements of a piano sonata or string quartet. An andante cantabile in the case of Begley's essay, followed by a scherzo cum finale giocoso in my concluding spoofs. Some slow lyricism, then some concluding levity.

Novelist Louis Begley's set of ruminations on Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*, in Appendix A, was originally commissioned by Random House as an introduction to their new edition of the Russian-American's memoir. The piece, however, was scrapped at the proofs stage when, according to Mr. Begley, Nabokov's son Dmitri raised some "unspecified objections." For me it has been a personal pleasure to rescue this lovely essay (which I word-processed, line by line, using a copy of those original proofs) from the oblivion of the Boston University archives where it had been housed.

Appendix B is a group of occasional lampoons of libertarian issues that I have published over the past three decades. In some cases they are even more relevant now than when they first saw print. In the end, the satires may sum up my attitude more crisply than does my literary analysis.

*

I wish to express my gratitude to the following individuals and institutions who, in the course of fifteen years, have enabled this book's existence and also helped make it better.

To John Burt Foster, who in 1997 first brought my attention to the comparative studies of D. Barton Johnson on Nabokov and Rand, and who, with Ronald Bogue, gave me the opportunity to present my own ideas on the subject at the 1999 meeting of the Southern Comparative Literature Association;

To D. Barton Johnson, who graciously corresponded with me and then joined me on a panel dealing with the two authors at a special session of the MLA convention in 2000;

To Steve Levin and the Faculty Lecture Committee, who provided a forum for my thoughts as part of the Williams College Faculty Lecture Series in 2001;

To Tomás Eloy Martínez (in memoriam, 1934-2010), fine novelist and journalist from Argentina, who first drew my attention to the shaping influence of Friedrich von Hayek on Latin American neo-liberalism;

To Gordon Bigelow and to Nicholas Birns, who each put together MLA panels on neo-liberalism (2001 and 2008, respectively) on which I could first rehearse my reflections on Friedrich von Hayek;

To Greg Dawes, who invited me to share my ideas on Hayek and his Latin American disciples on the online journal *A Contracorriente*;

To Chris Matthew Sciabarra, libertarian thinker, expert "Randologist," and a likeable man, who gallantly encouraged me to work out my ideas on Nabokov and Rand, and on Randian aesthetics, for his *Journal of Ayn Rand Studies*;

To Zoran Kuzmanovich, who was hospitable to my thoughts on "Nabokov's Obsessions" at the 2002 MLA meeting's panel of the International Vladimir Nabokov Society;

To Robert Boyers, under whose editorial guidance my reflections on Rand's 100th anniversary saw light in *Salmagundi* magazine;

To Kelly Comfort, for commissioning my essay on Nabokov and including it in her collection, *Art and Life in Aestheticism*;

To Ron Morin, for reading an earlier version of the above essay and offering suggestions;

To Louis Begley, novelist, for granting me permission to include his suppressed essay on *Speak, Memory*; for obtaining for me the proofs of the essay from the Howard Gottlieb Archival Research Center at Boston University; and for providing some insider's details about the episode with Dmitri Nabokov;

To Stephen Fix, for sharing with me the anecdote of his students' reactions to *Strong Opinions*;

To Darra Goldstein, for leading me to Paul Russell's novel about Sergey Nabokov;

To novelist Paul Russell, for *The Unreal Life of Sergey Nabokov*, and for some fruitful exchanges on the delicate yet vast topics of Nabokov and his brother, and of Nabokov's multiple prejudices;

To Julie Cassiday, for pointing me in the direction of scholarship on Chernyshevsky;

To Linda G. Senesky, for suggesting a change in the title of this volume;

To Enrique Peacock-López, physical chemist, who elucidated for me the workings of John Galt's magical energy machine and also clarified some of the fallacies and problems in Rand's engineering physics;

To Andrea Pitzer, whose recent book, *The Secret History of Vladimir Nabokov*, opened this writer's eyes, at the very last minute, to another dimension of the novelist's world;

To Williams College, for two generous mini-sabbaticals that allowed me the free time for doing full-time research and writing of this book;

To Rebecca Ohm of the college library, who, with her electronic expertise, dug up some important past documents related to my researches;

To Rachel Kranz, novelist, all-around writer, and ever the genius reader, for a thorough and sensitive job of copy-editing the manuscript and helping iron out its rough spots;

Last but not least, to Audrey, for putting up once again with my ongoing graphomanic compulsions and with the return of our old friend Larry the Libertarian.

Thanks to the help of all of the above, my ideas have taken on book form and improved in the process. Any faults, solecisms, or gaps are my own.

GB-V
Williamstown, Mass.;
Cambridge, Mass., 2009-2013

A NOTE ON PAGE REFERENCES

All references to books by Nabokov and Ayn Rand appear, parenthetically and abbreviated, within the body of the text. The following editions are utilized:

Books by Nabokov

Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle (A). New York: Fawcett, 1970

The Annotated Lolita (L). Edited, with preface, introduction, and notes by Alfred Appel, Jr. Revised and updated edition. New York: Random House, 1991

Bend Sinister (BS). London: Penguin Books, 1947

The Defence (LD). Translated by Michael Scammell in collaboration with the author.
London: Grenada Publishing, 1964

Despair (D). Translated by the Author. New York: Vintage International (Random House), 1989

The Gift (G). Translated by Michael Scammell in collaboration with the author. New York: Vintage International, Random House, 1991

Invitation to a Beheading (IB). Translated by Dmitri Nabokov in collaboration with the author. London: Penguin Books, 1963

King Queen Knave (KQK). Translated by Dmitri Nabokov in collaboration with the author. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968

Laughter in the Dark (LD). Translated by the author. London: Penguin Books, 1963

Lectures on Literature (LL). Edited by Fredson Bowers. Introduction by John Updike. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980

Lolita (L). (See under *The Annotated* Lolita.)

Look at the Harlequins! (LATH) New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974

The Original of Laura (Dying Is Fun) (OL). Edited by Dmitri Nabokov. New York: Knopf, 2009

Pale Fire (PF). New York: Vintage Books (Random House), 1989

Pnin (P). In Page Stegner, ed., *Nabokov's Congeries*, pp. 362-514. New York: Viking, 1968

The Real Life of Sebastian Knight (RLLK) .London: Penguin Books, 1964

Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited (SM). New York: Vintage International Random House, 1989
Strong Opinions (SO). New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973

Books by Ayn Rand

Anthem (An). New York: New American Library, N.D.
Atlas Shrugged (AS). New York: New American Library, 1959
Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal (CUI). New York: New American Library, 1967
For the New Intellectual (FNI). New York: New American Library, 1963
The Fountainhead (F). New York: New American Library, N.D.
Night of January 16th (NJ). New York: Penguin, 1987
Romantic Manifesto (RM). New York: New American Library, 1971
The Virtue of Selfishness: A New Concept of Egoism (VS). New York: New American Library, 1964
We the Living (WL). New York: New American Library, 1959 (?)

CHAPTER ONE

THE PAIRING

Ladies and gentlemen, we have before us two iconic figures.

Standing behind podium number one, stage center, his 3" x 5" cards in one hand, a butterfly net in the other, is Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov (1899-1977). (APPLAUSE.) And there, standing at the other podium, stage right, is Ayn Rand, née Alyssa Rosenbaum (1905-1982), sporting in her hand a long, swanky cigarette holder and, pinned to her black cape, a shiny, golden dollar sign. (APPLAUSE.) Both of them literary products of pre-1917 Russia as well as mid-twentieth century America.

Their respective magnum opuses first saw light on U.S. soil within a year of one another—*Lolita* in 1958, *Atlas Shrugged* in 1957. Each book surges onto the best-seller lists of its time. Each volume goes on to survive into the twenty-first century, with new editions, special editions, anniversary editions, audio editions, electronic editions, and the like. Each title becomes shorthand for an entire set of experiences, preoccupations, issues: in one case a forced amour, carried on in countless comical motels, between a thirty-something guy and a sassy pubescent teen (his stepdaughter); in the other, the celebration of a genius-inventor-businessman who, via a general strike that he leads with the captains of industry and their equally brilliant allies (scientists, musicians, sculptors, and other luminaries), brings the mighty U.S. of A. to its knees, and who, in a seventy-page, nationally broadcast allocution over radio, defends individual selfishness as ***morally right***!

Both these writers, and their writings, have become handy references and sources for popular culture.[1] Each author was interviewed by *Playboy*, Nabokov in 1961, Rand in 1964, both—coincidentally—by Alvin Toffler. Two feature films based on *Lolita* exist thus far, one by Stanley Kubrick (1962), the other by Adrian Lyne (1997). The first was funny, the second was not. Neither of them, alas, could replicate the formal cum verbal wizardry of the prose original. In addition, a couple of Nabokov's middle-

[1] For a survey of Nabokov's larger impact, see Suellen Stringer-Hye, "Vladimir Nabokov and Popular Culture."

period Russian works, *Laughter in the Dark* (1933, trans. 1938) and *Despair* (1936, trans. 1937) were brought to celluloid, respectively, by Tony Richardson (1969) and by Rainer Werner Fassbinder (1978), though the artistic results are not among those respected cinéastes highest. Probably the best Nabokov-inspired movie, *The Luzhin Defense* (2001), by the fine Dutch filmmaker Marleen Gorris, came out of what is, arguably, the man's best Russian-language novel, originally by that name (1930), yet known in English simply as *The Defense* (1964), about a brilliant chess player who may be something of an idiot savant. Meanwhile, Jim Jarmusch's sort-of romantic road movie *Broken Flowers* (2005) actually has among its cast a fleeting character called Lolita, who is (what else?) a sexy teen, daughter of the womanizing protagonist's whilom girl friend.

Indeed, within the pulp media's more sordid and sensationalistic news tales, the term "Lolita" is a common enough tag for alleged teen seductresses, even though the notion was not exactly what Nabokov had in mind.[2] As an instance, in the wake of the scandal surrounding Amy Fisher, a 17-year-old who shot and wounded the wife of her lover Joey Buttafuoco, the accused came to be known in the yellow press and on TV as "the Long Island Lolita."[3]

Then there are the passing allusions in pop music. The lyrics to the song "Don't Stand So Close to Me" by Sting and The Police, to take just one instance, tell of a schoolgirl's lustful crush on a male teacher twice her age; its concluding lines note that he "starts to shake and cough/Just like the old man in/That book by Nabokov." (The pronunciation is off, the rhyme is right.) Australian singer and writer Nick Cave in turn credits his discovery of *Lolita* as one of the signal formative experiences of his youth, and, on 4 March 2011, read aloud from its opening pages to an assembled multitude at the first World Book Night in London's Trafalgar Square.[4]

Lolita moreover can help catapult literary essays to best-sellerdom. Nabokov's most famous novel takes up the initial chapter in Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*: A *Memoir in Books* (2000), the subject matter being not so much the Russian writer's wondrous art as the hazards of studying transgressive texts while living in the shadow of a theocratic regime.

Ayn Rand likewise has had her filmed adaptations and pop-culture incarnations. The 1949 film of *The Fountainhead*, directed by King Vidor

---

[2] For a "revisionist" look at this established view, see Elizabeth Patnoe, "Discourse, Ideology, and Hegemony: The Double Dramas in and around *Lolita*."
[3] Ibid., p. 154.
[4] Both cited in D. Barton Johnson, "Nabokov, Ayn Rand, and Russian-American Literature, or the Odd Couple," p. 106.

and starring Gary Cooper, helped further boost sales of the book and enhanced her reputation. And 1999 saw a docudrama, *The Passion of Ayn Rand*, on cable TV, starring such respected actors as Helen Mirren, Julie Delpy, Peter Fonda, and Eric Stoltz. Based on chosen portions of close disciple Barbara Branden's book by that name, it focuses largely on the strange, sordid, years-long affair that Rand conducted with Barbara's then-husband Nathaniel, who was twenty-five years Rand's junior—all with the "consent" of the respective other spouses, whom the great sage had persuaded (as rational individuals! as superior beings!) to accept the twin-triangle arrangement.

Allusions to Rand's work often crop up in film and TV narratives whenever some advocacy of selfishness—virtuous or not—is in the spotlight. In *Dirty Dancing* (1987), the upper-class cad Robbie who gets his working-class girl friend Penny accidentally pregnant has as his bible… *The Fountainhead*, a copy of which he waves about as he declares blithely, "Some people matter, some people don't." An episode of *The Simpsons* features a nursery called the Ayn Rand Day Care Center (ironically, given Rand's contempt for motherhood and total lack of interest in children), and cites the Randian formula "A is A" taken from *Atlas Shrugged*. (The nursery likewise features signs saying "Helping Is Futile" and bans pacifiers, because toddlers should "develop the bottle within.") The advertising agency CEO Bert Cooper of the *Mad Men* office series gives away copies of the *Atlas* tract to his favored employees. A kind of official recognition was also granted writer Rand when, in 1999, the U.S. Postal Service issued a commemorative stamp honoring her as part of its "Great American Authors" series.

Going Nabokov and The Police's pop tune one better, Rand can boast from the Canadian rock band Rush a 1975 song called … "Anthem"! Its words, which pointedly take issue with "bleeding hearts," indeed advocate living only for oneself and imply that selfishness is, yes, just fine. At that time, the group's lyricist-composer, drummer Neil Peart, was admittedly under the influence of La Rand. Senatorial hopeful Rand Paul, a libertarian, used Rush's music as background to his successful political campaign in 2010, as did far-right-wing radio celebrity Rush Limbaugh over the years to spice up his talk show. The band's attorneys formally sued both the Honorable Dr. Paul and the radio announcer on grounds of copyright infringement.

Would any high-school curriculum require *Lolita* for an English class? Doubtful, for reasons anyone will easily guess. The instructions for the Advanced Placement literature course in fact reportedly counsel its participating teachers against having their young charges study the work.

Teachers blogging on the Web frankly admit that they can't (or at least won't) use *Lolita*. By contrast, Rand's *Anthem* is actually read and discussed in some high-school classrooms—owing presumably to its pamphlet-like plainness and brevity (according to biographer Anne Heller, it has sold some three and a half million copies).[5] Even *Fountainhead* is used on occasion, the notorious rape scene notwithstanding. *Atlas*, though, with its 1,200-page heft, is obviously not easily utilizable. At the college level, by contrast, *Lolita* and other Nabokov fictions have long served as standard fare in advanced undergraduate lit. classes, whereas precious few English professors would so much as consider requiring Rand—and fewer still Philosophy profs, save for the most convinced, extreme, and axiomatic libertarians, who, as Rand herself did, consider her absolutely the greatest thinker of all time!

The late Nabokov enjoys enormous critical, cultural, and academic standing. He lives on in "the canon," albeit somewhere at its edges. Renowned Yale University critic Harold Bloom, significantly, does not include any of the Russian-American master's works in his own best-seller, *The Western Canon* (1994). And Nabokov doesn't even rate mention in respected historian Peter Gay's encyclopedic survey, *Modernism* (2008), presumably owing to the Russian's virulent hatred of Freud, whom both Bloom and Gay have built upon and touted. In contrast with a posthumously triumphant Rand, there is not and probably will not be a postage stamp bearing Nabokov's name. British director Adrian Lyne for his part encountered some difficulty placing his 1997 *Lolita* film in U.S. theatres during that time of child-molestation scandals.[6]

Still, to have read *Lolita* is one step toward being literate and learned in America, even though the novel is less than accessible to U.S. teens, despite its American-teen co-protagonist. The literary-linguistic artifice and the life-experience that sustain it are far too much save for the most sophisticated of adolescents. Fittingly, *Lolita*'s several-hundred laudatory readers' reviews on Amazon.com exhibit a high level of literary culture and a nuanced appreciation for the book's evocative and descriptive powers, its narrative and moral ambiguities, its dazzling prose. Even the scattered one-star dismissals on that website tend to grant the novel its strengths *qua* art.

If bulk sales of books were our chief measure for determining literary worth, then Rand as scribbler would have to be ranked well above her exquisite émigré compatriot. Rand's thick, preachy epics, *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*, along with her half-dozen collections of articles,

[5] Anne Heller, *Ayn Rand and the World She Made*, p. 104.
[6] Stringer-Hye, p. 152.

continue to sell in the six figures every year. Indeed, in the wake of the ominous, 2008 financial panic, sales of *Atlas* actually surged to around 600,000 just in the year 2009! These were purchases generated by word-of-mouth and made by individual consumers—not the result of college-course reading lists or publishers' ad campaigns.

Rand's ardent followers, most of them hooked when in their teens, have numbered in the millions. It's a passing phase, as a nervous mom may note; the kids will usually outgrow their infatuation and become everything from libertarians, Marxists, or New Ageists to plain old centrists and Republicans. Yet there are bright grown-ups who have continued to cleave to the faith. Some convinced Randians hold, or have held positions in the headiest upper reaches of U.S. life. In the best-known case, economist Alan Greenspan showed up at Rand's doorstep in Manhattan when in his mid-twenties and became one of her most devoted acolytes. Even when at the height of his fame and power as head of the Federal Reserve, he gratefully acknowledged his role in her life. Michael Milken, the financier who served time in prison for securities fraud, reportedly had twenty-two copies of *Atlas Shrugged* in his jail cell.

Likewise, John A. Allison IV, retired CEO of the BB & T bank in North Carolina, is a devout Randian who publicly extols selfishness, and has his bank donate $5 million per year in support of teaching and researches to propagate Randthought. Other vociferous Randians include hedge-funder Clifford Asness; the CEO of the Whole Foods chain, John Mackey;[7] Rex Tillerson, the chairman and CEO of ExxonMobil, whose favorite book is *Atlas Shrugged*;[8] Eddie Lampert, CEO of Sears; and the 2012 Vice-Presidential candidate Paul Ryan, who, in 2005, explicitly said, "The reason I got involved in public service…, if I had to credit one thinker, one person, it would be Ayn Rand." Finally, in September 2013, Senator Ted Cruz, Republican of Texas, as part of his crusade against President Obama's Affordable Care Act, conducted on the Senate floor a twenty-one-hour filibuster in which, among other things, he "read long excerpts from the novels of Ayn Rand, one of his literary heroes."[9]

Rand has been a favorite of U.S. politicians for some time. The very witty Gore Vidal remarked in 1961 that, when he ran for a seat in the House of Representatives, Rand was the only writer whom people in Washington knew about or would talk about.[10]

---

[7] Andrew Martin, "Give Him Liberty, but Not a Bailout," *New York Times Sunday Business*, August 2, 2009, pp. 1, 6.
[8] Steve Coll, "Gusher: The Power of Exxon Mobil," p. 28.
[9] Jeffrey Toobin, "The Absolutist," p. 38.
[10] Gore Vidal, "Comment," *Esquire*, July 1961.

Rand's sway at the mass level, or at least the effectiveness of her fan base, was dramatically demonstrated in two revealing polls from the 1990s. In a 1991 survey, sponsored by the Library of Congress and the Book-of-the-Month Club, readers chose *Atlas* as the book that had most influenced them, after the Bible. And in a later poll conducted by Modern Library asking for votes on the best 100 English-language novels of the 20th century, some 400,000 readers responded as follows: numbers 1 and 2, *Atlas* and *Fountainhead*; numbers 7 and 8, *Anthem* and *We, the Living*. In a corresponding poll for the best 100 works of non-fiction, Rand's *The Virtue of Selfishness* topped the list. In a separate survey of the imprint's editorial board, consisting of eighteen highly respected authors and editors, not a single novel by Rand cropped up. *Lolita*, by contrast, was #4.

Randianism, nonetheless, exists. There is the movement, still a grass-roots presence via the Objectivist Clubs whose posters bedeck the campus bulletin boards each year. And there is the 1997 film *Ayn Rand: A Sense of Life*, a glowing, sans-blemishes fairy tale made under the auspices of a Randian financier from Bermuda (his name: Monroe Trout, something out of Scott Fitzgerald or Sinclair Lewis) and an Oscar nominee under the Documentary category the next year. (When I saw the movie at a multiplex art house in Boston, the hush among the audience was church-like. Subtitle of the picture could well have been *A Sainted Life*.)

On the other hand, there's *Atlas*, the movie—or rather the multiple aborted attempts at a movie. One proposal, in 1972, fizzled out because Rand insisted on full control over any such screenplay. She herself later began a script but left it only one-third complete when she died in 1982. A couple of planned TV miniseries, by NBC in 1978 and by the Turner Network in 1999, were abandoned in the wake of organizational shuffles at each firm. Finally, in 2010, a high-tech investor by the name of John Aglialoro put up funding for a movie trilogy. This time the obstacles came from casting: no glamorous female stars could be found to assume the role of super-heroine Dagny Taggart. The eventual troupe for the film was made up of unknowns, with American-Canadian thespian Paul Johansson directing and also playing the part of a shadowy hero John Galt. Its release, on Tax Day, 2010, was greeted with largely negative critical reception, except for glowing reviews in—where else?—the Randian journal *Reason* and the business bi-weekly *Forbes*. The movie showed at a total of 465 screens out of a possible 37,000 and lost over $10 million. Both as art and as entertainment, the film was a stiff and stillborn thing.

For *Part 2: The Strike*, the entire cast was changed and TV director John Putch took over the reins, with only the cinematographer, Ross Berryman, remaining from the original crew. Although this time the movie

appeared on twice as many screens, its box-office receipts were yet lower, and the reviews even more negative, than for its predecessor. The product came and went, largely unnoticed except among hard-core libertarian audiences at such venues as Heritage Foundation and Cato Institute. Given its bulk, didacticism, and outdated technology (railroads!), *Atlas* may well be unfilmable…

Cinematic disasters aside, Randian history has all the morbid if fascinating features of a religious sect, as expertly anatomized by Canadian journalist Jeff Walker in his important muckraking study, *The Ayn Rand Cult* (1999). Like all guru-centered cults, Randism has had its fair share of eager acolytes, passive followers, and loyal dissidents who have somehow been linked or witness to the rivalries, the infighting, the excommunications, the quarrels over fine points of doctrine, and the creepy sexual intrigues. Rand herself achieved some notoriety as a nasty little dictator who demanded total dedication and, conversely, who ruthlessly quashed any hints of doubts as to her rightness. It's a bizarre tale that is beautifully evoked in Mary Gaitskill's disturbing, seriocomic novel, *Two Girls: Fat and Thin* (1991).

But Randianism also exists as a consistent and rather simple set of beliefs, a theology one readily grasps after some time spent with its scriptures. "Objectivism" is how the founder dubbed her system. At its core is the idea that selfishness is good, greed is admirable, and altruism is evil—indeed, as she says in her essay "Theory and Practice," altruism is "a doctrine of the hatred of man" (C, 148). (*The Virtue of Selfishness*—those are her very words! A more complete title for her book would be *The Virtue of Selfishness and the Evilness of Caring about Others*.) Unfettered capitalism is thus in Rand's view the only true moral system in history. The successful businessman is the ideal hero of our time. The sign of the dollar is an icon to be worshiped and flaunted. Conversely, generosity and compassion have no place in the world according to Rand. In a letter from the 1940s she singles out competence as "the only thing I love or admire in people. I don't give a damn about kindness, charity, or any of the other so-called virtues." Or, as Dominique Francon, the gorgeous and cold-hearted heroine-cum-bitch of Rand's *Fountainhead* reflects at one point with lofty sarcasm, "Compassion is a wonderful thing. It's what one feels when one looks at a squashed caterpillar" (F, 274).

Having ambitious claims as a total philosophy, Objectivism also posits a theory of knowledge. For Rand, the external world is to be grasped only through man's highest faculty: reason. (*Reason*, not incidentally, is the name of the libertarian magazine, founded by a Randian.) Rand's and Randians' formulaic paeans to rationality often sound like sloganeering,

though admittedly the tradition goes back to the French Revolution and its anti-clerical, anti-religious struggles. Rand herself was aggressively atheistic. Still, despite Randroid fixation on the term "epistemology" and their own mega-word (take a deep breath) "psychoepistemology," she and her friends have little to say about messy, more complex and elusive ways of understanding such as experience or intuition. Darwin and Einstein, to cite just a couple of examples, were not exactly pure rationalists.

Feelings, meanwhile, are secondary, or dangerous, or simply shouldn't count for much. Within our range of human faculties, emotion for Ayn Rand is a no-no as a path to wisdom, let alone as a means to a good life. As she herself thundered in her 1964 *Playboy* interview, whosoever chooses to live for family and friends rather than for "creative work" is an "emotional parasite" and, what's more, is "immoral."[11] She adduces no figures, but those immoral parasites easily number in the billions, world-wide. They presumably include the field workers who've picked your table grapes and the Salvadorans who now mow many a front lawn in Long Island—all for the sake of their wives and kids back home or right here in the U.S. Could anything under the sun be more morally repellent?

Rand thought. Randspeak. Randcult. They're very much an American phenomenon. Though she has some fans scattered about the U.K., the (white) British Commonwealth realms, and Scandinavia, her oeuvre is something scarcely known beyond the U.S. coastal shores and southern borders. Over the past couple of decades I've chanced to mention La Rand to well-read Europeans and Latin Americans. Almost invariably her name draws a blank. And when I proceed to summarize for them her cherished ideas and values, my interlocutors generally find such notions puzzling, strange, and kind of wacky.

*

I first heard about *Lolita* in Caracas, Venezuela, from my male classmates at the American School in that South American metropolis. To our sex-obsessed young souls and longing libidos, *Lolita* was rumored to be the latest, big "dirty book," the successor to *Peyton Place*. Several in my social group had already gobbled up the notoriously scabrous small-town saga by a New Hampshire scribbler of French-Canadian origin named Grace Metalious.

I too had imbibed from Peyton, mainly because I'd found the novel sitting in the two-shelf library of my father, an expatriate entrepreneur from Kansas who, a few years earlier, had ditched my Asian mother in

[11] Alvin Toffler, "*Playboy* Interview: Ayn Rand," p. 37.

Puerto Rico for a sexy Cuban, name of Mary (rounded hips, dyed-blond hair), and who, in the process, had stealthily taken possession of—"abducted," perhaps—my brother and me. (Other books of his that I casually plucked from those twin shelves included mass-market paperback editions of business novels by one Cameron Hawley—*Executive Suite* and *Cash McCall*; Sloan Wilson's best-seller and then-cultural icon, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*; stories by Graham Greene; some early Orwell; and a sensationalist novel about a child murderess entitled *The Bad Seed*.)

My mother later would inform me, when I rejoined her a couple of years later in New Mexico, that Dad had always found the light versifier Ogden Nash too arty for his tastes.

Meanwhile, there were no Spanish books gracing that meager, lone bookcase—our stepmother Mary didn't read. *Lolita*, for its part, was still unavailable in paperback, and for other reasons was inaccessible to young minds. To us whelps, the idea that erotic experience could be evoked via indirection, artifice, and high art would never have crossed our still-green minds.

As for La Rand, I never had occasion to encounter so much as her name until my last couple of years as a music student at the University of Arizona. Her axiomatic doctrines were a favored reference point for a few pop ideologues and sages who hung around the student cafeteria, huffing and puffing cigarette fumes as they gabbed at great length over their coffee cups.

About that same time my junior-year roommate, a fellow musician and aspiring musical scholar, devoured *Lolita* (the American edition of the book was only four years old then, and it had somehow crossed his path). He was particularly baffled by, but also taken with, the strangely named author's odd lexical items: *solipsized*, *solecisms*, *phocine*. Thanks to my Latin American background I had previously learned the definition of *solecismo* in a Cuban high school class; vaguely sensed that *phocine* resembled *foca*, the Spanish word for "seal"; and was acquainted with *solipsism* from philosophical lectures and casual vocabulary study.

My years of adolescence and my twenties were times of enormous confusion for me (quasi-madness, really), with much catching up to do—personal, cultural, emotional, and more. Both Rand and Nabokov seemed like alien entities (which, in fact, they literally were). I could never have imagined that some sort of complex, conflicted yet compelling relationship with these two figures—she the pure didacticist, he the recherché wordsmith—was in my long-term future…

CHAPTER TWO

ON THE BIG BOOKS THEY WROTE

Both Nabokov and Rand left their mark on the larger culture with a couple of thick volumes that sold on a grand scale and grew into publishing phenomena. Those prose artifacts also became representative of certain values, certain unwonted ways of seeing our modern, American world.

Their key works came only after years of early struggles to earn a reputation through their writings.

*

Nabokov arrived in the United States in 1940 with fluent English, the happy result of resident childhood tutors on his Russian estate, and of his B.A. from the mighty University of Cambridge. Under the pseudonym "Sirin" he already had to his credit ten Russian books that had gained him *succès d'estime* among émigré literati in Western Europe. These works would also provide some precarious extra income from foreign translations. Shortly after his American arrival, the sheer luck of an emerging friendship with man of letters Edmund Wilson helped our recent immigrant publish a few stories in *The New Yorker*.

Lolita was Nabokov's third novel in English. Before that, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941) and *Bend Sinister* (1947) had been bringing him critical attention but low sales, along with *Conclusive Evidence* (1951), an initial version of his autobiography *Speak, Memory*.

Nabokov reportedly came within a hair of burning the manuscript of *Lolita*, but his wife Véra dissuaded him from so drastic a move. The story of the gestation, publication, and canonization of *Lolita* is a long one, a legend unto itself that need not concern us at this point. Without *Lolita* in print and its strange subsequent fame, however, Nabokov as author would certainly be a more marginal, even an obscure figure today. Yet in *Lolita*'s wake, every novel previously penned by him would become the vivid harbingers of a twice-displaced master artificer's literary razzle-dazzle, the telling forerunners to the twin saga of Humbert Humbert and his less-than-

willing paramour. Already in his second novel, *King Queen Knave* (1928), for instance, we are struck by the twenty-something author's uncanny talent for telling about sex purely by hints and quite comically, just as, in *Despair*, we marvel at his ability at capturing the voice of a deluded psychopath. (Not surprisingly, the names of Hermann in *Despair* and Humbert in *Lolita* share in common several letters and phonemes.)

Despite these predecessors, *Lolita* by itself is something of an artistic miracle. In the hands of a Naturalist author—a latter-day Zola or Dreiser, say—so sordid a subject would have generated a correspondingly sordid novel, with an implicit yet foreseeable moral to it. In Nabokov's atélier the tale becomes a wondrous artifact, a thing of self-reflexive, multifaceted beauties. The moralizing role is assigned to John Ray Jr., Ph.D., a psychologist who in his "Foreword" describes protagonist Humbert Humbert as *"horrible…, abject, a shining example of moral leprosy" and worse* (5). All of which, in terms of everyday mores and ethics, is simply true. Yet nothing in *Lolita* is ever "simply". Dr. Ray's piece is of course a spoof on the invented experts' prefaces that, until the 1960s, would "present" pornographic novels to the reader—a formulaic way of imparting "redeeming social value" to such fare in legal prosecutors' eyes. The front matter also serves to inform us about Dolores Schiller/Lolita's death in childbirth, and the divers destinies of the other characters—information usually reserved for a novel's final pages.

The first-person account that follows, the novel itself, is H.H.'s purported defense to be read before the jury, an apologia for his misdeeds sexual and homicidal. The book thus exists as a hall-of-mirrors-type montage of texts-within-texts. This distancing artifice is further compounded by Humbert's narrative voice and its key traits. First, he is very funny. His confession bristles with jokes, puns, conceits, alliterations, self-deprecating jabs, and amazingly succinct summaries. (About his mother's death: "picnic, lightning." About his first marriage bonds: "These burst.") (10, 27)

H.H., besides, is crazy. He himself admits it, and alludes to his previous stays in sanatoriums. He is hence ipso facto "unreliable," and so we're inclined to judge him as less depraved than demented. The certifiable madness of a wrongdoer, by definition, puts him outside the realm of ordinary humanity and its laws. Furthermore, it must be emphasized, Humbert comes to *love* his Lolita to distraction—a sentiment he declares on numerous occasions, especially towards the end. About the only subject on which Humbert repeatedly waxes lyrical concerns either Lo or his love of Lo. Some of the paeans he pours out to her are truly gorgeous effusions of prose poetry, in the venerable tradition of love verse

addressed to one's beloved. Finally, in his last visit to Lolita, now Mrs. Schiller, Humbert all but proposes, asking her to join him so that "we shall live happily ever after" (278). In an odd sort of way, such feelings potentially redeem H.H. in the reader's eyes, or at least make his motives more complex, his actions less than merely heinous or evil.

Humbert's transgressiveness, moreover, is somewhat mitigated by the character (in both senses of the word) of Dolly Haze herself. It is not H.H. who deflowers her: she has already had sexual relations with camp mate Charlie Holmes. Those relations, moreover, were hardly the awkward fumblings of a pair of novices, according to Humbert's report.

> All at once, with a burst of rough glee…, she put her mouth to my ear…and she laughed…, and tried again, and gradually the odd sense of living in a brand new, mad new dream world, where everything was permissible, came over me as I realized what she was suggesting. I answered I did not know what game she and Charlie had played. "You mean you have never—?"—her features twisted into a stare of disgusted incredulity… I took time out by nuzzling her a little. "Lay off, will you," she said, with a twangy whine, hastily removing her brown shoulder from my lips. (It was very curious the way she considered…all caresses except kisses on the mouth or the stark act of love either "romantic slosh" or "abnormal".)
>
> "You mean," she persisted, now kneeling above me, "you never did it when you were a kid?"
>
> "Never," I answered quite truthfully.
>
> "Okay," said Lolita, "here is where we start."
>
> However, I shall not bore my learned readers with a detailed account of Lolita's presumption. Suffice it to say that not a trace of modesty did I perceive in this beautiful hardly formed young girl whom modern co-education, juvenile mores, the campfire racket and so forth had utterly and hopelessly depraved. She saw the stark act merely as part of a youngster's furtive world, unknown to adults. What adults did for purposes of recreation was no business of hers (133).

Later, a woman lodger at a hotel asks Humbert, "Whose cat has scratched poor you?' (164)—an indication, presumably, that Lolita is rough in bed. Lolita is thus wiser about sex, and has had a far more active pubescence, than H.H. could even have imagined in his proper European adolescence or in his truncated idyll with Annabel Leigh. And of course there's Lolita's concurrent, secret amour with Clare Quilty, the intimate details of which remain elusive both to Humbert and ourselves.

In this regard, Nabokov's nymphet looks ahead to the promiscuous, somewhat anomic sexuality that would become commonplace among certain sectors of American pre-adult life. Today's press has its share of