

# Memories of Ayn Rand

by John Hospers

When Marcel Proust tasted his famous cup of tea with Madeleine, the experience of that unique taste evoked in him such a flood of recollections that it filled seven volumes (*Remembrance of Things Past*). Three days ago when I was invited by *Full Context* to record a few recollections of my acquaintance with Ayn Rand, I thought I could make it quick and easy. But in the ensuing hours, a flood of memories overcame me, many of them long buried, and now resurrected after an interval of 35 years, as vividly as if they were occurring at this moment.

It was April 1960, and I can still hear her delivering her lecture at Brooklyn College: "Faith and Force, the Destroyers of the Modern World." I remember agreeing with her about both faith and force, but I didn't follow the implications of everything she said about the modern world. I remember inviting her to lunch afterwards, and she graciously consented to give me an hour. Five hours later, we were still engaged in animated conversation in the coffee shop.

It was a totally new experience for me—the systematic character of her thought, together with her childlike benevolence, the keen piercing eyes, the deep voice which could warm you and freeze you by turns—and the uncompromising rigor of her argument. Our conversation skirted over a wide range of different subjects. I was at that time finishing my book on ethics (my *Human Conduct* was published in 1961), and when she said she could answer any ethical question, I asked her a few, beginning with one that has now become familiar through repeated asking, but was not then: "If you were driving and came across a sudden turn in the road, and had to choose between hitting a man and hitting a dog—the dog is your own, and the man is a stranger to you—what should you do?" Apparently I had hit upon a tension-point between two principles, one about the value of man as a rational being and the other involving egoism and one's love for one's own pet. She admitted the difficulty, and opted for the man—but I wasn't yet aware of the intensity of this conflict or the depth in her thinking of the conflicting principles. The other ethical questions I asked her she answered easily; they mostly had to do with helping others, and she made short shrift of them, though not always in a way I agreed with. I had had a taste, and was hungry for more.

A cousin in Iowa had been urging me to read what she described as "a marvelous new novel, *Atlas Shrugged*," but I was so busy teaching and writing that I hadn't got around to it. Now, however, I plunged into it. I would write on my own manuscript till midnight or after and then read *Atlas* till 4 or 5 a.m., and then go to my class at Brooklyn College in the morning. It was all I could do to refrain from reading the whole novel at once. But within a week I had done so, and I can only describe the experience as "it bowled me over" and "it wiped me out." Here I was, an aspiring professor of philosophy, and I had never had so much of a hint of this unique intellectual edifice. How could that have happened? I might not agree with all of it, or even understand some of it (not yet), but how had my own colleagues and teachers had the audacity, or the ignorance, or the perverseness, not to encourage me to sip this heady wine?

A few weeks later I received from her an invitation to attend the NBI lecture on aesthetics. I remember finding some things confusing and other formulations not rigorous enough (after all, aesthetics had been my dissertation subject), and agreeing with her on Dostoyevsky and Victor Hugo and disagreeing with her on Tolstoy and Faulkner. But in another week or so I accepted an invitation to visit her in her apartment on East 36th Street. I came armed with a paperback copy of *Atlas*, full of marginal comments and questions. "May I trade you?" she asked, handing me a new cloth-bound copy, which she autographed. How could I refuse? "These were just thoughts that occurred to me while reading," I said somewhat apologetically; "not necessarily my best ones." "That's just what I wanted," she said, smiling, and then suggested that our first meeting be devoted entirely to aesthetic considerations about *Atlas* and that the philosophy be reserved for later.

That suited me perfectly, and (I think in retrospect) helped to cement our friendship. Aesthetically we were very much on the same wavelength, and my detailed praises, with the reasons for them, clearly pleased her enormously. I had assumed that she was basking in praise all the time, and that my comments would be just the thousand-and-first for her to absorb. I didn't know till later how the remarks on her book were divided into (1) unthinking admiration, which meant nothing to her, and (2) carping criticism, e.g. from the media, by people who had no comprehension of her thoughts, and usually hadn't even read much of the book, or those who had, and were out to kill it.

I described to her the deepening sense of mystery as one gets into the book; and how well she revealed some details while withholding

others. I described her way of dropping a hint in an early page, then picking up on it some hundreds of pages later. I went on about the character development in Rearden and the mounting rhythmic pace as a climactic incident approached. I admired the way she handled the mini-climaxes in each chapter and the full climaxes in each Part. All this was obviously well known to her, the author, but she kept urging me to keep on. Above all, I admired the dramatic speeches, each spoken in the context of rising action and at the place where it wielded the maximum dramatic potency.

Should all novels be like that? Of course not, I said. I thought James Joyce was great because of the way he handled language. She didn't agree, but she did agree on Isak Dinesen ("wonderful style, but a miserable sense of life," she said of *Out of Africa*). Some novels were almost plot-less but had great characterization. Later when I read *Anthem* I told her that as a novel it might well be better than *Atlas*, but lacked that final pinnacle of greatness because the theme of *Atlas* was so monumental and the structure so intricate. I expressed the thought to her that except for Rearden her characters do not develop, and as a result some of the characters, including Galt, were static, largely symbols rather than life-and-blood characters. In this respect I contrasted her characterizations with those of Joseph Conrad in his numerous novels (Conrad, born Polish and not learning a word of English till he was nineteen), which were full and rich—you would almost know these characters if you met them.

Was I an objectivist about literature, she wondered. (I hadn't heard the term "objectivist" before as describing her philosophy.) Yes, I said, the features referred to are objective—the structural tightness, the complexity of thought and characterization. But different people pick out different combinations of features, depending on what they like, and this is the subjective aspect. Some readers prefer the tightness of Greek tragedies, others will accept the more "sprawling" nature of some of Shakespeare's plots in order to get the depth of characterization he provides, and the cascading metaphors which provide a unique intensity to the dramatic experience.

Most of the terms we used to characterize art, I said, are primarily subjective: sometimes they describe our experience, more often they do not describe experience but evoke it (we call these "emotive words"): "sad" is an emotion-word, "bastard" is an emotive word. A work of art, we say, is moving, interesting; powerful; subtle; boring.... How many of these terms describe the work,

and which either describe the experience or are calculated to evoke an experience in the reader? Mostly the latter, I suggested—the grammatical form may suggest otherwise ("The play is charming" resembles in form "The play has three acts") but this fact should not mislead us. Ayn didn't take much to the idea of emotive language; perhaps it was perceived as a threat to objectivity of judgment—but her remarks about many writers and philosophers surely included quite a bit of emotive language.

We had very similar tastes in movies, though her "prohibited areas" in the arts were more inclusive than mine. When she abruptly asked me "Who is your favorite director?" and I replied "Fritz Lang," she frowned for a moment, thinking perhaps that I had learned that Lang was also her favorite. But she accepted my assurance on this, and we found agreement even on such specifics as the greatness of Garbo; we even agreed on the reasons. (Also with Marilyn Monroe—not so much a sexpot as a symbol of childish innocence.) It was a wonderful experience to have what she said she most wanted, "intelligent agreement." We often reeled off mutually supporting reasons, enhancing our already favorable evaluations. We didn't entirely agree on music, where she was a Romantic, and her favorite composers were Rachmaninoff and Tschaikovsky, whereas mine were Bach and Handel. Was that judgment an objective one? I asked, wondering whether it was accidental that her favorites were all Russian. "Yes," she responded, "but in music I don't know how to prove it." I wondered what "proving" meant in this case—perhaps deducing conclusions from certain premises—but what if we didn't agree on the premises? I have no recollection of what she said in response to this.

When it came to the philosophy of Atlas, I was largely the new-found admirer. Most of what sympathies I had had with the Welfare State dissolved under her withering analysis. Here she was the teacher and I the pupil. She told me to read Hazlitt's Economics in One Lesson—which I did, within a few days—and she introduced me to Von Mises, giving me copies of Socialism and Bureaucracy—uninscribed, since she was not the author, though she gave me inscribed copies of all her novels. With great patience she took me through a whole range of objections to these economic views, which I won't describe here because this area is so familiar to Objectivists. "Mises is a utilitarian who doesn't believe in natural rights," she said once, "but I won't try to convince a great man when he's in his 80s." A few months later she invited me over when Mises and Hazlitt were both guests in her apartment. Nothing of great importance was said, but I was awestruck, thinking that

here I am meeting the great men of the field when only a few months ago I hadn't read a word of either of them.

We usually met every two or three weeks, starting at 8 p.m. and not parting until 4 in the morning, sometimes even 6 o'clock. The manuscript of my ethics book *Human Conduct* was due at the publisher, Harcourt Brace, a few blocks up the street from her apartment, and one night I brought the entire manuscript, about a foot high, to her apartment; we talked all night, she made me breakfast, and at 8 in the morning I walked to the Harcourt Brace office and deposited the finished manuscript. I told her that if there were another edition I would include a section on Objectivist ethics, which I did several years later. When the book appeared (first edition) the following year she read the section on Aristotle's ethics and said she liked it. She was not a heavy reader and I was pleased that she read even that much of my work.

As opposed to economics and political philosophy, ethics remained a subject of continuing but friendly controversy between us. I continued to have doubts about some aspects of her egoism, particularly in relation to human rights: is it always to your own interest, I said, to respect the rights of others? What if you steal from someone, in a situation where you know you can get by with it and profit handsomely from the act of theft? "You never really do get by with it" had been Plato's view, embellished with many psychological considerations about what it does to the doer, but Plato had never convinced me on this point. If a man has committed a crime and someone else is in prison for it, wouldn't it be wrong of him to let the innocent man languish in jail for what he has not been guilty of? Of course it would, according to Ayn; but her rationale was somewhat different from that of traditional egoism, and this part was new to me: not only should you not sacrifice yourself to others, but you should not sacrifice others to yourself. The latter half of this statement was just as important for Ayn as the first half. But I was not entirely sure what it came to in particular cases. Might they not work against each other, when you profit from not sacrificing others to yourself? Doesn't the statement greatly resemble Kant's Second Categorical Imperative, that you should treat each person as an end and not as a means to your ends? She hated Kant more than any other philosopher, but there seemed to me clear resemblances: acting on principle rather than on whim, and not using people merely as means; indeed, her discussion of human rights was astonishingly similar to Kant's discussion of the same concept.

Sometimes when she was exposing some bit of irrationality, I would say to her gently, "You're too Kantian to believe that, Ayn," and she would smile and then let it go. I referred her to Kant's chapter on duties to oneself, but she continued to view Kant as the exemplar of pure altruism. I raised some considerations about justice and fairness, wondering how a policy of fairness, either in a family or in a judicial context, would always be compatible with self-interest. It would take me many pages to give even a summary of our discussions of egoism and altruism, and her reasons for condemning utilitarianism and mine for raising utilitarian considerations with approval even though I wasn't a utilitarian. She usually held her ground, though sometimes for reasons I could not fathom, especially when I presented what seemed to me clear counter-examples to general statements she made. Usually I concluded that in some way I didn't yet grasp, the case under discussion fell under the second half of her egoistic principle: "...and do not sacrifice others to yourself." (At this time she had written almost none of her non-fiction essays—these were still to come.)

Even in economics, sometimes her "no exceptions" principle got to me. "I am in favor of pure, unregulated capitalism—no exceptions!" she would say with emphasis. By this time I could understand why she would say this; she had devised an awesome philosophical system, whose parts were intimately interconnected. Limited government, with total separation of politics from economics, seemed by now so clearly the correct system that I almost hated to present possible counter-examples. Still, I had been in favor of the Marshall Plan, which saved the European economy after the war, as well as rescuing many nations from Communism; this had been well worth it, I thought. I also favored the G.I. Bill, not only as a deserved reward for veterans, but as a way of enabling many people who had sacrificed years of their lives to come back and enter the middle class. I believed there should be laws against cruelty to animals, though animals didn't come under the mantle of human rights as she conceived them. I believed that it was a great injustice when a black person couldn't get a motel room in the South or even eat in a restaurant—although under pure capitalism it was the owner's own business who entered his motel or his restaurant, and if no owner wanted black people there, then that was that. (This, at a time when there just weren't any black-owned motels.) I wasn't exactly sure what should be done about it: yes, more wealth-creation and black-owned motels—but what about in the meantime?

Ayn was aware of my inner turmoil about these cases, but believed that if a single thread got loose the entire fabric would go. Perhaps she already envisioned the E.E.O.C. and the things it would do in the name of civil rights, and rejected it in advance. She was extremely far-sighted about what political entities would do in the name of the public good. The concept of a totally voluntaristic society ("no initiation of force to achieve one's ends") was one of breath-taking splendor and majesty. I could think of many borderline cases of initiation of force, such as attacking when you are sure the other person is about to do so, or defending your property against an unarmed trespasser.

But what bothered me most was an example that went against something very precious to voluntarism: the military draft. Of course, a volunteer army is better, more efficient, more dedicated, and so on. But suppose the danger of Nazism is not seen in time, and millions of people are being murdered, and now Pearl Harbor is attacked and one must respond massively and immediately. Within two years more than ten million people in the U.S. were in uniform. What if this couldn't have happened without a military draft? Is that not possible? Or what if the volunteer army might be so small that many men, who would otherwise have volunteered, didn't do so because they thought victory would be impossible with such small numbers?

Of course, Ayn stuck to her principles: no draft, ever. I was always more inclined to say "It depends; there might be conditions which require it." Of course, even if that is so, if an exception to a good rule is justified, it will be more likely that exceptions will later be made that are not justified. And so on. Maybe she was right. All I was adamant about was that we shouldn't distort the facts in order to protect a conclusion that we already accept.

I remember those evenings as among the most intellectually exhilarating of my life. Sometimes the sun would be up when we closed up shop, and I would drive to my class in Brooklyn almost in a daze. I didn't always understand her intractability. When she championed selfishness I made a distinction: "When you go to see a doctor to cure an illness, people don't say of you "How selfish!" Your act is self-interested, but not selfish. "Selfish" usually connotes doing something at other people's expense." Still she stuck to her guns: "selfish" means concerned with the well-being of the self, and that was that. I wondered whether she remembered this little distinction when her book *The Virtue of Selfishness* appeared.

"I understand that you're a determinist," she said to me once, apparently having been told this by a student who had read my essay on the subject in an anthology. "Well," I said, "like most words ending in -ism, that depends on what you mean. If you mean that everything you do is controlled by God or some inscrutable fate who "gets into your head" and determines what you do next, that, as far as I know, is not true. Determinism isn't fatalism. If it means that our every action depends for its occurrence on certain causal factors, in the absence of which it wouldn't have occurred, than that may well be true—but I doubt that we could ever know this because of the number and complexity of the causal factors: how can we know that if conditions were the same you'd do the same thing again, when in fact the conditions never are the same? (They're at least different the second time, in that you remember the first time.) And if the event weren't the same the second time, we'd say that the conditions were different this time, whether we knew it or not—wouldn't we?"

I tried to introduce her to a whole epistemological tangle here, and referred her to my book *Introduction to Philosophical Analysis*. "As to freedom," I said, "of course we're free in a perfectly ordinary sense; we're not chained, we're not coerced; we do X because we decide to do it. If I decide to leave the room, I can do so, and if I don't decide to, I don't; that's my freedom—and what other freedom could one want? It's up to me which alternative I choose; isn't that enough? If I decided to do X and found myself doing Y instead, or if my decision resulted in nothing whatever, then I wouldn't be free with regard to X; but I am! If you then say that my deciding to do X depends on certain causal conditions, well, I suppose it does—I don't know that anything is exempt from the Law of Causality. And if it were uncaused—if it just happened, with nothing bringing it about—that wouldn't be freedom at all, would it? To train children or educate our students is to bring about (cause) certain changes in them; if our educative actions caused nothing in them, why try to educate them?"

We went on with this for a long time. There were many complications and subtleties (the issue has been discussed for many generations). Ayn suggested that human acts are caused but self-caused (cause sui). I objected to the idea of something causing itself (an earlier state causing a later state is O.K.)—again, with many complexities in the discussion. Always, I wasn't so concerned with what conclusion we ended up with, as with the route by which we got there: no circularity of reasoning, no begging the question, no smuggling in a premise under another name, and so on.



She wasn't much in tune with what she called "modern philosophy" (i.e., contemporary philosophy). She seemed to believe that most philosophers aren't sure there is a physical world at all. I told her that none of them doubt, as they enter a classroom, that the classroom exists; but that they differ in how they come to it: some think (with Ayn) that some propositions about physical things are axiomatic, like Euclid's axioms; others believe that they are inferences from the orderly character of our sensations (Hume). Once I referred her to Norman Malcolm's "proof of a physical world," and typed a series of statements on paper, statements which constituted his proof—and we went over these carefully. She wondered why such subtle arguments were needed to prove anything so obvious, but praised him for at least believing in a physical world, and suggested that we bring him down from Cornell for a discussion. But this never happened.

I had to be careful that she not misinterpret or oversimplify what a philosopher was saying; she was so "out of the loop" of the give-and-take of contemporary philosophers that she found even the basics to be elusive. Finally I wasn't at all sure that the lengthy indoctrination that would be needed for this, was called for in her case. She generated so many insights on her own, with her resourceful and imaginative mind, that it would probably have been a waste of time to try to acquaint her with the insights of others to which she was so little attuned. I recalled that both Stravinsky and Richard Strauss wrote great compositions but neither could endure hearing those of the other.

How I would have loved to introduce her step by step to the works of John Wisdom or John Austin or a few other clear-as-a-bell contemporary writers in the field, to savor their insights and their various subtleties! But I concluded that it wasn't worth while trying because of the enormous amounts of time that would be involved. She had been brought up on nineteenth-century philosophy, often at opposite poles from the contemporary Oxford-Cambridge precision, with their enormous sensitivity to language and the ways it can mislead us. If she had been trained in Oxford instead of Leningrad, it might all have been different—for better or for worse. But the time for that had passed. For her, determinism was a fixed doctrine, which was either true or false, and that was that. And so on for many other positions in contemporary philosophy.

I described once to Ayn Rand an E.S.P. experiment that had been conducted, apparently with some success - the famous Shackleton

Experiment in London. A man was sealed into a room, with no way of communicating from this room to another room three doors away. Once per minute all evening (and for hundreds of evenings thereafter) when a bell rang, Mr. Shackleton would write down what card he guessed was being pulled three rooms away: there were five suits of cards (elephant, penguin, deer etc.) and he would have to choose one and write it down. At that same moment three rooms away someone would actually be pulling a card from a deck and would record which suit it belonged to. Every precaution was taken to ensure that there was no possible communication between the rooms. The chances of getting it right on any one pulling of the cards was 1 out of 5, or 20%; and of the many people who had tried, a few hundred attempts would always reduce the number to 20%, give or take 1%. But in Shackleton's case the percentage, even after thousands of tries, was regularly around 30%—the chances of this happening would be 1 in several hundred billion. So, it was concluded, there must be E.S.P.: "one mind affecting another mind without the intermediary of sense-organs."

I didn't much care about the experiment one way or the other. But Ayn was distressed and even indignant that I should even consider such a thing. Didn't I know that this is not the way that nature works? Didn't I know that in nature there couldn't be anything like E.S.P.? I told her that we don't have a priori knowledge of such things, and if they happen, well, that's that: nature has a trick up her sleeve that we hadn't suspected. But for Ayn, my granting even the possibility of such an occurrence was a kind of intellectual betrayal: mysticism, she called it, in a wide sense of the term which included any kind of thing she lumped together under the heading of "irrationalism." I never raised the subject with her again.

One evening she asked me a question about astronomy which indicated to me that she hadn't distinguished between the solar system and the stars. Having taught astronomy in the past, I began eagerly but didn't get very far: azimuth, the ecliptic, the sidereal poles, were too much conceptual baggage for one evening, and even the evolution of the galaxies, the methods of detecting their distances, and theories of their origin (this was before the Big Bang theory) were not matters of much interest to her. Her principal interest was man and his life. Surely that was enough!

She renewed my confidence in my profession. I once told her that I felt like a small cog in a vast machine that kept going round and round like those in Chaplin's *Modern Times*. Students would finish an introductory course in philosophy, hopefully learning to make

a few distinctions, and when they started to get the idea the course would be over and then I would start with another group, with the same confusions as the previous one. But no: "You are in the most important profession in the world!" said Ayn. If handling material things is important—and it is vitally important, as I showed in Atlas—how much more important it is to deal in ideas! What you are handling is dynamite. If it is not well handled, it could destroy the world!" I was quite overwhelmed by the conviction that she was right. At the same time I was sure that nothing I would ever do or say could make any difference in the scheme of things. Still, she created in me a new confidence, which has continued to this day.

I couldn't convince her about some things that seemed to me obvious, such as the difference between so-called necessary propositions like  $2+2=4$  and  $A$  is  $A$ , which no experience could refute, and so-called contingent propositions, like "Water freezes at 32 degrees," which depend on the way the world is. When she said that all truth could be apprehended by reason—as opposed to mysticism or E.S.P. or experiences of revelation—I concurred with this, but became aware that when she spoke of "reason" she meant to include both what I called necessary propositions and what I called contingent. "If you like, all of them are equally necessary," I believe she once said; but she didn't accept this nomenclature at all. Logic was a manifestation of reason—I would have said reasoning, as opposed to experiencing. But I rather wore myself out with her on that point. "Snow is white" and "Snow is snow" were both, apparently, known to be true by "reason."

My memories now go back to Christmas vacation 1961. I am at home in Iowa with my parents, and the phone rings. Ayn is calling me, to respond to something I had written to her. I had raised with her a problem about land-ownership in connection with Peruvian peasants. The Spaniards, descendants of the Conquistadors, continued to own all the best land—large tracts of fertile acreage which they allowed to lie fallow, forcing the native Indians to scratch for a living further up in the inhospitable Andes. Shouldn't those large idle tracts be forcibly divided, I asked, so that the native Indians would have a chance to survive? No! Ayn exclaimed so loudly that I could hear the microphone rattle. My father wondered what all the fuss was about, and suggested that she call when we weren't at dinner. But Ayn, unaware of this, would not be deterred. "They can sell it off piece by piece until everyone has something!" she said. "But they choose not to do that—they want to hold on to these unused lands as a matter of personal prestige. They don't care about economic development or

the condition of the Indians. After the war, MacArthur divided up the feudal estates in Japan in that way, and opened Japan to democracy." But Ayn would have none of it: "That's land redistribution!" she said. "Coming from the Soviet Union, do I have to tell you about the evils of compulsory land redistribution? You have been perverted by utilitarianism!" That stopped me. But I still wasn't convinced. I still wanted to say "It all depends...."

Belatedly I sat down to dinner, still revolving this in my mind. Overall I felt humble: here was one of the most esteemed novelists and thinkers in the world, finding it worth her while to phone me long distance to settle a point with me, so that I would not remain captive to false ideas. Even at this distance I could imagine those eyes that (I fancied) could penetrate through walls, and that mind so perceptive as to discern at a glance any remnant of self-excuse or rationalization. One's face must not display even one small pimple of dishonesty, especially with oneself, else the wrath of God would be tame by comparison.

In general, life was too serious a business for her to waste her time with small-talk. She admitted that playing chess involved great ingenuity, but all for nothing: "it's only a game." She didn't care much about jokes, except those that illustrated some favorite point of hers. When Nathaniel Branden played a side-splitting recording of Mike Nichols and Elaine May, she managed no more than a wan smile. She rather enjoyed my telling her Mark Twain's response to a preacher who said that God created man in His image: "Now how in the world do you suppose he found that out?" She liked the one about the two behaviorist psychologists meeting one another: "You are fine, how am I?" She rather relished the old Dutch saying I had learned as a child, something that people say when they're supposed to be grateful for a gift they don't really like: "Ik dank u wel, mit u kont daarbij" (I thank you kindly, and your ass along with it). With a bit of training in the language she might have enjoyed using it on some would-be friends.

I took her to a restaurant a few times, and to a concert and a Martha Graham dance. Frank was ill at the time, and she was extremely solicitous for his well-being before we went out. She didn't particularly enjoy the dance or the music, but her comments were very perceptive. She enjoyed these evenings a lot, and always returned the favor: when Frank recovered he would take us both to a Russian restaurant, and she was at her most charmingly festive, like a teenage debutante. Frank was always warm and outgoing with me, and my memories of him are all pleasant.

Philosophy was too central with Ayn to be ever treated casually. When I quoted to her Anatole France's statement that the rich have as much right as the poor to sleep under bridges, her voice was tinged with venom: "And who built the bridges?" she shouted. She stopped a New Year's Eve party cold when someone volunteered that high taxes for the rich were all right because "they still have enough to live on." Her manifest revulsion almost froze everyone around her. When on another occasion someone suggested that "some people don't have it so good in the Soviet Union, but there are undoubtedly many who like it just fine," the man who said this was treated to an equal chill: "And what kind of dishonest lying bastard would say such a thing?" To most onlookers these would be merely passing remarks, but I fully concur with Ayn's reaction to them: to refute such utter ignorance point by point would take endless time and effort, and by that time the one who asked the question would already be somewhere else, making some equally inane remark. "Self-expression is self-exposure," I said to her.

Rumors persisted, however, of how she would "excommunicate" people: they would say or do something that seemed trivial to others, and she would be done with them forever. Some of them were quite good friends, such as Edith Efron, who cared a great deal for Ayn but who was also cut off. None of this would have happened, they said, ten years before, but with the years she had become more suspicious, testy, impatient--no one was sure why. Quite a few people, it seemed, were suddenly out of her life.

I had known Ayn for two and a half years when it happened to me as well, and it came as a complete surprise to me. As program chairman for the American Society for Aesthetics, I invited her, against the counsel of most of my colleagues in the Society, to give a talk. She consented, provided that I who understood her ideas would be her commentator. By tradition, commentators make criticisms. Mine, I thought, were mild as criticisms go. I wondered publicly about whether every work of art (even mediocre ones) carries with it a sense of life; I mentioned Ayn's own example of Dinesen (fine writing, but an awful sense of life); I speculated about whether to any extent what we say about sense of life depends on the language we use to characterize it ("emotive meaning" again).

I saw something wrong when I noticed that her remarks in response were icy, sarcastic, even insulting. I never discovered what there was about my remarks that made her "go ballistic." Apparently I had betrayed her, and I had done so publicly, when an academic audience already presumed critical of her might have been

turned her way. There was no doubt that she felt deeply hurt. At the party in her room afterward, she would not speak to me, nor would anyone else: word had gone out that I was to be "shunned." I never saw her again.

Walking back to my hotel room (the meeting was in Boston), the voice of Kennedy came over the loud speaker: if the Soviet Union did not withdraw its missiles from Cuba, there might be nuclear war. I felt as if the whole world was coming to an end.

What had I done? Maybe there had been a stridency in my voice that I wasn't aware of, to prove something to my professional colleagues in the audience. Doubtless she wanted a public vindication, and I, one of the few intellectuals she had taken into her confidence, had shafted her—after she had invested in me so much time and effort.

Crushed at being so suddenly cut off, it took me some months to get over the hurt. I did become faculty adviser to the Ayn Rand Club at Brooklyn College, and then later (after moving to California) to similar clubs at Cal State Los Angeles and at U.S.C. I wrote letters to university presses to get the Den Uyl-Rasmussen anthology on Rand published (as well as Narveson's *The Libertarian Idea*) but I bowed out of authoring an essay on Rand's aesthetics for it. Some years went by before I again felt up to writing anything on Ayn Rand.

Finally, after many years, I can view these events with some equanimity. There is one fond memory of her that above all I shall never forget. When we had our long discussions, and I would finally leave her apartment, whether it was 4 in the morning or 6 or 8, I would go into the hall and ring for the elevator, and she would stand in the doorway and throw me a kiss, saying not "Good night," but rather (something only she would say) "Good premises."

In the ensuing years I have meditated often on those words of farewell, which were also a continuing challenge. I could not claim, but only hope, that I have been able to live up to them. Throughout these years I have hardly been able to remember this little recurring gesture, and its accompanying words, without being reduced to tears.

And now it is April 20, 1998, and after this lapse of years, as Thomas Wolfe wrote in *Of Time and the River*, "This world, this life, this time, are stranger than a dream."