Pitiless Adolescents and Young Crusaders: Reimagining Ayn Rand's Readers

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Abstract: In the United States, Ayn Rand's (1905–1982) novels still appeal to a large readership, in spite of their age and length. While many attribute Rand's lasting popularity to her effect on the presumably young and impressionable, few have actually explored why her novels at times prove to be such a transformative reading experience. The article retraces Rand's impact, through the lens of four writers who have reimagined her readers: Gene H. Bell-Villada, in the novella *The Pianist Who Liked Ayn Rand*; Tobias Wolff, in *Old School*; William F. Buckley, in *Getting It Right*; and Mary Gaitskill, in *Two Girls, Fat and Thin*. While Bell-Villada, Wolff, and Buckley convey their own attitudes toward Rand through their characters and shy away from creating strong Randian adherents, Gaitskill's dark satiric novel offers a surprisingly more empathic account of a pseudo-Randian acolyte.

Keywords: Gene H. Bell-Villada; William F. Buckley; Mary Gaitskill; libertarianism; Objectivism; politics and literature; Ayn Rand; Tobias Wolff.

Résumé : Aux États-Unis, les romans d'Ayn Rand (1905-1982) rejoignent encore un vaste lectorat, malgré leur âge et leur format. Si beaucoup ramènent la popularité durable de l'auteure à l'effet qu'elle aurait sur des lecteurs supposés jeunes et impressionnables, peu, en fait, ont réellement cherché à savoir pourquoi ses romans s'avèrent être une expérience de lecture aussi transformatrice pour certains. Le présent article veut rendre compte de l'impact d'A. Rand en étudiant les œuvres de quatre écrivains qui lui ont imaginé des lecteurs : Gene H. Bell-Villada, dans la nouvelle *The Pianist Who Liked Ayn Rand*; Tobias Wolff, dans *Old School* (en français, *Portrait de classe*); William F. Buckley, dans *Getting It Right*; et Mary Gaitskill, dans *Two Girls, Fat and Thin*. Tandis que Bell-Villada, Wolff et Buckley transmettent leur opinion personnelle à l'égard de Rand et répugnent à

faire de leurs personnages des adeptes convaincus de l'auteure, le roman sombre et satirique de Gaitskill trace un portrait étonnamment plus empathique d'un congénère pseudorandiste.

Mots clés : Gene H. Bell-Villada, William F. Buckley, Mary Gaitskill, libéralisme, objectivisme, politique et littérature, Ayn Rand, Tobias Wolff

Introduction: In Search of Rand's Persuasive Powers

In a 2013 edition of *The New Yorker*, humourist John Hodgman spoofs *Parade* magazine's column "Ask Marilyn" by imagining the answers readers might have received to their queries had Ayn Rand (1905–1982) written them instead of Marilyn vos Savant. His "Shouts and Murmurs," as the satirical weekly instalments are called, ridicule those aspects of Rand's character, thought, and style that one often finds lampooned: her belief in reason and individual judgment ("He takes for evidence only his own experience, . . . and that is why I do not hesitate to say, objectively, definitively, that 'Caddyshack' is the year's best movie"), her reputed lack of humour ("I am joking, because I am not joyless"), her Benzedrine usage ("I took fifteen speed pills, and I got into a contest with Liza Minnelli over who could roar most like a jaguar"), her literary style ("and I will mix metaphors and bend language to my own reality like rails of garbage steel"), and the alleged rigidity of her thought and absurdity of her arguments (Hodgman 29).

While such satires may entertain some and reflect Rand's image with certain audiences, they do not intend to edify us as to why her works' have such a lasting appeal. But even those more desirous of explaining Rand's effect on her readership struggle to come to terms with it. In some cases, they resort to the cliché Randian adherents—namely, the young and supposedly impressionable, whom Jerome Tuccille describes in his oft-quoted *It Usually Begins with Ayn Rand* (1971):

The young crusader in search of a cause enters the world of *The Fountainhead* or *Atlas Shrugged* as though he were about to engage in unheard-of sexual delights for the first time. He has been warned beforehand. There is no need to search any further. The quest is over. Here is all the truth you've been looking for contained in the tightly packed pages of two gargantuan novels. (13)

In a similar vein, literary scholar and writer Gene H. Bell-Villada dismisses adoration of Ayn Rand as “a passing phase”: “the kids will usually outgrow their infatuation and become everything from libertarians or Marxists or New-Agers to plain old centrists and Republicans” (“Who Was” 227). Those who fail to outgrow the Randian stage of their lives—and if we believe the repeatedly quoted Library of Congress survey from 1991 (Heller, Preface xii) and Amazon.com sales rankings of recent years (“Atlas Felt” 73), there is a substantial number of them—will face a different criticism. The most ardent Randians, the so-called Objectivists, have been denounced as members of a cult (see Walker), with pop quizzes likening Objectivism to the Church of Scientology (James) or branding it as plainly dangerous (Weiss). Accounts like Weiss’s try to understand what makes people turn to Ayn Rand, but they often fail to hide a persistent incredulousness and disapproval. The present article turns to an alternative source, one more apt, as Catherine Zuckert once observed, at delineating “l[’]éducation sentimentale” (688) of individuals; namely, fiction.

Ayn Rand’s life and oeuvre have inspired novelists and storytellers in many genres (Riggenbach; Ryan), from former member of her inner circle, Kay Nolte Smith, to comic artist Steve Ditko, to science fiction authors like Matt Ruff or Nancy Kress.¹ While some created characters based on Rand herself, others wrote variations on her novels’ plot lines or created ideal Objectivist heroes. The present article takes the focus away from the fictional potential of Rand’s persona and her creations and shifts it to the recipients of her messages; that is, her readers. In other words, I discuss how writers have reimagined Rand’s readers, the impact of her novels, and the consequences of exposure to her ideas. Why do some characters feel persuaded by Rand’s ideas? How lasting is the effect of Rand’s ideas? And do novelists find explanations for Rand’s persuasive power different from those we are usually offered? I explore these questions through three novels and one novella.

The first part of the article analyses how Bell-Villada in the novella *The Pianist Who Liked Ayn Rand* (1998) and Tobias Wolff in the novel *Old School* (2003) have adolescents discover Rand. I then turn to William F. Buckley, Jr., who portrays a fictional Randian in *Getting It Right* (2003). As we will see, these attempts at understanding Rand’s appeal have trouble fathoming their characters’

obsession with the worlds of John Galt and Howard Roark. A third novel, Mary Gaitskill's *Two Girls, Fat and Thin* (1991), by contrast, offers different insights into a follower's mind.

Youthful Fever: Bell-Villada and Wolff's Adolescent Disciples

The Pianist Who Liked Ayn Rand (1998)

¿Qué cosa es ésa?—Qué ideas más extrañas. . .—¡Esa mujer está loca! (163). What strange ideas, what a crazy woman: the family of José "Joe" Victoriano González from Merced, Arizona, finds nothing redeeming in the new literary passion of their youngest member—the novels of Ayn Rand. Majoring in Applied Music at college, the protagonist of Bell-Villada's *The Pianist Who Liked Ayn Rand* (1998) has returned home for the summer, only to spend it engrossed in stories that his family finds hard to stomach. However, it is not the first act of emancipation in his young life:

A devout Roman Catholic until age seventeen, he began quietly doubting religion in his final year at Merced High, thoroughly though still quietly abandoning his faith early on as a college freshman, and in time latching onto the then-fashionable thought of Ayn Rand. (124)

Spinning further from this family's orbit, Joe meets fellow student Jennifer at his college, who sports a "brooch in the shape of a dollar sign" (130) on her blouse and refers to her sorority as "an assortment of individuals, each one unique" (130). As we learn through Joe's letters to his cherished elder brother, the former cheerleader Jennifer attracts Joe's attention by, among other things, carrying a copy of *The Fountainhead* (1943) with her. Misunderstanding and mispronouncing the author's name for a long time, Joe is initially confused by the thinker Jennifer admires so much that she even abandons cheerleading: "She opened my eyes and made me see cheerleading for the brand of tribal, emotional collectivism it is" (135). With Jennifer, Bell-Villada creates a character who is struggling just as much to find her identity and role in life as Joe is, yet who believes she has found the key to a fulfilled life in Rand's fiction. Bell-Villada's unsympathetic and satirical portrayal reveals Jennifer's limited, rather superficial understanding of Objectivism, as she naïvely pictures herself as Dominique Francon waiting for her Howard Roark to

come—not to her rescue, but to claim her. Unaware that Jennifer is romanticizing a fictional rape scene, Joe instead tries to live up to the gentlemanly virtues he has been brought up with and therefore has to disappoint her.

What follows is Joe's conversion to Ayn Rand. Put down in his luckless courting of Jennifer, he spends the summer break reading Rand and taking *Roark* as his guide in human relationships. Robert Hunt suggests that *Atlas Shrugged* (1957) could be read as a *Bildungsroman* (83), in that it depicts the ideological development of Dagny Taggart; Bell-Villada, by contrast, lets *The Fountainhead* become Joe's transformative reading experience. In fact, what happens corresponds to Hunt's observation of the effect *Atlas Shrugged* may have: "The reader"—in this case Joe—"is impressed, oppressed, and finally overwhelmed by the sheer weight of the world according to Rand" (85). In his temporary seclusion, he dedicates himself fully to Rand's vision:

The act of reading is also a kind of sensory deprivation; *Atlas Shrugged* [or *The Fountainhead*] effectively shuts out all other literary and intellectual influences for a period of weeks or months. The reader, by the end, may acquiesce to Rand's world view because all others have grown dim and distant. (85)

In Joe's case, this turns out to be a lasting effect. He may re-enter the college world, but he does so as an initiate of Rand's world. Thus, he will end in Hollywood, playing the piano in bars and hoping for a breakthrough such as Rand experienced after her immigration. Although success does not materialize, he believes he has made the right choices—thanks to Ayn Rand:

Through Rand he'd learned to think in terms solely of himself and his own selfish worth as an individual, and, correspondingly, to reject false moralities of guilt and sacrifice. He liked to fancy himself the incarnation of the Argentine aristocrat Francisco D'Anconia in *Atlas Shrugged*, sharing in a secret, lifelong passion with Jennifer in the role of Dagny Taggart. (170)

He would hold on to this idea even when deployed with the armed forces to Vietnam, where he dies with "a much-handled photocopy of a key page from John Galt's climactic speech in *Atlas Shrugged*" (185) in his wallet.

Bell-Villada creates two characters in the typical stage of finding themselves, depicting the awkwardness of maturing and growing up. In both cases, they reach a turning point when they are exposed to Rand's literature. Yet in the case of Jennifer, Rand mainly gives her romantic ideals a new shape and a basis to justify her selfish, at times erratic, behaviour. Consequently, the young woman's attempt at asserting herself and finding her voice sounds ridiculous and pompous. The reader can suspect, however, that she might outgrow this Randian stage in her life and reach actual maturity. While Jennifer's initiation story reaches beyond Bell-Villada's pages, Joe believes he has entered adulthood in adhering to Randian values. In Bell-Villada's depiction, Joe errs in this regard and he is caricatured as a rather eccentric, ideological simpleton. He seems to suit Rand's own description of adolescents: "Young people do seek a comprehensive view of life, i.e., a philosophy, they do seek meaning, purpose, ideals—and most of them take what they get" (*Return* 19). Joe may have done just that, taken what he could get in terms of philosophic guidance, though it is hard to believe that a young man who once observed Jennifer's intellectual poses with a mixture of bewilderment and amusement could morph into a self-absorbed Randian in the course of just one summer. His resistance to other opinions and criticisms may be credible for an adolescent, but why a gifted student should not be exposed to other ideas seems incomprehensible.

The reason why both Randian characters remain hard to grasp and rather flat may lie in their creator's own attitude toward Ayn Rand's life and legacy. Elsewhere, Bell-Villada describes Rand's magnum opus *Atlas Shrugged* (1953) as

a very bad long novel that nonetheless has moved and inspired countless true believers out there, and still does. It became the fantastical, race-neutral *Gone with the Wind* of pitiless adolescents, tin-ear ideologues, and illiterate entrepreneurs, wannabe or actual. ("Who Was" 236)

Although his novella does not pass as a purely satirical piece, it is clear that Bell-Villada re-creates in Jennifer the "pitiless adolescent," and in Joe the "tin-ear ideologue," but without grasping what would make such characters actually pitiless or tin-eared in the first place.

Old School (2003)

I wanted to capture the moment just after Kennedy was elected, when Robert Frost was the poet supreme, Ayn Rand was building a really weird cult following and Hemingway set the pattern for young men—taught them not only how to write but how to talk and think and thirst for conflict in which to prove themselves. (Bradley 108)

Thus, Tobias Wolff described his motivation to re-create the world of a 1960s boarding school whose attendees adore the incumbent youthful president and all aspire to be the next Hemingway. In pursuit of this goal, the unnamed narrator-protagonist is just as ardent a short-story writer as his peers and tries to excel at the regularly held competitions that promise a personal encounter with an invited writer. In the part captioned “*Übermensch*,” Ayn Rand is chosen as the judge in this literary contest (thus the reference to Nietzsche).² At the height of her career, Rand was a frequent speaker on university campuses, yet always at the invitation of students rather than their faculty. By contrast, Wolff’s boarders are forced to enter Rand’s world at the request of a rich school trustee, naturally under faculty protest (63). Wolff’s nameless protagonist is initially reluctant to even consider leafing through any of Rand’s novels—but quickly changes his mind:

By now I’d picked up enough swank to guess that Ayn Rand was as bad as she was popular, and she was very popular. In a smirky spirit I pulled a copy of *The Fountainhead* off a book rack in the train station as I was leaving for Christmas break, read a few pages for laughs, forgot to laugh, and got so caught up I decided to buy it. (64)

What the summer break is to Bell-Villada’s Joe, Christmas is to Wolff’s adolescent hero: a couple of days of voracious reading, an intense initiation into the world of Dominique Francon and Howard Roark. And just like Joe before him, he gets so engrossed with what he takes as Rand’s message that he grows ever further from his family—that is, his grandparents. The simplistic patterns of male-female relationships presented by Rand prove particularly appealing to the young man: “This was new and interesting to me—the idea that a woman’s indifference, even her scorn, might be an invitation to go a few rounds” (68). The conclusion he draws from the novel reminds us of Umberto Eco’s description of the cult novel: “one must be able to break, dislocate, unhinge . . . so that one can remember only parts of it, irrespective of their original relationship

with the whole. In the case of a book one can unhinge it, so to speak, physically, reducing it to a series of excerpts" (4).³ In this way, the young reader does not think through the political consequences of *The Fountainhead* but still believes she has gotten hold of a key to understanding society:

For once I had a complete picture of the world: over here a few disdainful Roarks and a few icy Dominiques, meltable only by Roarks; over there a bunch of terrified nobodies running from their own possibilities. Now and then I caught glimpses of other ideas in the novel, political, philosophical ideas, but I didn't think them through. It was the personal meaning that had me in thrall—the promise of mastery achieved by doing exactly as I pleased. (71)

Growing more confident about his abilities, becoming rather conceited, he does not get started on his contribution to the literary contest because he believes himself able to deliver a masterpiece at the last minute. He feverishly rereads Rand's break-through novel and keeps picturing himself as Howard Roark—until the metaphorical fever passes for a mundane literal fever and he is confined to bed, missing the contest deadline (73). When he is cured of his fever, his Randian adulation also seems to be nothing but an unfortunate phase, a passing illness, so to speak. Although still interested in seeing Rand, he is shocked at the nonsensical piece she chooses as the winning short story, and an interview with her fails to capture his interest, as she keeps "going on about this John Galt" (78), a person unknown to him. Her actual visit only increases his feeling of alienation, as Wolff stages her entrance with all the hallmarks of the present-day caricature of Rand's public persona: she steps onto the campus with her entourage (79), dons a dollar sign brooch (81) on her cape, and urges the young admirers of Hemingway to read Mickey Spillane's thrillers instead (84). Her rant against Hemingway finally ruins her standing with Wolff's protagonist. One of his peers delivers the punch line for the scene, when he asks Rand at her departure, "Who is John Galt?" (87).

Trying to find the answer to that question, the narrator, in spite of his growing misgivings about Rand, starts reading *Atlas Shrugged* but fails to get past the first pages; he even fails to finish the book he had previously read several times—*The Fountainhead* (91). He realizes that he had earlier bought into a fleeting illusion:

It had dawned on me that I didn't really know anyone like Roark or Dominique. Though Ayn Rand insisted that such people existed and that she herself was one, my own experience of them was purely literary. Everyone I knew, even in the most privileged families, was beset by unheroic worries. (93)

Yet it is not only the unrealistic nature of Rand's heroes and of the lives they lead that has a sobering effect on the adolescent reader. He also feels betrayed by Rand's attempts at luring him away from what he considers "true" literature. The type of novels Rand crafts and reveres, her style and limitations, as well as the Manichaeian world she constructs bar the Wolffian reader from more challenging and more pleasurable literary experiences—such as Hemingway's stories:

You can't read "Indian Camp" and then go back to *The Fountainhead*. Everything seems bloated and cheesy—the swollen sentences, the hysterical partisanship of the author, the crassly symbolic, uninflected characters, the impossible things they think and say and do. (96)

It is, thus, not Rand the advocate of laissez-faire capitalism and individualism that the narrator dismisses but rather Rand the writer. Bell-Villada's Joe was satisfied with the little he managed to comprehend of Rand's philosophy and did not explore further either her philosophy or the literary qualities of her work. By contrast, Wolff's hero dismisses Rand's political beliefs out of hand, without trying to learn more, due to his utter contempt for her writing skills. Both characters will aspire to become artists, but only one of them focuses his attention from the very beginning on Rand's artistic skills. In the context of the artist's coming of age, understanding the novel as both a *Bildungsroman* and a *Künstlerroman*, the development of Wolff's protagonist is more credible. If he strives for a certain literary aesthetics, Rand's effect necessarily has to wear off. Interestingly, though, he could still have learned important lessons from Rand as a writer and thinker: first, how to respect other people's work—a stumbling block for the narrator in the course of events; and, second, what are the economics of writing a bestseller—for this much, if not more, Rand had figured out.

Moreover, as in the case of Bell-Villada's Joe, Tobias Wolff has given his protagonist many of his own views on Rand, as one might have suspected from his reference to her "weird cult following"

(Bradley 108). During his research, Wolff struggled to get hold of Rand's books because they were constantly checked out from the college library, leading him to suspect that young people were still influenced by her thought ("The Writing Obsession"). His attempt at reimagining these young readers and the reasons behind their fascination for Rand was only partially successful.

Getting It Wrong: Buckley's Objectivists

In 1982, Conservative intellectual William F. Buckley, Jr., claimed that "Ayn Rand is dead. So, incidentally, is the philosophy she sought to launch dead" (qtd. in Burns 279). Despite his prophecy, he would, eleven years later, publish a novel that partly focused on Ayn Rand's followers, or, to be more precise, on one fictional follower, Leonora Goldstein. Set in the 1960s, her story runs parallel to Woodroe Raynor's, a Mormon from Utah, who works for the John Birch Society. As their paths cross at the founding of the Young Americans for Freedom (YAF), they fall in love and will eventually "get it right"; that is, join mainstream conservatism.⁴ Before their quest for truth comes to an end, however, Buckley chronicles both their errant years working for two subgroups of the American Right.

Leonora's biography bears some similarities to Rand's in that she is of Jewish and Eastern European—specifically Polish—descent and was born during the North Atlantic passage to the United States. Anti-Communism already dominates her political thinking when she enters New York's Hunter College. There, a fellow student turns her attention to Rand's philosophy, and she is eventually hired by Rand. Leonora hopes "to become a qualified Objectivist"—even though she is admonished by her future employer that there "are only *two* Objectivists. Me and Nathaniel Branden" (42). To her astonishment, an initiation to Objectivism seems to require more than ideological allegiance: "Change Goldstein" (42). Although she is hesitant to conceal her Jewish ancestry, she will eventually adopt a new surname, "Pound" (94). She is thus prepared to make sacrifices to become part of Ayn Rand's inner circle: "I am very pleased to be in the company of—to be a student of—your order" (43).

With Leonora's choice of "order," Buckley deliberately gives Rand's movement a religious connotation. He describes the regular discussions in the groups as a substitute for religious service:

Worship was an important part of the communal exercise. Yet it was in part social, in major part of course instructive. These were young men and women of extraordinary intellect, and Ayn Rand was their lode-star. If there was any deviation, however unintentional, the errant compass was fine-tuned by her word. By her afflatus, though that term would never be used, suggesting, as it does, divine inspiration. (58)

Leonora does not seem to require an ersatz religion, though, and she has not been seeking a sense of community. Even though she guides us through the world of Ayn Rand and lets us peek behind the scenes of Rand's affair with her erstwhile intellectual heir, Nathaniel Branden, we fail to grasp why Leonora found her ideological home in Objectivism. Her letters to Woodroe confirm that she is not a casual follower and that, in contrast to Bell-Villada's Joe or Wolff's young boarder, she has understood the implications of Rand's ideas. However, the fact that she has read *Atlas Shrugged* thrice does not bring us any closer to comprehending her commitment to Objectivism. The religiosity Buckley attributes to Rand's group cannot cast any light on Leonora's initiation story, especially if we consider the rather distant relationship between Rand and the young woman. As a consequence, Leonora's decision to break away from Rand after Branden's discharge is less dramatic than probably intended.

One of the reasons why the reader may not understand how Leonora could feel persuaded by Rand's ideas may be due to her creator's intentions. Buckley lets Rand claim that her "books are not written merely for enjoyment," but rather as "catalysts for societal change" (99). *Getting It Right* may not share the latter goal, but neither does it seem to be intended to be a purely enjoyable read. Instead, it wants to teach the reader how promising young minds like Leonora wasted their years for the wrong cause. Such a rather negative premise and prejudiced attitude leaves little room to develop a credible Objectivist *Bildungsroman*, let alone a sympathetic portrayal of a young Randian; Buckley's Leonora simply serves instead as a means to take the reader into Rand's inner sanctum.

For Another Life: Gaitskill's Dorothy Never and Her Quest for Happiness

In stark contrast to the writers discussed previously, Mary Gaitskill did not approach the subject of her 1991 novel *Two Girls, Fat and Thin* with disdain and antipathy. Instead, she started her

research on Ayn Rand's followers with a series of interviews during which she met Objectivists who "weren't what most people would consider selfish, they were considerate and communicative" (Percespe). Still, with Gaitskill's past oeuvre in mind (in which she often explored the dark side of desire, particularly in sadomasochistic relationships), one would not expect a Randian hagiography; a cynical, black-humoured account of human passions would fit better.

Two Girls, Fat and Thin intertwines the exploration of different types of passion, covering physical desires as well as emotional needs and ideological obsessions. The two girls alluded to in the novel's title are the "thin" Justine Shade and "fat" Dorothy Never, whose names can be read as ironic references both to Ayn Rand's dualistic worldview and to her tendency to give her characters unique, rather strange names.⁵ Gaitskill develops two different points of view and plotlines, one that follows Justine's quest for a career in journalism and for a relationship that lets her further explore her masochistic desires and another that follows the story of Dorothy's early sexual abuse by her father (26) and of her later self-discovery. In the course of that self-discovery, the two characters cross paths: Dorothy finds the strength to assert herself and pursue her own vision of happiness, thanks to the influence of Romanian writer and thinker Anna Granite, while Justine wants to write an article about that same Anna Granite:

Justine was morbidly attracted to obsessions, particularly the useless, embarrassing obsessions of the thwarted. She could not help but be drawn to the spectacle of flesh-and-blood humans forming their lives in conjunction with the shadows invented by a mediocre novelist. (21)

Anna Granite is a thinly clad parody of Ayn Rand, with the mandatory ingredients of an ideology, Definitism, considered "fascistic" (32) by many: a flamboyant presence accentuated by staple accessories such as a cape (22); an intellectual heir with academic credentials (23), who replaces the earlier protégé (the tellingly named "Beau Bradley," who fell from grace by ending an affair with the author [31]); and an oeuvre disdained by critics and literary scholars alike. The names of Granite's novels mimic those of Rand's novels to highlight the core message of originals—spoofing *We the Living* (1936), for example, as *The Last Woman Alive* (23), in which the heroine would finally

perish . . . on an ice floe in an effort to escape to America, Captain Dagmarov had killed himself on realizing that he was philosophically in error, and Rex, having been broken by the collectivist society around him, was writing pornography for a living. (24)

Those acquainted with Rand's work will likewise recognize the rape scene between "Asia Maconda" and "Frank Golanka" (35) as lifted from *The Fountainhead*, or link the title *The Gods Disdained* (163) with *Atlas Shrugged*.

In spite of Gaitskill's apparent pleasure in rewriting Rand's plots, she offers a human portrayal of the young woman who becomes engrossed in Granite's fiction. Although Dorothy had first read Granite's work as a high school student, it is only during her "increasingly ghastly second year" (161) at college that she seeks refuge in these story worlds. She starts perusing the novels with the same intensity as she devours donuts during her reading sessions (163), with the books thus metaphorically becoming part of her body. The physical transformation is paralleled by an emotional change, as Dorothy grows more confident and hopeful: "I could determine my own world and reject anything that made it an unhappy place" (164). She tries to share this newly found source of inspiration and joy with the people around her, and she hopes to discuss the theories that have affected her:

I introduced Granite into discussions in history and philosophy and was dismissed by my philosophy professor ("I don't deal with the work of dime-store ideologues") and blankly stared at by my history teacher, who'd never heard of her. (164–5)

Her professors are not very different from the resistant faculty at Wolff's imagined boarding school or from the many critics like Bell-Villada who dismiss Rand as a passing phase. Unwittingly, they thus accelerate Dorothy's initiation into Definitism. She practically undergoes the classic three stages of initiation; namely, separation, transition, and incorporation (Van Gennep 11). She abandons her college courses to spend all her time reading and rereading Granite's novels. During this intense time of reclusion—another topos of initiation—she becomes convinced that she will only find happiness if she breaks with the past and endorses Definitism, and she finally has a sense of homecoming when she listens to Anna Granite for the first time: "I felt I was connecting with the life force of humanity.

At the first lecture I sat there and wept. I just wept" (28). She becomes a part of the movement, even of the inner circle modelled after Ayn Rand's own entourage, ironically called the "Collective." Moreover, she severs all ties with her family by adopting "Dorothy Never" as her name, reminding us of Leonora's name changing from Goldstein to Pound. Like the secretary of Rand's first protégé and lover, she becomes well acquainted with Granite and with a man who will complete her emancipation from her former self. She becomes the lover of another Definitist, in spite of her initial reservations:

Then I opened my mouth, breathed in and ate the fiancée. Vaguely remembering that Asia Maconda, Katya Leonova, and Solitaire D'Anconti all had more than one lover, I swallowed the fiancée information and held it down. It dissolved in my stomach pretty quickly. I ate my pie and smiled at Knight's ultrareality. (222)

Again, Gaitskill uses the metaphorical language of food and eating to make the change in Dorothy palpable, as she lets the truth of another woman become part of her body—a body, however, whose superfluous fat she starts shedding. Eventually, Dorothy will see her trust in Definitism betrayed, as the movement loses momentum due to the break-up of Bradley and Granite, but she retains her independence and confidence. She will develop tastes that are not in line with Granite's beliefs; yet she has now the confidence to counter expectations held by others, not least because "one of the central beliefs of Definitism is in the right of the individual to seek out whatever serves and pleases him, as long as others are not trampled upon" (182). Unlike Bell-Villada's and Wolff's protagonists, Dorothy does not become cocky or see herself growing superior to the rest of the world. Instead, she has simply learned to embrace and assert herself. Her transition, in spite of her comical appearance, her seeming naïveté, and her excitability, becomes more credible and easier to understand. Neither the satirical tone nor the many stabs at the eccentricities of Rand and her followers manage to suppress the reader's sympathy for Dorothy Never.

Interestingly, despite her declared "morbid" attraction to obsessions, Justine fails to develop a similar understanding of Dorothy's Definitist beliefs. In her final article, she caricatures Anna Granite as a "Yuppie Grandmother" (290) and describes her novels as "phantom comic-book worlds shadowing, in exaggerated Kabuki-

like form, the psychological-life and anxieties of [American] society" (291). In particular, she sees Dorothy and other Definitists as mere victims of indoctrination and emotional manipulation: "While claiming to exalt the individual, she plugged into a mass psyche, using archetypal characters devoid of real individuality, with the same vulgar emotional power as the Wicked Witch" (292). Her judgment seems justifiable only with reference to a more stereotypical Objectivist/Definitist than Dorothy and was probably based on Gaitskill's own encounters with "old-guard hardliners" (Percespe). Apart from Dorothy, Justine Shade also interviews Max Nolte, a teacher at the private Rationalist Reaffirmation High School (235). He dedicates his teaching to Definitist values, carefully choosing the curriculum:

What I teach is stuff like Ian Fleming, Mickey Spillane, Jack London, Hemingway, Conrad, and, of course, Anna Granite. Literature with clear plots, clear cause-and-effect connections, plenty of action and *heroes*. That's the most important thing. Especially for kids at this age. Heroes who live by clear values. (235)

Nolte's literary preferences are nearly congruent with Rand's, who admired Mickey Spillane (Rand, *Column* 35–7) and applauded Ian Fleming (Rand, *Romantic* 136) (but, as we know, not least thanks to Wolff, abhorred Hemingway [Rand, *Q&A* 201–4]). And, in their distaste for more experimental literature, their minds meet: "I have them read Joyce and Kafka and other junk, but I give them a solid Definitist perspective" (Gaitskill 236). Nolte may be a better-educated Definitist and thus seemingly more intelligent than Dorothy, but from his portrayal, we can easily deduce that his Definitism is the result of indoctrination and fundamentalism rather than an independent choice. He is depicted as something closer to Bell-Villada's cartoonish Joe than to Dorothy.

The Definitist world Gaitskill's Justine explores is contrasted with the aspiring journalist's own life, in which she seeks sexual thrills in being humiliated. Her initial pleasure in a sadomasochistic relationship—ironically with a partner who admires Anna Granite (250)—offsets the unrealistic rape fantasies heeded by Wolff's protagonist and Bell-Villada's Jennifer and can be read as a critique of Rand's attempt at capturing the liminal space of deviant desires. Granite's adherents are redeemed, however, by the fact that it is Dorothy who intervenes in the decisive moment

when Justine's partner is pushing dangerously far and turning thrill into pure pain and fear. Fittingly, Dorothy only arrives on the scene because she intended to voice her anger about Justine's article.

Conclusion: Young Crusader, Seek No Further?

In the eyes of political scientist Maureen Whitebrook, one of the main reasons for her discipline to consult literary works rather than political opinion pieces lies in the fact that the former do not argue as such but rather "illuminate" and "juxtapose" (25). Moreover, novels and other forms of fiction can also disconcert, puzzle, and take us along unexpected paths. Bell-Villada, Wolff, and Buckley seem to have forgotten these aspects, as they impose their personal views of Rand on their protagonists and are unable to overcome their own reservations to come closer to their characters' (initial) fascination with the worlds of Howard Roark and Dagny Taggard. The reader feels, at times, lectured to, as if the authors did not trust their audience to "get it right." In the result, we learn more about why Rand's fiction should not persuade anyone of anything in the first place, rather than about why it does.

Although more experimental, satiric, and playful in tone, plot, and style, Mary Gaitskill's novel makes palpable what some people may find in the work of Ayn Rand. While both Bell-Villada's Joe and Wolff's adolescent writer-in-waiting only seek a justification for adopting an attitude of superiority and hiding their insecurities, Dorothy, indeed, strives for a philosophy that gives her life meaning and direction. Moreover, in contrast to our puzzlement over Leonora's experience with "Rand," we comprehend how "Granite," in spite of her theatrical persona, may leave an impression on people and provide them with more than just an ideological home. Gaitskill thus succeeds in unfolding a story of Objectivism and its adherents that is both critical and sympathetic.

There is one aspect of Rand's political thought neglected in all four literary works at hand: laissez-faire capitalism. Buckley's Leonora does, at times, discuss the economic implications of Rand's ideas, but only in a cursory manner. Wolff's focus is on Rand's literary worth, while Bell-Villada concentrates on the idea of rational self-interest and its implications for the individual. Gaitskill picks up

the latter concept as well, but she is likewise interested in the sense of community that even an individualistic ideology creates. The message of all four thus seems to be that individuals care less about the political and societal implications of an ideology than they do about its impact on their personal lives. At what point they will grasp that these two effects, the individual and the political, go hand in hand may be answered outside the realm of fiction—or in yet another novel.

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Notes

- 1 Kay Nolte Smith's novel *Elegy for a Soprano* centres on a singer, Vardis Wolf, who inspires a following as Rand did and lives only according to her own values, putting her livelihood and happiness first. Steve Ditko is the co-creator of Spider-Man; his character *Mr. A* is an attempt to imagine the ideal Objectivist comic hero. Ditko's independent work shows many Randian influences; see, e.g., Bell 83–97; Brühwiler. In Matt Ruff's *Sewer, Gas & Electric*, Ayn Rand is a ghost trapped in a lamplight and has to help one of the protagonists unveil a plot for robot dominance. Ruff has ghost and carrier argue constantly about the essence of Randian thought and its plausibility. The plot of Nancy Kress's *Beggars in Spain* resembles those of Rand's *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged* in many ways: it features a community of individuals who, thanks to genetic modifications, are superior to the rest of society. Their intelligence and ability to live without sleeping provokes the hostility of the "normal" citizens and forces them to establish a parallel society.

- 2 On Nietzsche's influence on Rand's work, see, *inter alia*, Burns (25) and Heller (41–2).
- 3 I am indebted to Melissa Jane Hardie's text on Ayn Rand's camp aesthetics for pointing me to Umberto Eco's essay on *Casablanca*.
- 4 Incidentally, the title also bears another meaning, or so it seems to the present reader—namely, that Buckley "got it right" as well. Thus, he claims that "[n]ot one word is attributed to any public declaration by Robert Welch or other representatives of the John Birch Society that wasn't actually spoken or written by them. This is so also of Ayn Rand, respecting her thought and writing" (vii). To cement this claim, he appends a list of sources. As has been pointed out by Robert James Bidinotto of the Atlas Society, some of the sources are of a rather dubious quality, and some of Rand's alleged statements cannot be authenticated at all.
- 5 Lauren Berlant points out more literary possible origins (127): *The Wizard of Oz's* Dorothy, *Pale Fire's* narrator John Shade, and the Marquis de Sade's *Justine*.

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