

MISES AND ROTHBARD LETTERS TO AYN RAND

January 23, 1958

Mrs. Ayn Rand
36 East 36 Street
New York, N.Y.

Dear Mrs. Rand:

I AM NOT A professional critic and I feel no call to judge the merits of a novel. So I do not want to detain you with the information that I enjoyed very much reading *Atlas Shrugged* and that I am full of admiration for your masterful construction of the plot.

But “*Atlas Shrugged*” is not merely a novel. It is also—or may I say: first of all—a cogent analysis of the evils that plague our society, a substantiated rejection of the ideology of our self-styled “intellectuals” and a pitiless unmasking of the insincerity of the policies adopted by governments and political parties. It is a devastating exposure of the “moral cannibals,” the “gigolos of science” and of the “academic prattle” of the makers of the “anti-industrial revolution.” You have the courage to tell the masses what no politician told them: you are inferior and all the improvements in your conditions which you simply take for granted you owe to the effort of men who are better than you.

If this be arrogance, as some of your critics observed, it still is the truth that had to be said in this age of the Welfare State.

I warmly congratulate you and I am looking forward with great expectations to your future work.

Sincerely,

Ludwig Mises
LM/ms

October 3, 1957

Mrs. Ayn Rand O'Connor
36 East 36th St.
New York 16, N.Y.

Dear Ayn:

FIRST, I WOULD LIKE to begin by saying "and I mean it"; there is no exaggeration or hyperbole in this letter. Anything less than complete honesty would be unworthy of *Atlas Shrugged*.

I just finished your novel today. I will start by saying that all of us in the "Circle Bastiat" are convinced, and were convinced very early in the reading, that *Atlas Shrugged* is the greatest novel ever written. This is our generally accepted initial premise, and the discussions over the book have naturally been based upon it. But this is just the beginning. This simple statement by itself means little to me: I have always had a bit of contempt for the novel form, and have thought of the novel, at best, as a useful sugar-coated pill to carry on agit-prop work amongst the masses who can't take ideas straight. A month ago, if I had said a book was "the greatest novel ever written," it wouldn't have been too high a compliment.

It is one of the small measures of what I think of *Atlas Shrugged* that I no longer pooh-pooh the novel. I have always heard my literary friends talk of the "truths" presented by novels, without understanding the term at all. Now I do understand, but only because you have carried the novel form to a new and higher dimension. For the first time you have welded a great unity of principle and person, depicting persons and their actions in perfect accordance with principles and their consequences. This in itself is a tremendous achievement. For with the unity of principle and person there emerges the corollary unity of reason and emotion: and the reader, in grasping your philosophic system both in speech and through acting persons, is hit by the great emotion of an immediate and rational perception. As I read your novel, the joy I felt was sometimes tempered by the regret that all those generations of novel-readers, people like my mother who in their youth read Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, searching eagerly for they knew not what truths which they never quite found, that these people could not read *Atlas Shrugged*. Here, I thought, were the truths they were really looking for. Here, in *Atlas Shrugged*, is the perfection of the novel form. It is now a form that I honor and admire.

But the truly staggering thing about your novel is the vast and completely integrated edifice, of thought and of action: the astounding infinity of rational connections that abound, great and small, throughout this novel. Joey says she used to wonder how a novel could take you over ten years to write; she now wonders how you possibly could have written all that in a mere ten years. Every page, almost every word, has its meaning and function. I am sure that I have only scratched the surface of tracing all the interconnections, and a good part of my conversation consists of saying; and what of page so-and-so: do you see how that fits in? I recall now just a line, I believe it was in an early speech of Francisco, where the following nouns appear: reason, justice, freedom, production, achievement. To some this [might] seem to be a random string of nouns, but I saw immediately that one follows from the other in strict logical progression, that each leads to the succeeding. This is just one example of the almost infinite treasurehouse that is *Atlas Shrugged*.

To find one person that has carved out a completely integrated rational ethic, rational epistemology, rational psychology, and rational politics, all integrated one with the other, and then to find each with the other portrayed through characters in action, is a doubly staggering event. And I am surprised that it astonishes even I who was familiar with the general outlines of your system. What it will do the person stumbling upon it anew I cannot imagine. For you have achieved not only the unity of principle and person, and of reason and passion, but also the unity of mind and body, matter and spirit, sex and politics . . . in short, to use the old Marxist phrase, “the unity of theory and practice.”

This is the sort of book where one is apt to find a phrase or concept and exclaim: oh, no leftist could say such nonsense, and then go out and find the same nonsense being spouted all around you. It is almost impossible, after reading *Atlas Shrugged*, to take the usual leftist arguments seriously. At first I admit I missed the presence of a great, super-Toohey villain, a Dr. Fu Manchu of evil, but then I came to realize that this is one of the key points in the book. And then, when I tried to tell a couple of leftist acquaintances something about your system, all they could do was curl their ugly lips and sneer about a “paranoid closed system.” These are the “intellectuals” of our day!

I now come to the painful part of this letter. For standing as I do in awe and wonder at the glory and magnitude of your achievement, knowing from early in the novel that I would have to write you and express in full how much I and the world owe to you, I also know that I owe you an explanation: an explanation of why I have avoided

seeing you in person for the many years of our acquaintance. I want you to know that the fault is mine, that the reason is a defect in my own psyche and not a defect that I attribute to you. The fact is that most times when I saw you in person, particularly when we engaged in lengthy discussion or argument, that I found afterwards that I was greatly depressed for days thereafter. Why I should be so depressed I do not know. All my adult life I have been plagued with a “phobic state” (of which my travel phobia is only the most overt manifestation), i.e. with frightening emotions which I could neither control nor rationally explain. I have found that unfortunately the only way I could successfully combat this painful emotion is by sidestepping the situations which seemed to evoke it—knowing that this is an evasion, but also knowing no better way. So in this situation. I have never felt depressed in such a way after seeing anyone else, so I concluded that the best I could do is avoid the reaction by not going to see you. I had naturally been too ashamed to say anything about this to you. Strangely, I don’t feel ashamed now; it is as if when writing to the author of *Atlas Shrugged*, that book which conveys with such immediate impact the pride and joy in being a man, that it is impossible to feel shame for telling the truth.

In trying my best to figure out why I should have been so depressed, I can only think of one or both of the following explanations: (1) that my brain became completely exhausted under the intense strain of keeping up with a mind that I unhesitatingly say is the most brilliant of the twentieth century; or (2) that I felt that if I continued to see you, my personality and independence would become overwhelmed by the tremendous power of your own. If the latter, then the defect is, of course, again mine and not yours. At any rate, I have come to regard you as like the sun, a being of enormous power giving off great light, but that someone coming too close would be likely to get burned.

At any rate, I want you to know that, even without seeing you, you have had an enormous influence upon me—even before the novel came out. When I first became interested in ideas, my first principle that I had from the start was a burning love of human freedom, and a hatred for aggressive violence of man upon man. I always liked economics, and was inclined to theory, but found in my graduate economics courses that I felt all the theories offered were dead wrong, but I could not say why. Mises’s *Human Action* was the next great influence upon me, because I found in it a great rational system of economics, each interconnected logically, each following, as in Aristotelian philosophy, from a basic and certain axiom: the existence of human beings. When I first met you, many years ago, I

was a follower of Mises, but unhappy about his antipathy to natural rights, which I “felt” was true but could not demonstrate. You introduced me to the whole field of natural rights and natural law philosophy, which I did not know existed, and month by month, working on my own as I preferred, I learned and studied the glorious natural rights tradition. I also learned from you about the existence of Aristotelian epistemology, and then I studied that, and came to adopt it wholeheartedly. So that I owe you a great intellectual debt for many years, the least of which is introducing me to a tradition of which four years of college and three years of graduate school, to say nothing of other reading, had kept me in ignorance.

And now I find, and marvel at in wonder and awe and joy, that I have become a better person just in reading *Atlas Shrugged*. It is still incredible to me that a person’s character can improve from reading a work of art, but there it is. I have checked and found many friends who have read it have felt the same way. I think that reading it will bring to the attentive reader, as it has brought me, at least a little more of the conviction of pride in being a man, of joy in unlimited roads of achievement open before him, of the feeling that pain does not matter, of the happiness of being alive on earth, and even of the feeling that reason and justice will ultimately prevail. He will walk a little straighter, hold his head a little higher, and be far more honest (one of the greatest accomplishments of the book is its rational and emotional demonstration that honesty is a profoundly selfish and necessary virtue—and not just a luxury for suckers. Magnificent!).

The chief defect in this book—and I am quite serious—is that it lacks an index. My chief emotion in reading this book was beautifully summed up in an emotion that Dr. Stadler felt when he first came across Galt’s manuscript: torn between eagerness to proceed onward, and the eagerness to look back and think about and digest the many ramifications of what I had read. With a novel, this is even more troublesome, since the pull of reading onward is more irresistible. This book cries for a fully annotated index, so that when one wants to refer quickly to passages on certain subjects, or to a particularly moving speech or phrase, one could find it without delay. I know that no novel has had an index before, but none has ever required it before, and this does. Perhaps you could be persuaded to come out with a “textbook” edition, complete with index.

Please let me know if there is anything I can do to promote the sale of the novel. I will do anything I can: from writing letters to the editor to pasting stickers up on street corners. I am enclosing a copy of the letter I am now sending to the *New Leader*, in comment on the disgraceful and disgusting column of Granville Hicks, an “ex”-Communist,

about your book. (When I said your book will improve the reader, I don't mean the convinced leftists: I shudder what the book will do to their psyche, if they really read it.) I understand, glory be!, that John Chamberlain will review it for the *Sunday Herald-Tribune*—and, confidentially, there is a growing possibility that John may also review it for *National Review*, if Whittaker Chambers does not send a review in on time.

Only twice in my life have I felt honored and happy that I was young and alive at the specific date of the publication of a book: first, of *Human Action* in 1949, and now with *Atlas Shrugged*. When, in the past, I heard your disciples refer to you in grandiloquent terms—as one of the greatest geniuses who ever lived, as giving them a “round universe”—I confess I was repelled: surely this was the outpouring of a mystic cult. But now, upon reading *Atlas Shrugged*, I find I was wrong. This was not wild exaggeration but the perception of truth. You are one of the great geniuses of the ages, and I am proud that we are friends. And *Atlas Shrugged* is not merely the greatest novel ever written, it is one of the very greatest books ever written, fiction or nonfiction. Indeed, it is one of the greatest achievements the human mind has ever produced. And I mean it. If Zarathustra should ever return to earth, and ask me—as representative of the human race—that unforgettable question: “what have ye done to surpass man?”, I shall point to *Atlas Shrugged*.

Gratefully yours,
Murray