

Romanticism in Everyday Life

by Robert James Bidinotto

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"I believe," Ayn Rand wrote in her *Journals*, "...that the worst curse on mankind is the ability to consider ideals as something quite abstract and detached from one's everyday life." (*Journals of Ayn Rand (JAR)*, p. 66)

Of all the things that made Ayn Rand's ethical viewpoint so distinctive, it was her passionate devotion to this view. She made it the leitmotif of her literary heroines, giving to Kira Argounova of *We the Living* "her hunger for practical beauty, for dreams and reality united" (*JAR* 60) -- and sharing that same hunger with Dagny Taggart of *Atlas Shrugged*, who "never found beauty in longing for the impossible, and never found the possible to be beyond her reach."

This spirit, which regarded the ideal as a *possible* dream, is so at odds with the *zeitgeist* of the past two thousand years that it is hard for people to comprehend, let alone internalize. At least since Plato, the concept of the "ideal" has been *defined* as the antithesis to the "real." As a result, millions of people experience life as tragically sundered, torn between the loud demands of body and the quiet yearnings of soul -- between the meaningless clamor of mundane existence, and the faint, mocking call of a state of perfection ever beyond reach.

So ingrained is this outlook that even many who find Rand's unique moral vision compelling and inspirational nonetheless find it difficult to absorb and assimilate into their own lives. And often they wonder: How did *this* woman manage to do it?

How did she manage to develop and sustain her idealism in a world so inhospitable to such a vision? What gave her personality and her writing its special power, passion, and inspirational quality? Did she leave any clues, in her person and her works, to help us understand how to infuse our own lives with a similar sense of romance, passion, and meaning?

I touched on some of these issues last year in my talk, "What Objectivists Must Learn from Religion." But based on subsequent audience questions and comments, I believe there is more to say and to clarify. These remarks also will expand upon certain ideas from my talk yesterday, "The Value-Seeking Personality." That presentation focused on the moral and characterological aspects of becoming a value-seeker. This talk will stress the *motivational* and *methodological* dimensions: how to develop a passion for value-seeking, and how to sustain that passion in everyday life.

Ayn Rand proudly declared herself to be a "Romantic," but that word seems woefully inadequate to encompass the emotional intensity of her sense of life. Here, I will use the term in a sense broader than that which we associate only with art. By "Romantic" I refer instead to an idealistic way of perceiving and experiencing the world.

The precision of her mature philosophical formulations do not convey Rand's lust for life quite as well as some of the more awkward, yet charmingly effusive writings of her youth -- and one of the best examples is in her *Journal* notes for *The Little Street*, a novel she never wrote. Here is her description of its hero, Danny Renahan:

"He has a wonderful 'sense of living.' He realizes that he is living, he appreciates every minute of it, he wants to *live* every second, he is unable to *exist* as other men do. He doesn't take life for granted... For him, life [must be] strong, high emotion; he has to live 'on top,' 'breathing' life, tense, exalted, *active*. He cannot spend eight hours each day on work he despises and does not need. He cannot understand men spending their lives on some work and not liking that work... He doesn't have people's... general way of existing calmly day to day and [experiencing] something strong and exalting only once in a while, as an exception."

Rand then underscored the next sentence:

"'Everyday life' does not exist for him. His normal state is to be exalted, all the time; he wants all of his life to be high, supreme, full of meaning." (*JAR 28*)

If an exultant lust for life is one element of Randian Romanticism, a solemn sense of reverence is another. Her brand of Romanticism might be described as a kind of impassioned religiosity -- but a secular religiosity, without a hint of mysticism.

"You're a profoundly religious man, Mr. Roark -- in your own way," a client tells the hero of *The Fountainhead*. "I can see that in your buildings."

"That's true,' said Roark. It was almost a whisper."

I have long been troubled by how little attention this religious aspect of Rand's Romanticism seems to receive, especially from Objectivists. No doubt her atheism and advocacy of reason dissuade both her enemies and admirers from thinking about her outlook in such terms. But Rand's profound religiosity is so central to that outlook, and so pervasive in her life and work, that it is impossible to properly understand her viewpoint without coming to grips with it.

In her "Introduction to *The Fountainhead*," she complained that "Religion's monopoly in the field of ethics has made it extremely difficult to communicate the emotional meaning and connotations of a rational view of life." She went on to

discuss the central importance in her view of life of what she calls “man-worship”: “a spirit embodying the emotions of reverence, exaltation, nobility, grandeur -- not directed at some supernatural realm, but at its proper object: *human potential*.”

Ayn Rand constantly expressed her philosophical outlook in strikingly religious terms. For example, the opening sentence of her notes for *The Fountainhead* says, “The first purpose of the book is *a defense of egoism in its real meaning*, egoism as a new faith.” (JAR 77) “[M]y ‘egoism as a new faith,’” she continued, “is a higher meaning and a higher exaltation of the word ‘I,’ of that feeling which makes man say and feel ‘I.’” (JAR 80) “That new faith is *Individualism* in all its deepest meaning and implications...a revival (or perhaps the first birth) of the word “I” as the holiest of holies and the reason of reasons.” (JAR 81)

Similarly, in her notes for *The Little Street*, she writes that “Most people lack [the capacity for]” -- and she underscores these words -- “*reverence* and *‘taking things seriously.’* They do not hold anything to be very serious or profound. There is nothing that is sacred or immensely important to them. There is nothing -- no idea, object, work, or person -- that can inspire them with a profound, intense, and all-absorbing passion that reaches to the roots of their souls... They are too small and low for a loyal, profound reverence -- and they disapprove of all such reverence. They are too small and profane themselves to know what sacredness is -- and they disapprove of anything being too sacred.”

But the story’s hero, Danny, she says, “is just their opposite. He is all passion, will, and uncompromising absolutes. He takes everything seriously. Life is very serious and sacred to him. And, as Nietzsche said, ‘The noble soul has reverence for itself.’ He has a profound reverence for himself, a determination to keep himself and his life clean, untouched, and beautiful, because they are the most sacred of all sacred things...” (JAR 28-29)

Later, in notes for *Atlas Shrugged*, she would go so far as to say, “It seems that self-reverence (which is the root of self-confidence, which is the root of independence) is a primary axiom for man -- the axiom of survival, the life principle.” (JAR 448)

Though Rand would later become far more philosophically precise in her formulations of these issues, this sense of impassioned reverence was at the emotional *and motivational* heart of her work as a thinker and artist. As she repeatedly stressed, the goal of her writing was “the projection of an ideal man.” “[M]y life purpose,” she wrote, “is the creation of the kind of world (people and events) that I like, i. e., that represents human perfection...” (JAR 479-480) She added that “...I seem to be both a theoretical philosopher and a fiction writer. But it is the last that interests me most; the first is only the means to the last; ...the fiction story is the end...”

So Ayn Rand was not primarily a philosopher, but first and foremost, a Romantic visionary. Like her hero Howard Roark, she was a “profoundly

religious” person -- an artist on a sacred, self-defined mission to define and concretize a new image of the human ideal.

But though this quest explains the passion of her writing, it does not fully explain its *power*. Nor does it explain how *she* remained so unshakably devoted to her Romantic vision of human potential, in a society that treated such a vision as an alien presence.

I believe that both the extraordinary power of Rand’s writing, and her unwavering personal commitment to her ideal, arise from the same source. That source is a mental habit that allowed her to make her ideal dazzlingly real to herself -- and then helped her to sustain its reality as her constant companion in daily life. I call that habit *symbolic vision*.

In “What Objectivists Must Learn From Religion,” I discussed the psycho-epistemological basis for the use of symbolism in religion, art, and human consciousness. The response of some to that talk reminded me that the very concept of symbolism has negative connotations for many Objectivists, who associate it exclusively with mysticism and subjectivity. So I would like to extend my previous discussion of symbolism: first, establishing its central role in Rand’s life and work; then, applying it to issues in our own daily lives.

First, what do I mean by Ayn Rand’s habit of “symbolic vision?” Let me begin to illustrate this idea by means of an example.

One of the most powerful scenes in all of Ayn Rand’s fiction is at the close of her novel *We the Living*: the death scene of the heroine, Kira Argounova. Trapped inside the Soviet Union, Kira has fought desperately to save Leo, the man she passionately loves -- only to see him destroyed by the totalitarian system. Yet unbroken in spirit, she remains wedded to the image of what Leo might have become, and of the life she might have had with him.

She decides to escape across the border of Russia in the dead of winter. To camouflage herself in the snow, she puts on a pure white wedding gown, then begins to walk across the frozen wasteland toward freedom.

At the border stands Citizen Ivan Ivanov, a mindless, soulless border guard--in essence, Kira’s spiritual antithesis. He thinks he sees something moving in the distance, so without further thought, he raises his rifle and fires.

Kira falls in the snow. After a while, she gets up and continues her agonizing trek toward her future in the West. The torn train of the wedding dress drags behind her, leaving a trail of red drops on the snow. Before long, she becomes delirious. Through cracked lips, she begins to call Leo’s name.

“She went on,” Rand writes, “a fragile girl in the flowing, medieval gown of a priestess, red stains spreading on the white lace.”

The imagery is stunning, and hits you with the savage force of a hammer. It haunts you long after you have closed the novel, and makes you hate collectivism and dictatorship to your own dying day.

But why? What exactly gives this scene its power? How can it motivate the reader to share the author's philosophical commitments as no non-fiction essay possibly could?

The answer lies in Rand's awesome ability to visualize abstract ideas in concrete form, through the use of symbolism. By that means, every detail of the scene is made to carry enormous moral and emotional force.

Two symbolic devices stand out. The first is the contrast Rand draws, by means of carefully selected details, between Kira's heroic soul and the insufferable vulgarity of the border guard who shoots her. In isolation, these concretes would be meaningless and have no special emotional impact. For instance, had Kira's soul matched that of the guard -- and therefore been less representative of our own ideals -- our feelings about the shooting (if any) would be far less intense. Or, had the guard been a better sort of man -- and therefore less representative of the Soviet system -- our anger at that system would have been far less focused.

But Rand depicted something more than an accidental shooting at a border. She depicted two individuals who were also faithful representatives of two absolutely clashing ways of life, and then poised them on the border that divided their two absolutely clashing worlds. Placed in this *abstract context*, which she had previously established in the story, their encounter is elevated from meaningless chance to profound symbolic significance. And as a result, this is not a shooting; this is blasphemy -- and the emotional impact on the reader is infuriating.

The second symbolic device, even more potent, is the absolutely ingenious choice of having Kira wear a wedding dress during her escape. Now here is a girl who has lost her lover to the dictatorship. She will never be Leo's bride -- in effect, she has been widowed by that system. Yet she remains wedded to his ideal, to her image of what he might have been, and to what they might have been together. Now we see her, a small figure in a white wedding gown, at once bride and widow, marching resolutely across frozen waste toward future hope, Leo's name on her lips -- and right into the sights of Citizen Ivanov's rifle.

Had Kira been wearing ordinary clothing, the scene would have been robbed of the special emotional connotations we attach to a bridal gown. The gown, after all, is not ordinary clothing; it is ceremonial dress. In the context of the story, it becomes an excruciating reminder of what the Soviet system has stolen from this young girl -- yet a poignant reminder of her idealism and spirit in the face of that monstrous system. This is not a death; it is tragedy of operatic proportions -- and its emotional impact on the reader is unendurable.

Symbolism of this sort pervades Ayn Rand's fiction and non-fiction. One can turn to almost any page of anything she wrote and find examples.

In the opening scene of *The Fountainhead*, a young Howard Roark stands alone atop a stone cliff, his naked figure framed against the sky. He sees the raw stone around him and thinks of the buildings he could make of it. Then he dives down the stone face, descending into the world below -- and into his battle with society.

In the closing scene of *The Fountainhead*, Dominique Francon, the woman who loves him, is drawn by a speeding elevator up the stone face of a building Roark has designed. He has won his battle against the conformist society that had tried to hold him down, and now she too rises above its symbols -- above the spires of churches, above the pinnacles of bank buildings, above the crowns of courthouses. Then she looks up and sees him, standing alone atop his building, above the world. And just as the novel begins with the name "Howard Roark," so it ends with the name "Howard Roark."

In the opening scene of *Atlas Shrugged*, Eddie Willers walks through the depressing streets of a decaying New York City, unaccountably recalling a disturbing image of his childhood, the image of an oak tree. "It had stood there for hundreds of years, and he thought it would always stand there." It had been his greatest image of enduring strength -- until the night it was split open by a bolt of lightning. "The trunk was only an empty shell," Rand writes, "its heart had rotted away long ago; there was nothing inside -- just a thin gray dust that was being dispersed by the whim of the faintest wind. The living power had gone, and the shape it left had not been able to stand without it."

Some paragraphs later, Eddie approaches the Taggart Transcontinental Building where he works. "The building stood over the street as its tallest and proudest structure," Rand writes. "It seemed to stand above the years, untouched. It would always stand there, thought Eddie Willers." He enters the building, and walks "through the spotless halls into the heart of the building, into the office of James Taggart, President of Taggart Transcontinental."

The full symbolic weight of this scene can be grasped only after a reading of the entire story, which provides its abstract context of meaning. It is only then that we understand that, like the oak tree, the heart of Taggart Transcontinental has also rotted away long ago, and that what is left in its president's office is a gray non-entity who is moved by the faintest breeze of public opinion. The living power of the railroad had also gone, and what was left would not long stand without it.

Such symbolism is everywhere apparent in Rand. As literary scholar Kirsti Minsaas points out so well, Ayn Rand constantly places otherwise insignificant concretes -- names, the titles of stories and chapters, events, objects of all sorts -- into contexts which impress upon them a host of value-laden meanings, creating a colorful tapestry of metaphor.

For example, in *Atlas Shrugged*, when the sun sets over the dying city, Rand describes it as looking like a bleeding wound. Cigarettes bear the sign of the dollar, and become "fire, tamed at man's fingertips." A burning oil well

becomes “Wyatt’s Torch,” and a symbol of the strikers. A train’s engine is described as “a moral code cast in steel.” The chapter which introduces Dagny Taggart to Galt’s Gulch is titled “Atlantis.”

Rand frequently narrates the life stories of individual characters -- Midas Mulligan, Nat Taggart, Ragnar Danneskjold, John Galt -- in ways that elevate them to legendary stature. As Susan McCloskey noted earlier this week in her brilliant discussion of heroic archetypes, Rand describes Galt repeatedly as a figure of classical myth: as the man who found Atlantis, as “the Prometheus who changed his mind,” as the discoverer of the Fountain of Youth, and so on.

The complex weave of symbolism extends even to the book’s structure, elegantly balanced in three sections of ten chapters, with each section named in honor of Aristotle’s laws of logic, and each chapter title having special, sometimes multiple, meanings.

For instance, in the final sentence of a chapter titled “The Chain,” Lillian Rearden describes the chain bracelet of Rearden Metal which her husband gives her as “the chain by which he holds us all in bondage.” But the events of the chapter actually show how and why Hank Rearden is chained to his family. Similarly, at the beginning of the chapter, “The Top and the Bottom,” four villains, each in a position of social and political power, meet atop a skyscraper to plot against the book’s heroes, conspiring in a dark, cramped bar that looks like a cellar. But at the close of the same chapter, Eddie Willers meets, in a bright, spacious cafeteria beneath the Taggart Building, the nameless worker whom we later learn is John Galt. As Kirsti Minsaas observes, in the moral inversion of this society, heroes occupy the bottom rungs, while villains rise to the heights of power: the top are at the bottom, and the bottom are at the top.

And how could we ignore the most obvious symbol -- the novel’s title itself? Taking the mythical image of the Titan who bears the world on his shoulders, Rand transports it to the context of industrial civilization, where Atlas becomes a new symbolic archetype: the Producer, who bears upon his generous shoulders the burden of a parasitical society. And, adding one deftly chosen verb, she condenses the essence of the entire plot and theme, masterfully combining two unrelated images into a symbol laden with special philosophical meaning.

But these symbols were not employed merely to create esthetic effects, or to make philosophical ideas more memorable. For Rand, such symbols were indispensable tools for capturing and conveying her “religiosity” as well. In her talk, Susan McCloskey anticipated some of the following examples, showing how Rand the artist drew upon Classical and Religious models of heroism in order to forge a new vision of the hero. But I wish to use these same examples and others to make a very different point: that through symbolism, Ayn Rand both experienced and expressed her passion and her religiosity.

Consider first her heroes’ symbolic forms of religious expression -- and there really is no other word to describe it. Rand has Howard Roark create the

Stoddard Temple as a tribute to the human spirit, and Steve Mallory add to it a statue representing Man “seeking God -- but finding himself.” She tells us that Hank Rearden sees his mills as a “holy temple,” while she describes Francisco d’Anconia as having a “religious zeal for d’Anconia Copper.”

Her characters mark their personal commitments with religious symbolism, as well. Francisco, whom she describes as “religiously purposeful” (*JAR 561*), is deeply enmeshed in a world of tradition, of solemn toasts with goblets, of symbolic signs and gestures to the world, of sacred oaths in the name of the woman he loves. Dagny Taggart makes frequent devout pilgrimages to the statue of her ancestor, Nat Taggart. John Galt contrives his own sacred oath, and makes it the literal key to unlocking all doors to his world. She uses the word “priestess” to describe many of her heroines, in relation to the men they love. To these examples, one could add the many instances of religious symbolism in *Atlas Shrugged* that Susan McCloskey cited.

My point is not merely that Ayn Rand filled her work with symbols. My point is that the key to understanding the passion and religiosity of Ayn Rand, both as a person and visionary artist, is that she *thought* in symbolic terms -- and did so virtually all the time.

Her way of looking at the world around her was *to see things metaphorically*: that is, to see a thing as what it literally is, but also as something much more. It is a process of thinking simultaneously on twin tracks -- one concrete, and one abstract. It is a process -- and let me emphasize this point -- of *mentally residing at that juncture where concrete and abstraction meet and merge, becoming a concretized abstraction*.

That is what it means to see a sunset over a decaying city as a bleeding wound--to see Hank Rearden as a suffering Atlas, or John Galt as “the Prometheus who changed his mind”--to see a train engine as “a moral code cast in steel.” Metaphorical thinking elevates the mundane to the meaningful.

More specifically, metaphorical thinking imposes a template of personal significance on people, things, and events, by transforming otherwise ordinary circumstances and meaningless concretes into symbols. This is the method of the poet and the visionary, a method that I refer to as “symbolic vision.”

I believe that by means of this method, Ayn Rand transfigured her everyday life into an ongoing morality play, one that imprinted a sense of order and purpose upon events. The world around her was not a barren expanse devoid of meaning, but a dramatic stage on which heroes and villains met in mortal combat, for the highest possible stakes.

There is much evidence that Rand nurtured this cognitive habit from her youth. To cite just one example: When, at age twelve, she first heard the communist slogan, “from each according to his ability, to each according to his need,” she did not analyze it in abstract conceptual terms, but in the perceptual manner of a visionary. She recalled later that she saw in that slogan--saw, with

vivid perceptual clarity--an analogy to Cyrus, the beloved hero of her favorite childhood story. She visualized her Cyrus on a sacrificial altar, his blood drained for the sake of his inferiors; and this image allowed her to realize immediately that communism meant, in its essence, the sacrifice of the best to the worst.

It is striking that so much of Rand's analysis of complex philosophical issues took this form of analogous, or metaphorical thinking, using symbols. Her *Journals* and *Letters* show how she endlessly translated and concretized difficult and complex abstractions into perceptual concretes -- concretes which *symbolized* the essential issues involved. She personified abstract principles, showing how they were represented in the lives of friends and acquaintances. Or, she saw in the lives of real people some abstract operative principle that explained their behavior, and could serve as the basis for a story or essay. Even her nonfiction essays were filled with the embattled archetypes of Apollo and Dionysus, and with Producers, Attilas, and Witch Doctors locked in timeless combat. The examples from her writing are legion; but as the biographical material about her life makes clear, symbolic vision was her private way of looking at the world, as well.

Now observe what this symbolic way of looking at things accomplished for Ayn Rand.

First, symbols served the profoundly important *psycho-epistemological* function of *concretizing her abstractions*. In her *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, she pointed out that *words* are auditory and visual symbols for concepts, which serve the indispensable cognitive function of grounding our abstractions in perceptual forms. Words thus allow our minds to apprehend, remember, and use the concepts that they represent. Without them, our concepts would remain floating abstractions, mere ghosts of thoughts; and our thinking processes would grind to a complete halt. In fact, not just words, but *all* symbols work in this way, and serve similar cognitive functions. A symbol is a wedding of the abstract and the concrete.

Here I must pause to address a common misunderstanding. Because symbols have been favored weapons of mystics and manipulators, some Objectivists are suspicious of almost *any* use of symbolism. They perceive symbols as ambiguous approximations of ideas, intended to evoke emotion rather than thought.

But that is a profound error. Yes, symbols can be misused, in ways I shall detail later. But properly employed, a symbol is not a *substitute* for an idea; it is simply a *reminder* of an idea. It is impossible to grasp and retain a complex abstraction--let alone a complex *system* of abstractions, such as a complete philosophy--without reducing them to a manageable number of memorable concretes. Symbols concretize abstractions in forms that allow us to perceive them simply and directly. They are our mental shorthand, necessary tools of rational, conceptual thought.

Symbols are no more valid than the concepts that they represent; but let me stress this: they also are no more invalid. Rooted in rational premises, symbols can contribute enormously to human life.

For instance, I believe her habit of symbolic vision largely explains why Rand was such a potent analytical thinker. Because she could literally see abstractions in concrete forms, she possessed a formidable ability to clarify difficult issues, cutting through complexity to the essence of things, tying floating abstractions to reality.

Symbolic vision is also a key to Rand's *esthetic* power, as the examples I have offered demonstrate. Her deft use of symbolic devices--such as allegories, analogies, and archetypes--help explain why her fiction has captured the imaginations of millions of readers. Her characters and the pivotal events of each story are indelibly impressed on our memories and in our hearts, precisely because of their symbolic weight.

But symbols did not serve only cognitive and esthetic functions for Rand. Viewing the world symbolically also served her *motivationally*, infusing her life with passion and purpose, with meaning and majesty.

Consider, for example, the abstractions of individualism and collectivism. Purely as concepts, they have no immediate referents in reality, and are thus utterly devoid of emotional impact. Now, consider those same concepts as embodied in Kira Argounova and Citizen Ivan Ivanov. With these two characters, Rand not only helps us *understand* the conceptual distinction between individualism and collectivism: we can *experience* it.

In fact, this explains the power of art, which is constructed entirely upon various kinds of symbols. As Rand herself pointed out in *The Romantic Manifesto*, the concretized abstractions of art do not "tell," they "show." By showing us, through direct perception, the actual *referents* of our concepts, symbols help make them an *experiential reality*. And when they represent our own values, symbols can help us *personalize* what is at stake, motivating us to action.

Imagine, then, how Ayn Rand -- an artist steeped in this symbolic way of looking at things -- must have experienced everyday life. Her highest philosophical abstractions were not remote topics of intellectual speculation and discussion: rather, they were objectified, and thus immediately accessible to her consciousness by direct perception. So those abstractions became luminously real to her.

And *that* is why she was so passionate about ideas, and their consequences. "I'm not brave enough to be a coward," Rand once wrote. "I can see the consequences too clearly." I take her quite literally: she *could* see those consequences, through the powerful lens of symbolic vision.

I have the impression that the symbolic images she created -- especially her magnificent characters and the worlds they inhabited -- became just as real

to her as the actual people and events around her, if not more so. If I am right, that may go a long way toward explaining how she could maintain an unbending commitment to abstract principles despite the withering and debilitating impacts of daily life. Rand had, in effect, imagined and then inhabited an ideal reality, a vivid mental sanctuary from which she could battle the petty everyday reality of *The Little Street*.

Rand's Romanticism -- again, understood as a habitually idealistic way of looking at existence -- can be contrasted with two other ways of experiencing life: *Platonism* and *Literalism*.

As I use the terms here, Platonism, Literalism, and Romanticism are the character and cultural manifestations of fundamental epistemological alternatives well known to those in this audience. They are also descriptive of three respective cognitive styles: floating abstraction, concrete-boundedness, and symbolic integration.

Randian Romanticism was different from traditional, or Platonic Romanticism. Because her outlook was consonant with reason, Rand was able to project a metaphysically *possible* ideal. Hers was a new brand of Romanticism from which the floating abstractions and disembodied ideals of Platonism were largely banished.

But her exalted vision of human potential also transcended the everyday world of meaningless concretes, and that world's concrete-bound inhabitants. Rand's Romanticism was the antithesis of what might be called "Literalism."

By Literalism, I mean the habit or policy of seeing concrete things as no more than the concrete things they literally are. To a Literalist, a sunrise is never a "bleeding wound": it is just a sunrise. Steel mills are never a "holy temple": they are just steel mills. Life is not an impassioned, exalted state of existence: it is just plain, dull, everyday life -- a meaningless and empty routine.

Rand clearly had this in mind when, in her notes for *The Little Street*, she denounced "existence instead of life, satisfaction instead of joy, contentment instead of happiness, security instead of power, vanity instead of pride, attachment instead of love, wish instead of will, yearning instead of passion, a glow-worm instead of a fire." (*JAR 25*) I am struck by the closing metaphor -- a symbol summarizing all of these abstractions. The Literalist, then, is the psychological antithesis of a Danny Renahan: he is the anonymous inhabitant of *The Little Street*.

The Platonic and Literal outlooks were brilliantly captured in, of all places, a "Pogo" cartoon. Three characters were debating the meaning of life. One character began to give a totally platonic philosophical answer, filled with floating abstractions. As he spoke, all three characters' feet began to leave the ground. Soon, they were floating off into outer space...until another character

interrupted the first. "I'll tell you the meaning of life," he snapped cynically. "You're born. You go on some diets. You die."

Immediately all three characters plunged violently back to earth. Dusting himself off, the Platonist turned angrily to the speaker and shouted, "Literalist!"

And indeed, it seems to me the perfect descriptive term for the concrete-bound mentality.

Through her symbolic way of looking at reality, Ayn Rand bridged this mind-body dichotomy. This metaphorical way of envisioning ideas allowed her to integrate the two metaphysical realms that for too long had remained severed. But beyond its enormous contribution to her philosophical thinking, symbolic vision steeped her existence with meaning and purpose, power and passion. It brought Romanticism into her everyday life.

What symbolic vision accomplished for Ayn Rand -- cognitively, esthetically, and motivationally -- I believe it can do for each of us, too. And for those who grasp its value, I would suggest several ways to make symbolism better enrich your experience of life.

One step toward bringing Romanticism into everyday life would be to define a personal mission. I say "mission" rather than "purpose," because the term "mission" suggests a purpose important enough to give one's life a profound sense of meaning and fulfillment.

To indicate what I mean, consider an example of three different ways of looking at the same work, and ask yourself which person is likely to be the most impassioned, motivated, and fulfilled.

One man says, "I'd like to write a book." Of course, thousands of people say that every day, but only a handful ever do. The goal is simultaneously too concrete and too general: "a" book could mean *any* book -- and that is not very inspiring. By contrast, a second man says, "I aim to become a writer." Now *that* sounds more serious: he is expressing a serious career goal or vocation. The likelihood of achieving his goal is surely higher than that of the first man.

But now, consider the literary aspiration expressed by Victor Hugo, while still a boy. One day he announced gravely: "I aim to ennoble literature." An extraordinary goal. But, of course, *he did*.

Unlike the other two men, Hugo had a life's *mission*, not just a concrete goal or even career purpose. In his mind, he had elevated his work to a symbolic plane of importance; that transformed it from being a mere job, into becoming a sacred crusade. This imposed upon his writing an exalted sense of purpose that affected every element of his writing: not only its content, but its tone and style, and even the motivation to stand each day at his desk for long hours, crafting literary masterpieces. In addition, it made meaningful every moment of Victor Hugo's life.

The habit of symbolic vision also transfigured Hugo himself. Like Rand, he became a person of extraordinary force of personality, will, passion, charisma, and influence. The founding father of 19th-century Romanticism, and the greatest writer of his time, Hugo lived, worked, and loved on a titanic scale. His formidable self-image and his grand-scale mission were simply two sides of the same symbolic connection to reality.

Rand and Hugo are certainly not alone in their solemn dedication to a life purpose. In fact, a similar sense of mission seems to be a common thread woven into the fabric of many great lives, as the biographies of history's giants often reveal. And that is not surprising. A mission elevates one's personal aspirations, challenges one's capacities and talents, exalts one's vision and values. Men tend to grow to match the size of their dreams.

I once read an ancient Greek definition of happiness. "Happiness is the exercise of vital powers, along lines of excellence, in a life affording them scope." Despite minor philosophical quibbles, I like the sense of this outlook. I take it to mean that one achieves the experience of efficacy by exercising one's capacities in order to impress one's personal vision on the world.

Rand taught us that at any given moment, a person must choose either to control circumstances, or else he will be controlled by circumstances. If I may put this truth in the form of a more memorable metaphor: You are either the sculptor of circumstances, or the clay.

A mission is man's way of becoming the sculptor of his own life, of recasting reality in his own image and to his own purpose. I don't like the things I see around me, Howard Roark tells his college dean; I want to change them. For whom? he is asked. For myself, he answers. The dean tells him: "That's monstrous!" But Rand tells us: that's godly.

So how does one formulate a personal mission? In my talk yesterday, I highly recommended Alan Lakein's book, *How to Get Control of Your Time and Your Life*. One of its strongest values is how it helps one define long-range purposes, then break them down into short-term goals and daily tasks. I believe his approach can be enormously helpful in defining a personal life mission, and making it a part of one's daily life. I cannot recommend his book highly enough.

A second step is to cultivate the habit of symbolic vision. This means looking at things with fresh eyes, seeing personal meaning in the things and events around oneself. It means seeing oneself as the lead character in a drama called life.

In *The Fountainhead*, Peter Keating -- a Literalist archetype -- blurts out his irritation at Howard Roark's idealism. Why, he asks, does Roark's every moment have to be so great, so important? Why can't he just relax and come down to earth? At another point, Roark watches a carload of screaming youths, and senses that their consciousness and his are somehow very different. But he

is immediately distracted by the environment around him, and is suddenly caught up in visualizing exactly what he might do to transform it.

Rand's point, of course, is that Roark *does* employ a kind of perception very different from those around him: a sense of symbolic vision. Roark tells Gail Wynand that a building can be a great symbol of one's life. That sense of symbolism governs his own self-perception, and his place in the world.

If a personal mission provides the motivation for great achievement, then symbolic vision provides the method. It is a visual talent that should be exercised until it becomes a subconscious habit.

A third step to bringing Romanticism to everyday life is to create for oneself a symbolic environment. By this, I mean surrounding oneself with the tokens, metaphors, and concrete reminders of one's deepest values.

Why is this necessary? First, to fortify our souls against the corrosive effects of the Platonic and Literalist worldviews; and second, to motivate us in the passionate pursuit of our personal values.

The dispiriting impacts of modern culture are virtually inescapable. Rand was not the only person to decry "our cultural value-deprivation." In recent years, a number of scholars and cultural observers have come to lament the absence of values and meaning symbolism in modern Western societies. While Eastern cultures are steeped in religious myths, rituals, and symbols, Western societies - in reaction against *Platonic* mysticism -- has rejected all symbolism as such, and blindly embraced a vacuous Literalism.

The result has been the spiritual bankruptcy of the West, whose symptoms Objectivist writers and others have long documented. The most troubling symptom for me, as a father, is to observe the impacts of this value impoverishment on my daughter's generation. Millions of young people seem torn between new forms of Literalism and Platonism -- between cynical, pragmatic careerism -- and self-destructive acts of symbolic protest.

As examples of the latter, consider the obsessive preoccupation of many adolescents with role-playing and fantasy games, with hair-dying and tattoos and body-piercing, with mystical cults such as Wicca and New Age religions, and of course with drugs. I see these as examples of an irrational, Platonic rebellion against the dominant Literalist culture: of a desperate, incoherent quest by would-be idealists to import some feeling of Romanticism into their desiccated everyday lives.

In such a culture, it is crucially important for each individual to create and inhabit a rational, nurturing environment. This means filling one's life with the tokens and treasures of a different and better reality: with such things as great art, great books, and great friends. Art is especially important, because art has the power to transform an idea into an ideal.

But it also means filling one's environment with *personal* symbols, reminders of one's deepest private values. One of the most tragic legacies of Platonism is the difficulty many people have in thinking about values in truly personal terms. I have seen this problem repeatedly among Objectivists, and it bears a moment of attention.

A symbol has value and meaning only to some specific *valuer*. Properly viewed, symbols should be seen as *objective*, not *intrinsic* -- that is, personal, and not "universal." Symbols are concretes; and there is no such thing as a concrete which has an imbedded, inherent meaning. By focusing our attention on different aspects of a thing, the same concrete can take on different meanings for different people in different contexts.

For example, in its normal context, a wedding dress is a symbol of a happy occasion, the marriage of two people in love. After a painful divorce, it may be a symbol of very different things. And in *We the Living*, that same dress can become a symbol of tragedy.

Or, to take another example, the figure of Atlas could be a tragic symbol to the ancient Greeks -- a representation of an agonized Titan, forced to bear the burdens of the world. To modern eyes, he is far more typically seen simply as a symbol of strength. To Objectivist eyes, he can be seen as a symbol of the productive giants who support the world with their creative efforts.

My point is that the concrete itself bears no intrinsic meaning: a wedding dress is just a wedding dress, and Atlas is simply Atlas. It is only by our use of such concretes in a specific context that we stress one element over another, and therefore one meaning over another. *Symbols are contextual.*

I belabor this point because of the well-known past tendency in Objectivist circles to regard certain concretes as having *intrinsic* symbolic significance. For example, some of Ayn Rand's personal preferences in art were treated as inherently good, while her dislikes were regarded as universally bad.

There is a considerable amount of this symbolic intrinsicism even in Rand's fiction. For instance, consider the claim, in *Atlas Shrugged*, that cigarettes are a positive symbol of "fire, tamed at man's fingertips." I wonder how many young readers took up smoking simply because Rand had a character transform a cancer-causing agent into a symbol of intrinsic metaphysical value.

A second example lies at the very heart of the architectural theories of *The Fountainhead*. At one point, one of Roark's clients wants him to build a replica of a southern mansion near where he grew up as a boy. The client had overcome poverty and great odds in order to achieve success, and the home had been his personal symbol of that achievement. However, Roark tries to persuade him that the mansion is inherently bad; that he should instead want a *modern* home, because *that* would truly symbolize the man's triumph. Whatever the architectural merits of each home, I am concerned here with the idea of a *universal* symbolism. By what standard is a specific kind of home supposed to be

universally symbolic of one man's *personal* triumph? The idea that no architecture has any conceivable symbolic value other than modern architecture -- or that other kinds necessarily symbolize nothing but bad things -- is another instance of intrinsicism.

Such intrinsicism has led Objectivists at times to copy-cat symbolism. For example, I cannot tell you how embarrassed I feel for those who expect me to get excited over the sign of the dollar, or some officially sanctioned Objectivist painting or sculpture. This, too, is intrinsicism.

For such reasons, it is understandable that many Objectivists are wary of symbolism, and especially reluctant to accept symbols of a "religious" sort. But just as there is no such thing as intrinsic symbolism, there is no such thing as intrinsically irrational symbolism, either.

I have already addressed the common belief that symbols are substitutes for thinking. But though it is not necessarily the case, it can and does happen. Rand herself alluded to it in her "Introduction to *Ninety-Three*," in her observations on Victor Hugo's creative processes. She pointed out that Hugo "thought in metaphors" on issues that required careful *conceptual* thinking.

Hugo's fault was not his power of symbolic vision, but the fact that he exercised it outside of the appropriate contexts. Just as symbols have their place, so do exact conceptual formulations.

It is very true, then, that symbolic vision has its contextual limitations. A metaphor is a poetic analogy, not a precise definition; it *represents* a concept, but it is not the concept itself. For example, a train engine cannot be *defined* as "a moral code cast in steel."

Another common misuse of symbols stems from the fact that, as concretes, they are no more valid than the abstractions they are intended to represent. There are many symbols and rituals, for example, that celebrate acts of self-sacrificial -- the Christian crucifix, the ritual suicides of Japanese kamikaze pilots, etc. Our philosophical premises shape our symbols, for good or ill; and our challenge is to devise symbols -- including myths, allegories, rituals, ceremonies, and tokens of values -- from rational philosophical premises.

Cultivating a habit of symbolic vision has another drawback. In a culture dominated by Platonism and Literalism, it is a route to being misunderstood, even ridiculed. Rand's example should suffice. It is a very difficult thing to endure constant misunderstanding, and doing so requires a very special kind of courage.

But the rewards of symbolic vision vastly offset such problems. Seeing the world through the eyes of a Romantic visionary makes it a very special and rewarding place.

The hero of *Anthem* tells us that it is his eyes alone that see the world, and give the world its beauty -- that it is his ears alone that hear the world, and

grant the world its song -- that it is his mind alone that grasps the world and gives the world its meaning.

Beauty, song, meaning -- and to them we can add integration, purpose, passion, reverence. A life, symbolized by Danny Renahan, whose normal state was to be "exalted all the time, high, supreme, full of meaning."

Where can we find such a state? It is not to be found, but to be created -- by ourselves. It is a gift from our own eyes to the world around us, a gift that bestows upon that world the blessing of our own significance. It is a gift that is ours alone to give: the kiss of an idea pressed upon the stone-cold face of matter -- the kiss which brings to life the romance that is ours alone to feel.

It is a romance you can experience but once.

Is there any other way you care to live?
