

## Book Reviews

*Letters of Ayn Rand*, Michael S. Berliner, editor. A Plume Book, New York, 1995, ISBN 0-525-93946-4, 681 pages, \$17.95 paperback.

This collection of Ayn Rand's letters begins soon after her arrival in the United States from the Soviet Union in 1926 and continues until shortly before her death in 1982. For readers familiar with her novels and non-fiction works, the compilation's attraction will lie principally in the personal insight it casts upon Rand as she and her career developed over more than a half-century. One shares her successes and failures, her exaltations and frustrations, as only the informality of letters can show them. In the course of it, myriad personal details, such as her love for light classical music and detestation both of small talk and of jazz, come to life.

Rand herself would abhor, however, a review that chatted amiably, as small talk would, about such incidentals. Her ideas are what counted to her, and she would respect only those who would take them seriously. Unfortunately—as she said of Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Mark Twain, and Bernard Shaw—“a good novelist or dramatist is not necessarily a good thinker.” Rand was a preeminent novelist, with *Atlas Shrugged* especially ranking with Tolstoy's *War and Peace* as a candidate for the finest novel of all time. The poetic license that goes with fiction masked, though, the didactic arbitrariness of her thought, which comes through strongly in her later non-fiction writing and in many of these letters.

The repeated use of superlatives, for example, is striking in dramatic exposition, but reveals a severe loss of balance and of nuance when used in what presumes to be rigorous thought. What is a serious thinker to do with such a pronouncement as “all the crimes of history have always been perpetrated by the mob?” However broadly we define “mob,” her statement simply isn't true. And what are we to think when at one point she says that the doctrine of Original Sin is the most vicious “of all human conceptions,” but then says later that “belief without evidence” is “the most vicious action of which men are capable” and at another point writes that the person who asks someone else for money without earning it “is the most rotten person on earth”?

If this were simply a manner of emphasis, it would be of little significance. But black-and-white pronouncements made *ex cathedra* are the hallmarks of both her rhetorical strength and her philosophic weakness. “Nobody is responsible for another human being” *sounds* strong, but it requires only reflection about the relation of parent and child or conservator and ward to see that it is nonsense. A pronouncement that frames her entire political theory is to the effect that the only moral restriction upon a man is that he not use physical violence against others, with the accompanying statement that “the only proper function of government is to protect men from physical force.” She herself contradicts this when elsewhere she favors the enforcement of contracts and laws against fraud, but the central

pronouncement has painted her into the corner of a dramatic but less-than-satisfactory *laissez faire* ideology, as distinguished from the type of classical liberalism that seeks to take into account all considerations that have a bearing on how a free society can be made most workable.

The superlatives relate closely to Rand's love for sharp dichotomies, defining two poles and pretending that nothing else is possible. For example, she tells us that a man either lives for himself or for others, as though a mixture were out of the question (in which case this reviewer will have to stop planning both a trout fishing trip for himself this summer and a vacation to do the things his wife prefers). Along the same lines, she says that either the State exists to serve individuals or individuals exist to serve the State. The significance of such oversimplification is that it precludes an examination of the really difficult issues, which involve trade-offs and often a hierarchy of distinctions.

The letters reveal a move by Rand from an inviting self-confidence in her early years to an irascible Goddess of Reason later in life. Those who see her Objectivism as the epitome of Reason should ponder the fact that her superlatives and dichotomies precluded any recognition that most difficult issues involve "matters about which reasonable people can differ." Being "wrong" as she saw it became a moral crime, making her much more a Robespierre-of-the-mind than a reflective individual. Behind her irascibility lay arrogance and presumption. There is very little about human life that admits of an Iron Logic that commands a single conclusion and consigns all else to error and perversity. Those who think there is seek the certainties of Faith, not of reason as it is available to human beings. Thus, Objectivism takes the form of a religion, with Rand as its Savonarola.

All of this is exceedingly unfortunate, because there is much that is brilliant, inspiring and insightful in Rand's life work. Millions, including this reviewer, have found her sense of the heroic exhilarating and have thrilled to her insights into the moral perversity of mediocrity's attacks on productive individuals. Those strengths will stand out in bold relief long after her arrogance and presumptuousness have been stripped away. Students of her work will long be posed with a fascinating challenge to tell the one from the other.

A word should be added about the dangers inherent in compilations of letters (unless the editor is exceedingly careful). Here, we see only Rand's side of the correspondence. Often she refutes positions and chastises those with whom she is corresponding, and the reader is given to see only her side of the exchange. This led philosopher John Hospers to insist upon the inclusion of a protestation by him about the unfair perspective it creates. He has a good point. Philosopher John Nelson could have made the same (had he known a letter from Rand to him was to be included). Editors of compilations will do well to take this into account. If they want to focus on their principal subject, as naturally they will most of the time, they may do better to select excerpts and not to identify, in many cases, the person on the other end. Readers of this particular collection will want to realize that it tells them much more about Rand than about her correspondents.

—Dwight D. Murphey