

AYN RAND



The Art of Fiction
A Guide for Writers and Readers



EDITED BY TORE BOECKMANN
INTRODUCTION BY LEONARD PEIKOFF



A PLUME BOOK

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AYN RAND is the author of *Atlas Shrugged*, philosophically the most challenging bestseller of its time. Her first novel, *We the Living*, was published in 1936, followed by *Anthem*. With the publication of *The Fountainhead*, she achieved a spectacular and enduring success. Rand's unique philosophy of Objectivism, has gained a worldwide audience. The fundamentals of her philosophy are set forth in such books as *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, *The Virtue of Selfishness*, *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal*, and *The Romantic Manifesto*. *Journals of Ayn Rand* and *The Ayn Rand Reader* are also available in Plume editions. Ayn Rand died in 1982.

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Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, U.S.A.

Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto,
Ontario, Canada M4P 2Y3 (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)

Penguin Books Ltd., 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Ireland, 25 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland

(a division of Penguin Books Ltd.)

Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty
Ltd.)

Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd., 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park,

New Delhi - 110 017, India

Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, North Shore 0632, New Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd.)

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty.) Ltd., 24 Sturdee Avenue,

Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd., Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

First published by Plume, a member of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

First Printing, January 2000

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REGISTERED TRADEMARK—MARCA REGISTRADA

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Rand, Ayn.

The art of fiction: a guide for writers and readers / Ayn Rand; edited by

Tore Boeckmann; introduction by Leonard Peikoff. p. cm.

Includes index.

eISBN : 978-1-101-13723-9

1. Fiction—Authorship. I. Boeckmann, Tore. II. Title.

PN3355.R26 2000

808.3—dc21

99-35588

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<http://us.penguin.com>

INTRODUCTION

This book is an edited version of an informal course of lectures given by Ayn Rand in her own living room in 1958. It was the year after the publication of *Atlas Shrugged*, and AR was at the peak of her powers as a novelist.

She gave the course, by “popular demand,” to some twenty or so friends and acquaintances. She spoke extemporaneously, with only a few written notes naming the topics she meant to cover. Including questions and discussion, each of the twelve sessions lasted about four hours.

Two kinds of students attended: aspiring young fiction writers, and fiction readers from a variety of professions. These two groups are the audience to whom the present book is addressed.

The goal of the writers was obvious and practical: to learn everything possible about the problems and techniques of their craft. The readers, by contrast, of whom I was one, were there strictly as consumers; we wanted to enhance our enjoyment in reading. We wanted to know from the master what to look for in fiction and where it had come from, i.e., what had gone on behind the scenes, in the creator’s mind, to produce the stories we loved (or hated). We were not content to grasp a book as a finished whole; we wanted to hear AR analyze the pleasures (or misery) a book evoked, and explain how what means its effects had been achieved.

Since AR held that fiction has four essential elements—theme, plot, characterization, and style—the lectures are organized accordingly, with the greatest emphasis on plot and style.

In regard to plot, AR identifies not only its nature and structure, but also its crucial relationships to theme and to a critical category of her own creation: “plot-theme.” To concretize her theory, she analyzes many plots, some invented by her for the course, explaining what makes each good or bad and by what steps the bad ones could be methodically improved.

The tour de force of the book is its discussion of style, which occupies almost one half of the text. AR analyzes lengthy passages (describing love, nature, or New York City) from a variety of authors, often one sentence at a time. By juxtaposing different authors and by rewriting selected sentences, she identifies the essentials of several antithetical literary styles, showing in the process what different wordings do to a scene (and to a reader). Writers such as Victor Hugo, Sinclair Lewis, Thomas Wolfe, and Mickey Spillane are covered—as well as AR herself. By rewriting her own sentences, she shows in startling terms how seemingly minor, even trivial, changes can utterly destroy or reverse an artist’s effect.

I can only hint here at other fascinating topics between these covers. AR explains how to stoop to one’s own subconscious and thus create one’s own “inspiration” as a writer. She explains what to do when one is blocked, or, in her words, suffering from “the squirms.” She discusses drama versus melodrama; what makes a character intelligible and a characterization profound; the differences between authors who “tell” and those who “show”; the nature of proper versus sick or vicious humor; how to handle, or as reader evaluate, fantasy, tragedy, flashbacks, exposition, slang, metaphors; and much, much more.

AR was expert at philosophical detection. Although this course focuses on the principles of literature, it identifies—as AR characteristically does—the deepest philosophic issues involved. Those unfamiliar with philosophy will be astonished to discover the extent to which abstract issues—such as the mind-body question, or the free will-determinism controversy, or the advocacy of reason versus

faith—actually influence a writer of fiction, shaping his selection of events, his method of characterization, and even his way of combining words into a sentence.

AR's book on esthetics, *The Romantic Manifesto*, was based in part on the same 1958 lecture course. Because the Manifesto deals largely with art in general, however, there is little overlap with the present book. On the contrary, *The Art of Fiction* serves as an extended concretization of the Objectivist esthetics, and thus as an invaluable supplement to the *Manifesto*. Most of its content is unavailable in AR's other books.

Tore Boeckmann has done an outstanding job as editor. I suggested to him an extremely difficult assignment: to give us AR faithfully—the identical points and words—but freed of the awkwardness, the repetitions, the obscurities, and the grammatical lapses inherent in extemporaneous speech. Mr. Boeckmann has delivered superlatively. I have personally checked every sentence of the final manuscript. Now and then, I thought that some nuance within a sentence of AR's had been unnecessarily cut (these have been reinstated). Not once, however, did the editor omit, enlarge, or misrepresent AR's thought, not even in the subtlest of cases. Using the original lecture transcripts as his base, Mr. Boeckmann has produced the virtually impossible: AR's exact ideas and language—in the form of written expression, as against oral. This, I believe, is the only form in which AR herself would have wanted these lectures to be published.

If anyone wishes to check Mr. Boeckmann's accuracy, the original lectures are still available on cassette from Second Renaissance Books, 143 West Street, New Milford, CT 06776.

When I first read the manuscript, I was astonished to find how much, in the decades since 1958, I had forgotten. I had expected to move nostalgically through familiar material, but I found myself continually arrested by AR's unique insights and colorful illustrations. I was also moved by passages whose language and passion evoked for me the inimitable personality of AR herself.

You too can now experience the joys of attending a course in AR's living room. You cannot ask her questions, as I could. But you can soak up her answers.

If you do not know her philosophy of Objectivism, you will probably be shocked by some of AR's ideas—but I am certain that you will not be bored. And I think that you will profit from the reading.

If you do share AR's philosophy, I know that you will enjoy this book.

—Leonard Peikoff

Irvine, California

September 1998

EDITOR'S PREFACE

Ayn Rand prepared for each of her lectures on fiction only by making some brief notes on a sheet two of paper. For instance, the material presented here as Chapter 1 ("Writing and the Subconscious") was delivered on the basis of the following two sentences in her notes for the first lecture: "Is there an 'innate literary talent'? The relationship of the conscious and subconscious in fiction writing."

Given the extemporaneous nature of Ayn Rand's lectures, the transcript of the tape recordings had to be edited before publication. My editing was aimed at giving the material the economy, smoothness, and precision proper to written prose; it consisted primarily of cutting, reorganizing, and line editing.

In general, I cut discussions of issues that Ayn Rand later covered in *The Romantic Manifesto*. Most of my other cuts aimed at eliminating the repetitiveness typical of (and proper to) oral communication. Ayn Rand often stated a point several times, in slightly different words, to give her listeners time to absorb the point. In such cases, I selected the statement I judged superior, sometimes combining the best parts of different statements.

In the main, this book follows the structure of Ayn Rand's course. I did, however, make many minor transpositions within her general structure in order to conjoin related points or achieve a more logical progression of argument. Also, the book's chapter divisions follow the logic of the material rather than Ayn Rand's lecture breaks, since she often covered related material across those breaks. (The chapter and subchapter titles are mine.)

A lecture given by Ayn Rand in early 1959, as an addendum to her course, has been incorporated into this book (it forms the bulk of Chapter 4). Also included are some comments on fiction that she made in a 1969 course on nonfiction writing. I am grateful to Robert Mayhew for bringing these to my attention. Finally, when Ayn Rand referred to passages in her own (or Sinclair Lewis's) novels, I sometimes supplied the relevant quote.

I made only a few editorial insertions. These are marked by square brackets, while parentheses always signal Ayn Rand's own asides.

The line editing consisted mainly of eliminating unnecessary words, rearranging the order of clauses within sentences, changing the tenses of verbs, etc. I also added words that were clearly implied by the original grammatical context (and necessary for a thought's completeness); and with that context, I made word changes where this improved the precision or economy of a sentence. I did not, however, freely restate any point in my own words. I am confident that none of my changes has altered Ayn Rand's intended meaning.

Nevertheless, the reader must bear in mind that the following pages have been edited by someone other than Ayn Rand herself. He must also remember the extemporaneous nature of the raw material.

In Chapter 8, Ayn Rand compares the conscientiously precise style of her own published works with the style of Victor Hugo, her favorite writer. Using a metaphor from painting, she says that "[Hugo's] brushstrokes are wider and more 'impressionistic' than [hers], whereas while [hers] are wide, someone who approached them with a microscope would see that every strand was put there for a purpose."

In this sense, the style of the present book may be described as more Hugoesque than Randian. The brushstrokes do represent Ayn Rand's views, but every strand does not necessarily reflect her purposes.

Writing and the Subconscious

Suppose you start to write a story and your opening sentence describes a sunrise. To select the words of that sentence alone, you must have absorbed a great deal of knowledge which has become so automatic that your conscious mind need not pause on it.

Language is a tool which you had to learn; you did not know it at birth. When you first learned that a certain object is a table, the word *table* did not come to your mind automatically; you repeated it many times to get used to it. If you now attempt to learn a foreign language, the English word still leaps into your mind. It takes many repetitions before the foreign word occurs without your being conscious of groping for it.

Before you sit down to write, your language has to be so automatic that you are not consciously groping for words or forming them into a sentence. Otherwise, you give yourself an impossible handicap.

In your description of a sunrise, you want to convey a certain mood; the sunrise, let us say, is a gloomy and ominous one. That requires different words than a description of a bright, cheerful sunrise would. Consider how much knowledge goes into your ability to differentiate between the two intentions. What is ominous? What is cheerful? What kind of concepts, words, metaphors will convey each? All that was at one time conscious knowledge. Yet if you had consciously to select your words, including all the elements needed to establish a certain mood—if you had to go through the whole dictionary to decide which word to start with, and the same for the next word, and if you then had to go through all the possibilities of conveying the mood—your whole lifetime would not be enough to compose the one description.

What then do you do when you write a good description, fitting your purposes, within a reasonable amount of time according to your skill? You call on stored knowledge which has become automatic.

Your conscious mind is a very limited “screen of vision”; at any one moment, it can hold only so much. For instance, if you are now concentrating on my words, then you are not thinking about your values, family, or past experiences. Yet the knowledge of these is stored in your mind somewhere. That which you do not hold in your conscious mind at any one moment is your *subconscious*.

Why can a baby not understand this discussion? He does not have the necessary stored knowledge. The full understanding of any object of consciousness depends on what is already known and stored in the subconscious.

What is colloquially called “inspiration”—namely, that you write without full knowledge of what you write as you do, yet it comes out well—is actually the subconscious summing-up of the premises and intentions you have set yourself. All writers have to rely on inspiration. But you have to know where it comes from, why it happens, and how to make it happen to *you*.

All writers rely on their subconscious. But you have to know how to work with your own subconscious.

What you will find today is the exact opposite. Most writers cannot account even for why the

chose to write a particular story, let alone for the manner in which they wrote it. In effect, they take the attitude of the worst medieval mystics. You have probably heard the mystic formula: “For those who understand, no explanation is necessary; for those who don’t, none is possible.” That is the slogan of religious mystics—and of artistic mystics. The simple meaning of that sentence is: “I don’t know why I’m doing it, and I don’t intend to explain.”

If you do not want to be reduced to such a condition, you have to be conscious of your premises in general, and of your literary premises in particular. You have to train yourself to grasp your premises clearly, not merely as general rules with a few concretes to illustrate them, but with a sufficient number of concretes so that the full meaning of the premises becomes automatic to you. Even the premise that you store in your subconscious in this manner—namely, thoroughly understood and thoroughly integrated to the concretes it represents—becomes part of your writing capital. When you then sit down to write, you do not need to calculate everything in a slow, conscious way. Your inspiration comes to the exact extent of the knowledge you have stored.

To describe a sunrise, you must have stored in your mind clear ideas of what you mean by “sunrise,” what elements compose it, what kinds you have seen, what mood you want to project and why, and what kinds of words will project it. If you are clear on all these elements, they will come to you easily. If you are clear on some but not others, it will be harder to write. If you are not clear at all—if you have nothing but “floating abstractions” in your subconscious (by that I mean abstractions which you do not connect to concretes)—you will sit and stare at a blank sheet of paper. Nothing will come out of your mind because you have put nothing into it.

A writer, therefore, has to know how to use his subconscious, how to make his conscious mind use it as a Univac [an early computer]. A Univac is a calculating machine; but someone has to feed it the material and has to set the stops and make the selections if he wants a certain answer. You have to make your conscious mind do exactly that to your subconscious [computer]: you have to know what you are storing there and what kind of answers you are seeking. If you have stored the material properly, it will come to you.

Even so, there is no guarantee that you will work from nine to five at your desk and everything will always come out perfectly (unless you are a hack). What is guaranteed is that you will always be able to express exactly what you intended to express.

You have probably heard that no writer can ever fully express what he wanted to express; that every book is a disappointment to the author because it is only an approximation. Sinclair Lewis, a very good writer, once made such a remark. If you read his books, you will understand why. The themes that he wants to express are clear; the manner in which he expresses them is not always clear, particularly in the realm of emotions. He can express ideas and characterization up to a certain point, but in regard to deeper values, he is an unhappy repressor.

If a writer feels that he was unable fully to express what he wanted to express, it means that he did not know clearly what he wanted to express. He knew it only as a generalized package deal [a conglomeration of logically unrelated elements]; he had his theme defined approximately, but not sufficiently supported with full understanding of all the elements of that theme. That which you know clearly you can find the words for and you will express exactly.

If someone then challenges you and asks, “Why did you describe the sunrise in this way?” you will be able to answer. You will be able to give a conscious reason for every word in your description; but you did not have to know the reasons while writing.

I can give the reason for every word and every punctuation mark in *Atlas Shrugged*—and there are 645,000 words in it by the printer’s count. I did not have to calculate it all consciously when I wrote

writing. But what I did was follow a conscious intention in relation to the novel's theme and to every element involved in that theme. I was conscious of my purpose throughout the job—the general purpose of the novel and the particular purpose of every chapter, paragraph, and sentence.

To master the art of writing, you have to be conscious of why you are doing things—but do not edit yourself while writing. Just as you cannot change horses in the middle of a stream, so you cannot change premises in the middle of writing. When you write, you have to rely on your subconscious; you cannot doubt yourself and edit every sentence as it comes out. Write as it comes to you—then (next morning, preferably) turn editor and read over what you have written. If something does not satisfy you, ask yourself *then* why, and identify the premise you missed.

Trust your subconscious. If it does not deliver the kind of material you want, it will at least give you the evidence of what is wrong.

When you get stuck on a piece of writing, the reason is either that you have not sufficiently concretized the ideas you want to cover or that your purpose in this particular sequence is contradictory—that your conscious mind has given to your subconscious contradictory orders. I call this miserable state, which all writers know, “the squirms.” It consists either of the inability to write anything or of the fact that your writing suddenly comes out badly—it does not flow as you want it to and does not express your intention.

Suppose you start to write a love scene. You write a few lines of dialogue, and suddenly you do not know what to say next. Let us say that it is a tragic love scene which has to end with the two characters renouncing each other. You know that they have to come to the parting, but not how to bring them there. Anything you put down is somehow not what you want; maybe the dialogue seems repetitious or it is not too meaningful. So you try again, and whatever comes out is still not right. That's the squirms.

The trouble might lie in any one of the elements involved. It might be that you have not fully defined for yourself the attitude of the characters, or that you are not clear on the nature of the tragedy, or on the nature of love, or on the relationship of this particular scene to the rest of the novel. For each scene of a story, an enormously complex amount of material has to be held in mind; and again, you cannot do it all consciously. You can hold only the highlights consciously, while relying on your subconscious to supply you with the missing connections and the concretes through which your general intention has to be expressed. If there is a contradiction in any one of those elements, it might stop you. And the difficult thing is that, in the nature of the process, you are stopped without having any clear idea of how to solve the problem.

The solution is always to think over every aspect of the scene and every connection to anything relevant in the rest of the book. Think until your mind almost goes to pieces; think until you are blank with exhaustion. Then, the next day, think again—until finally, one morning, you have the solution. Do enough thinking to give your subconscious ample time to integrate the elements involved. When those elements do integrate, the knowledge of what to do with the scene comes to you, and so do the words to express it. Why? Because you have cleared your subconscious files, your lightning calculator.

This experience is not confined to writers. With any kind of problem, you might think for days and suddenly, seemingly by accident, find the solution. The classic example is Newton and his apple: the apple fell on Newton's head and gave him the idea of the law of gravitation. As a writer once said, “Lucky accidents usually happen only to those who deserve them”¹—meaning that Newton had worked for a long time on the problem which led him to the law of gravitation; the apple served merely as the last link integrating the conclusions he had already reached.

The same thing happens with a writer's inspiration or in breaking the squirms.

I have written many scenes which I did not plan in advance, beyond a general definition that "the scene will accomplish such and such a purpose"—yet when I came to them, they wrote themselves. Those scenes were usually the ones on which I was so clear—all the elements, intellectual, emotional, and artistic, were so familiar to me—that once I had set the general purpose, my subconscious did the rest. That is the happiest state a writer can reach and the most wonderful experience. You come to a scene and you feel as if somebody else is dictating it; you do not know what is coming, it is surprising you as it comes, you write almost in a blind trance—and afterward, when you reread it, it is almost perfect. You might need to change a few words, but the essence of the scene is there.

This is the kind of incident which gives rise to the idea that writing is an innate talent or that you write because some inner voice dictates to you. You have probably heard writers maintain that they are vehicles selected by a superior power because they hear this dictation. They will say: "I sit down to write a scene, I don't know what I'm going to write, and suddenly it comes to me. And it feels as if it's a voice dictating, so I'm sure it's the voice of God." In fact, it *does* feel that way. But what is the real meaning of this phenomenon?

This is a case of the accident that happens only to those who deserve it.

The writers who tell you that writing is an innate talent—that if you sit down to write, God either moves you or He does not, and if He does not, there is nothing you can do about it—these writers are not necessarily lying. They are merely poor introspectors. They do not know what enables *them* to write.

This type of writer usually writes himself out after a few years. As a rule, he starts rather young; he shows what is called "unusual promise"; and in a few years you see him repeating the same thing, less brilliantly and originally each time—and soon he finds that he has nothing to write about. The inspiration whose source he did not know has vanished. He does not know how to replenish it.

By imitation more than by understanding, he caught on to the process of writing; he grasped that other people can put ideas, feelings, impressions down on paper, and he did so. If he has enough original observations stored in his subconscious, certain literary values might be present in his work for a while (among a lot of meaningless junk). But once he has used up that store of early impressions, he has nothing more to say. He merely grasped the general idea of what writing is, then coasted on his subconscious for a while, never attempting to analyze where his ideas came from, what he was doing, or why. Such a writer is antagonistic to any analysis; he is the type who tells you that "the cold hand of reason" is detrimental to his inspiration. He cannot function by means of reason, he says; if he begins to analyze, he feels, it will stop his inspiration altogether. (Given the way he functions, it *would* stop him.)

By contrast, if you know where your inspiration really comes from, you will never run out of material. A rational writer can stoke his subconscious just as one puts fuel in a machine. If you keep on storing things in your mind for your future writing and keep integrating your choice of theme with your general knowledge, allowing the scope of your writing to grow as your knowledge widens, then you will always have something to say, and you will find ever better ways to say it. You will not coast downhill after one outbreak of something valuable.

If part of your mind is still thinking, "Yes, but how do I know writing isn't an innate talent?" the chances are that either you will not start writing at all, or you will start, but in perpetual terror. Each time you write something good, you will ask yourself: "But can I do it next time?"

I have heard many famous writers complain that they have literal anxiety attacks before starting a book. It does not matter how successful they are; since they do not fully know what the process

writing consists of—or, incidentally, why a book is or is not successful—they are always at the mercy of this terror: “Yes, ten novels were good, but how do I know that my eleventh one will be good?”

Instead of improving, these writers usually either maintain a precarious level or, more likely, deteriorate over the years. An example is Somerset Maugham. As far as one can gather his views from his writing, he does not believe that writing is a rational process; and his later works are much less interesting than his early ones. Though he has not quite written himself out, the quality has deteriorated.

In order to form your own literary taste and put it under your conscious control, always account for what you do or do not like in your reading—and always give yourself reasons. At first you might identify only the immediate reasons for your estimate of any given paragraph or book. As you practice, you will go deeper and deeper. (Do not memorize your premises. Merely store them in your subconscious; they will be there when you need them.)

It is possible for a writer to hold good literary premises by default, meaning: by imitation or by feeling. Many writers do, and thus cannot identify the reasons for their writing. They say, “I write because it just comes to me,” and they fully believe that they have innate talent or that some mystical power dictates to them. Do not count on this mystical power to give you that talent. If you are tempted to ask, “Why can’t I just rely on instinct?” my answer is that your “instinct” has not worked for you so far. You do not have writing premises; the mere doubt on your part is what indicates it. And even if you do have writing premises, or show what people conventionally call “indications of talent,” you would stay on the same level for a whole career and never rise to writing what you really want.

To acquire literary premises, or to develop those you already have, what you need is *conscious* knowledge. That is what I offer in this course.

Literature as an Art Form

Literature is an art form which uses language as its tool—and language is an *objective* instrument.

You cannot seriously approach writing without the strict premise that words have objective meanings. If you approach it with the idea “I sort of know what I mean and my words sort of express something,” you have only yourself to blame if people fail to grasp your intended meaning, or get the opposite meaning.

If you are not sure of a word, look it up in a dictionary (preferably an old dictionary, because the modern ones are nonobjective). But important words like *value*, *reason*, and *morality* are defined very loosely even in the better dictionaries. Do not use them in that loose manner; define specifically what you mean by those words, and make your meaning clear by the context in which you use them. This is an important rule of thinking for people generally, and an invaluable one for writers.

The writers who complain that they never express their meaning exactly are guilty among other faults of treating words as approximations, even in their own minds. Most writers today use words loosely; if you sort of get the drift of a paragraph, that is all you *can* get and all the writer intended. A famous example is Thomas Wolfe, who uses a vast number of words, none of them precisely. To see how not to write, read his descriptive passages. (I will discuss Wolfe in greater detail under Style.)

In regard to precision of language, I think I myself am the best writer today.

An exact writer treats words as he would in a legal document. This does not mean using awkward sentences. It means using words with absolute clarity, while still projecting violent emotion, color—any literary quality—by precise means.

A sentence in *Atlas Shrugged* that is applicable to all rational people, but particularly to writers, is the one where I say that Dagny “regarded language as a tool of honor, always to be used as if one were under oath—an oath of allegiance to reality.” In regard to words, this should be the motto of every writer.

Since all art is communication, there can be nothing more viciously contradictory than the idea of nonobjective art. Anyone who wants to communicate with others has to rely on an objective reality and on objective language. The “nonobjective” is that which is dependent only on the individual subject, not on any standard of outside reality, and which is therefore incommunicable to others.

When a man announces that he is a nonobjective artist, he is saying that what he is presenting cannot be communicated. Why then does he present it, and why does he claim that it is art?

A nonobjective artist, whether a painter or a writer, is counting on the existence of objective art—and using it in order to destroy it.

Take a nonobjective painter. He creates some blobs of paint and proclaims that they are an expression of his subconscious, that they cannot be defined in any other terms, and that either you understand their meaning or you do not. Then he hangs them in a gallery. What does his work have in common with real art, which by definition represents recognizable physical objects? Only that it is hung on a wall. He has switched the definition of painting to “a piece of canvas in a frame.”

The art world laughed at the first nonobjective paintings—and today such stuff is practically all that is produced. The result is the destruction of art as a meaningful activity. The field has been taken over by a self-appointed elite of mystics who are playing a game to delude those with money enough to buy their products. But their basic purpose is not material; it is to establish an unearned artist aristocracy. (The same purpose was served by Toohy's clubs in *The Fountainhead*.) They want to make the practice of artistic creation available to anyone [regardless of ability], so that they can form their own little caste of specialists and pronounce, *subjectively*, what is and is not art. Then they can go around fooling each other and those who wish to support them.

In the field of literature, the nonobjective has not yet been accepted fully; but the elements of the reason—and, therefore, of real art—are growing rarer and rarer in present-day writing. If the trend is not stopped, literature will follow the path of painting (and of all other aspects of our civilization).

The best-known example of a nonobjective writer is Gertrude Stein, who combines words in sentences without any grammatical structure or meaning. She is still to some extent laughed at, but people are laughing rather respectfully; their implied attitude is: "Well, she's strange, but her writing is probably deep." Why is it deep? "Because I, the reader, cannot understand it." (The subjectivism of the *audience* of nonobjective art is based on an inferiority complex which takes the form: "If I don't understand it, it must be profound.")

A writer who is *not* laughed at, but taught in universities as something very serious, is James Joyce. He is worse than Gertrude Stein; going all the way to the ultimate in nonobjective writing, he uses words from different languages, makes up some words of his own, and calls that literature.

When communication by means of language is discarded, what is left as the definition of writing? Writing becomes inarticulate sounds printed on paper by means of certain black marks.

No one can be consistently evil. Since evil is destruction, anyone who attempted consistently in his life to follow a bad premise would eliminate himself; he would be dead, or at best insane. A man can hold bad premises only so long as his good ones make them possible, support them—and are destroyed in the process of supporting them. Bad premises, if not eliminated, will grow and destroy the good ones.

I mention this for the following reason. If you are not fully committed to rationality and objectivity, you might not go as far as Stein and Joyce, but your writing will then be a *combination* of the rational and the irrational. You will not, say, write a book without any knowledge of its meaning; you know in general what you want to communicate, you stick to rationality in a loose way, and you write something that has the semblance of a story. But in selecting the details of that story—the characters, events, and sentences—you rely only on feelings and unidentified premises. These premises might be right or wrong; that which you do not know consciously is not in your control. If questioned, you say, "I know my general theme, but not why I wrote this particular sentence this way. I just felt like it."

This means that you will be a cross between a writer like me and a writer like Gertrude Stein.

Insofar as the rational elements predominate in your writing, you might "get away with" the flaws in your performance. But you should not want to be a part-rational, part-Gertrude Stein writer.

Do not let your own talent—your good premises—act in support of your bad premises and of the lazy or the irrational in your mind.

If to any extent you hold the premise of nonobjectivity, then by your own choice, you do not belong in literature, or in any human activity, or on this earth.

With the exception of proper names, every word is an abstraction. One way to have words come

you easily—words which express the exact shade of meaning you want—is to know clearly the concretes that belong under your abstractions.

For instance, the word *table* is an abstraction; it stands for any table you have ever seen or will see. If you try to project what you mean by “table,” you can easily visualize any number of concrete examples. But in regard to abstractions like *individualism*, *freedom*, or *rationality*, most people are unable to name a single concrete. Even knowing one or two is not enough. In order to be completely free with words, you must know countless concretes under your abstractions.

The issue of the relationship of abstractions to concretes is crucial to all creative writing—not only to the composition of a sentence, but to the composition of a whole story and of its every chapter and paragraph.

When you compose a story, you start with an abstraction, then find the concretes which add up to that abstraction. For the reader, the process is reversed: he first perceives the concretes you present and then adds them up to the abstraction with which you started. I call this a “circle.”

For instance, the theme of *Atlas Shrugged* is “the importance of reason”—a wide abstraction. To leave the reader with that message, I have to show what reason is, how it operates, and why it is important. The sequence on the construction of the John Galt Line is included for that purpose—to concretize the mind’s role in human life. The rest of the novel illustrates the consequences of the mind’s absence. In particular, the chapter on the tunnel catastrophe shows concretely what happens in a world where men do not dare to think or to take the responsibility of judgment. If, at the end of the novel, you are left with the impression “Yes, the mind is important and we should live by reason,” these incidents are the cause. The concretes have summed up in your mind to the abstraction with which I started, and which I had to break down *into* concretes.

Every chapter and paragraph of *Atlas Shrugged* is set up on the same principle: What abstraction do I want to convey—and what concretes will convey it?

Young writers often make the following mistake: if they want a strong, independent, rational hero, they state in narrative that “he is strong, independent, and rational”—or they have other characters praise him these compliments in discussion. This does not convey anything. “Strong,” “independent,” and “rational” are abstractions. In order to leave your reader with those abstractions, you have to provide concretes that will make him conclude: “This man is strong, because he did X; independent, because he defied Y; rational, because he thought Z.”

It is on your power to create this kind of circle that your success will rest.

The purpose of all art is the objectification of values. The fundamental motive of a writer—by the implication of the activity, whether he knows it consciously or not—is to objectify his values, his view of what is important in life. A man *reads* a novel for the same reason: to see a presentation of reality slanted according to a certain code of values (with which he may then agree or disagree).

(Do not be misled by the fact that many artists present depravity and ugliness: those are *their* values. If an artist thinks that life is depravity, he will do nothing but studies of sewers.)

To *objectify* values is to make them real by presenting them in concrete form. For instance, to say “I think courage is good” is not to objectify a value. To present a man who acts bravely, is.

Why is it important to objectify values?

Human values are *abstractions*. Before they can become real to or convince anyone, the concretes have to be given.

In this sense, every writer is a moral philosopher.

Theme and Plot

A novel's *theme* is the general abstraction in relation to which the events serve as the concretes.

For instance, the theme of *Gone With the Wind* is: the impact of the Civil War on the South—the destruction of the Southern way of life, which vanished with the wind. The theme of Sinclair Lewis' *Babbitt* is the characterization of an average American small businessman.

A novel's theme is not the same as its philosophical meaning. I could write (and would like to write) a detective story or a plain action thriller with no philosophical "message" and no long speeches—yet such a story would still implicitly convey all of my philosophy.

Fundamentally, what is important is not the message a writer projects *explicitly*, but the values and view of life he projects *implicitly*. Just as every man has a philosophy, whether he knows consciously or not, so every story has an implicit philosophy. For instance, the theme of *Gone With the Wind* is historical, not philosophical—yet, if analyzed, the nature of the events and of the style would reveal the author's philosophy. By what he chooses to present, and by how he presents it, an author expresses his fundamental, metaphysical values—his view of man's relationship to reality and of what man can and should seek in life.

By contrast, a novel's *theme* need not be philosophical; it can be any general subject: a historical period, a human emotion, etc.

In judging a novel's esthetic value, all that one has to know is the author's theme and how well he has carried it out. Other things being equal, the wider a novel's theme, the better it is as a work of art. But whether one *agrees* with the theme or not is a separate question. If a novel presents a marvelous philosophical message but has no plot, miserable characterization, and a wooden style full of bromides, it is a bad work of art. On the other hand, I consider *Quo Vadis*, technically, one of the best constructed novels ever written, yet I do not agree with its message: the rise and glorification of Christian culture.

On the subject of theme, I have one warning: *Be sure that your story can be summed up to some theme.*

In today's literature, many books do not have any abstract theme, which means that one cannot tell why they were written. An example is the kind of first novel that relates the writer's childhood impressions and early struggle with life. If asked why the particular events are included, the author says: "It happened to *me*." I warn you against writing such a novel. That something happened to *you* is of no importance to anyone, not even to you (and you are now hearing it from the archapostle of selfishness). The important thing about you is what you *choose* to make happen—your values and choices. That which happened by accident—what family you were born into, in what country, and where you went to school—is totally unimportant.

If an author has something of wider importance to say about them, it is valid for him to use his own experiences (preferably not too literally transcribed). But if he can give his readers no reason why they should read his book, except that the events happened to him, it is not a valid book, neither for the

readers nor for himself.

Your theme, the abstract summation of your work, should be objectively valid, but otherwise the choice of themes is unlimited. You may write about deep-sea diving or anything you wish, provided you can show in the work why there is objective reason to be interested in it.

* * *

The most important element of a novel is *plot*. A plot is a purposeful progression of events. Such events must be logically connected, each being the outgrowth of the preceding and all leading up to the final climax.

I stress the word *events* because you can have a purposeful progression of ideas, or of conversation without action. But a novel is a story about human beings in action. If you do not present your subject matter in terms of physical action, what you are writing is not a novel.

Let me give a few examples of the difference between theme and plot, starting with my own works. The theme of *We the Living* is: the individual against the state, and, more specifically, the evil of totalitarianism. I present the theme by showing that the totalitarian state destroys the best people: in this case a girl and the two men who love her. When I say that the story concerns a girl under a dictatorship and the men who love her, I am already talking about the plot.

Incidentally, if one names only the most general meaning of *We the Living*—the individual against the state—one does not indicate on whose side the author is. It could be a communist story showing the evil of the individual; but then the plot would be different. Or it could be a Naturalistic novel, a presentation of life under a dictatorship with no moral sides taken. The theme, however, would still be: the individual against the state. So when you work on a story of your own, make sure you define your theme clearly. That will help you judge what to include.

The theme of *The Fountainhead* is: individualism and collectivism, not in politics, but in man's soul. I show the effects of each principle on men's character by presenting the struggle of a creative architect against the society of his time.

To go from the theme to the plot line, you simply ask: By what means did the author present the theme? By this method, you can also identify a story's *plot-theme*, the essential line of its events. The plot-theme is the *focus* of the means of presenting the theme; for the writer, it is the most important element in creating a story. Your work as a novelist starts in earnest when you have chosen your story's plot-theme.

The theme of *Atlas Shrugged* is: the crucial value of the human mind. The plot-theme is: the mind on strike. The latter names an *action*—the central action to which all the other events of the story are related. It, therefore, is the plot-theme.

The theme of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* is: the injustice done to the lower classes of society. The plot-theme is: the struggle of an ex-convict to avoid the persecution of the police. This is the central narrative line, to which all the events are related.

The theme of *Gone With the Wind* is: the disappearance of the Southern way of life. The plot-theme is: the relationship of the heroine, Scarlett, to the two men in her life, Rhett Butler and Ashley Wilkes. These characters symbolize the historical forces involved. Scarlett is in love with Ashley, who represents the old South, but she can never win him; she is a Southern woman belonging in spirit with Rhett Butler, who represents the destruction of the old traditions and who pursues her throughout the

story. This is an example of the skillful integration of plot to theme.

The theme of Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street* is the presentation of a typical American small town. The plot-theme is the struggle of a girl of more intellectual trends to bring culture to this town—her struggle with the materialistic small-town attitude of everybody around her. I must stress, however, that *Main Street* (like all of Lewis's novels) does not have a plot in the sense of a structure of events.

The main distinction between a Romantic and a Naturalistic novel is that a Romantic novel has plot whereas a Naturalistic novel is plotless. But although it does not have a *purposeful* progression of events, a good Naturalistic novel still has a series of events which add up to a story. In such a case when I say "plot-theme," I mean the central line of those events.

Take Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, the novel most typical of the Naturalistic school. It is the story of a married woman who falls in love with another man, leaves her husband, and finds herself hopeless and doomed. Since she is ostracized by society, she has no friends and nothing to do with her time, and eventually she and her lover grow bored with each other. The man, an officer by profession, volunteers for an army assignment in some Balkan war. The implication is that he will be killed; but he wants to go because he cannot stand his solitary confinement with the woman he loves. She commits suicide by jumping under the wheels of a train (in a horribly well-written scene).

The woman is presented as a sympathetic character; her outstanding quality is her eagerness to live. The husband is deliberately presented as a conventional mediocrity without any values or distinctions. All the evidence is given as to why the woman's life with him is boring and meaningless. Yet she dares to break the conventions because she wants to be happy—which the author considers an insufficient reason. There is no life for anyone outside of society, he implies; so, right or wrong, one has to accept social standards. The abstract theme is: the evil of adultery and, more broadly, of the pursuit of happiness. The plot-theme is: A woman leaves her husband and is destroyed for her unconventionalities.

The basic philosophical premises which determine whether a writer belongs to the Naturalistic or the Romantic school are the premises of determinism or of free will. If a writer's basic conviction is that man is a determined creature—that he has no choice, but is the plaything of fate or his background or God or his glands—that writer will be a Naturalist. The Naturalistic school, in essence, presents man as helpless; it has some great writers, but it is an evil school philosophically, and its *literary* flaw is plotlessness. A plot, being a purposeful progression of events, necessarily presupposes men's freedom to choose and their ability to achieve a purpose. If a writer believes that men are determined beings, he will not be able to devise a plot.

(A writer is governed by his deepest conviction, rather than by some professed belief. He might claim to be a believer in free will but subconsciously be a determinist, or vice versa. His subconscious premise is what will show in the structure of his writing.)

The Romantic school of literature approaches life on the premise that man has free will, the capacity of choice. The distinguishing mark of this school is a good plot structure.

If man has the capacity of choice, then he can *plan* the events of his life; he can set himself purposes and achieve them. If so, his life is not a series of accidents. Events do not "just happen" to him; he *chooses* what he makes happen (and if accidents occur, his purpose is to overcome them). He is the architect of his own life.

If such is your view of man, you will write about events dealing with a man's purposes and the steps by which he achieves them. That is what constitutes a plot. A plot is "a purposeful progression of events"—not an accidental string of occurrences, but a progression centered on someone's purpose (usually the hero's or heroine's).

Here I call your attention to Aristotle's concepts of *efficient* and *final* causation.

Efficient causation means that an event is determined by an antecedent cause. For instance, if you strike a match to a gasoline tank and it explodes, the striking of the match is the cause and the explosion is the effect. This is what we normally mean by causality as it exists in physical nature.

Final causation means that the end result of a certain chain of causes determines those causes. Aristotle gave this example: A tree is the final cause of the seed from which that tree will grow. From one perspective, the seed is the *efficient* cause of the tree: first there is the seed, and as a result, the tree grows. But from the perspective of *final* causation, Aristotle said, the future tree determines the nature of the seed and of the development it has to follow in order to end up as that tree.

This, by the way, is one of my major differences from Aristotle. It is wrong to assume what philosophy is known as *teleology*—namely, that a purpose set in advance in nature determines physical phenomena. The concept of the future tree determining the nature of the seed is impossible; it is the kind of concept that leads to mysticism and religion. Most religions have a teleological explanation of the universe: God made the universe, so His purpose determined the nature of the entities in it.

But the concept of final causation, properly delimited, is valid. Final causation applies only to the work of a conscious entity—specifically of a *rational* one—because only a thinking consciousness can choose a purpose ahead of its existence and then select the means to achieve it.

In the realm of human action, everything has to be directed by final causation. If men allow themselves to be moved by efficient causation—if they act like determined beings, propelled by some immediate cause outside themselves—that is totally improper. (Even then, volition is involved: if a man decides to abandon purpose, that is also a choice, and a bad one.) Proper human action is action by means of *final* causation.

An obvious example here pertains to writing. As a writer, you must follow the process of final causation: you decide on the theme of your book (your purpose), then select the events and the sentences that will concretize your theme. The reader, by contrast, follows the process of *efficient* causation: he goes step by step through your book being moved toward the abstraction you intended.

Any purposeful activity follows the same progression. To make an automobile, a man first has to decide what kind of object he is making—an automobile—and then select the elements which, put together, will constitute that automobile. By the process of final causation, he makes nature perform the necessary processes of efficient causation; he puts together certain parts in a certain scientific order to achieve a vehicle which moves.

In nature, there is no final causation; but in *man's* action, final causation is the only proper guide.

Observe how this applies to the issue of plot stories versus plotless ones. In a plot story, men and events are pulled forward by a purpose. In a Naturalistic, plotless story, they are pushed from behind as in physical nature.

Take the novels of Sinclair Lewis again. They are not totally formless: they begin somewhere and end somewhere. But the characters rarely pursue any particular goals. They go through certain events, drawing some conclusions, growing or deteriorating mentally, in a haphazard interaction between themselves and their social background. Their actions do proceed from their characters *as the author sees them*, but the protagonists do not determine the course of their lives.

There is a fundamental contradiction in the premise of the Naturalistic school. You are interested in reading a Naturalistic story such as *Anna Karenina* only because of the implied assumption that the characters have choice. If a woman hesitates between leaving her husband for the man she loves and giving up the man she loves for her husband, this is a crucial choice in her life. It can interest you only if you assume she has choice about it and you want to know why she decides the way she does and

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