

# The Role of Literature in Ayn Rand's Esthetics

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*What Art Is: The Esthetic Theory of Ayn Rand*, by Louis Torres and Michelle Marder Kamhi (LaSalle, Illinois: Open Court, 2000. 523 pp. \$21.95).

In her essays on art and esthetics, collected in *The Romantic Manifesto: A Philosophy of Literature* (1975, referred to below as *RM*), Ayn Rand presents her views on the nature and role of art in human life. However, as the subtitle suggests, her primary focus is on the art of literature, her major field of interest and her chief field of expertise. To the extent that she deals with the other art forms, it is mainly to provide a wider esthetic context for her discussion of literature, giving it a proper theoretical basis. Yet in so doing, she offers observations that in their scope and insight form the rudiments of a general theory of esthetics.

In their recently published book, *What Art Is: The Esthetic Theory of Ayn Rand*, Louis Torres and Michelle Marder Kamhi set out to extract this theory from Rand's writings. Having divided the book into two parts, they devote Part I to a critical examination of what they believe to be the basic principles of Rand's esthetic philosophy. In Part II, they try to apply these principles to resolve some of the many confusions and controversies that have plagued the theory and practice of twentieth-century art—especially the question of whether works hailed as art, even great art, within the modernist and postmodernist movements should be considered art at all.

On the whole, I think they have done a good job, providing an important contribution to the growing field of Rand scholarship in an area as yet largely unexplored. Steering clear both of the uncritical eulogy of many admirers and the unfair dismissal by detractors, they present a stimulating and thought-provoking account of Rand's esthetic views. Especially, I found their discussion in Chapter 6 of the problems relating to the definition of art rewarding. One does not have to be convinced (as I am not) that Rand's definition of art represents the definitive solution to the problem of determining what art is to appreciate the need for a valid definition of art in today's cultural context. Their arguments are well founded, relying on a thorough reading and understanding of Rand's works combined with a welcome attempt to relate her theory to other—mostly twentieth-century—theorists. Also welcome is their effort to cut through some of the less salient features of Rand's presentation—such as her sometimes crude polemical style, her many reductive and simplified historical observations, and her tendency to universalize her own personal tastes and practices—to highlight what is valid and valuable in Rand's theory.

However, in spite of my overall appreciation of the book, I have some serious reservations. These pertain especially to Part II. Although the authors here offer many incisive observations on the eccentricities of modern art and art theory, drawing on sound and wide-reaching research, their presentation suffers from the fact that it represents a wholly *negative* application of Rand. Given the book's general title, one would expect them to continue their examination of Rand's theory of what art is in Part I by testing it against actual art works, checking to what extent Rand's definition of art is corroborated by including those, and only those, works that traditionally have been given the status of art. As they themselves note, such a test is of vital importance for determining the validity of a definition. Yet all they offer on this point is a general declaration that they "can think of nothing whose status as art is undisputed that would be excluded" by Rand's definition. Finding no reason to substantiate this claim, they devote most of Part II to a substantiation of their further claim that "the only works excluded" by her definition are "those that have been regarded as 'controversial' or 'avant-garde' in the twentieth century" (104). Even though I share Torres and Kamhi's worries about much of this art, I think that their book would have been far stronger and better integrated if their focus had been more positive. Not only would it have given more substance to its main title, *What Art Is*, but it would also have justified the subtitle: *The Esthetic Theory of Ayn Rand*. For whatever its reliance on Rand, the second part is not, strictly speaking, about Rand's esthetic theory. Essentially, it is a debunking of modern art, with Rand's theory serving as a vehicle. As a result, Part I is by far the most rewarding portion of the book.

Yet, I have to raise a major objection against this part as well. For in their ambition to present Rand's ideas on art as a full-fledged esthetic theory, Torres and Kamhi downgrade the literary aspects of her views in unwarranted ways. As they write, their aim is to "identify and evaluate the basic principles of Rand's theory of art—as distinct from her literary theory and her personal esthetic preferences" (19). One result of this is that they devote far less space to literature as an art form than to the visual arts and to music and dance. But another and more serious result is that they in certain respects come to misrepresent Rand's general esthetics. Evidently,

they regard Rand's literary focus as an impurity in her esthetic thinking, muddling the clarity and consistency of her overall theory. At one point, they even argue that a partial cause for the scholarly neglect of her esthetics lies in her tendency to "subordinate her theory of art to her literary theory and to her personal literary esthetic" (19)—a contention I find rather strange, since Rand's literary theory has hardly generated more serious attention than her general theory. That an art theorist chooses to make literature the main focus of his esthetic concerns should by itself not inhibit his chance of inspiring serious critical attention—as testified by the tremendous influence of Aristotle's *Poetics*, both on literary esthetics and on art theory in general. More to the point is Torres and Kamhi's claim that Rand's arguments often are weakened by her tendency to shift her focus from art in general to the literary arts of fiction and drama (26). I accord with their wish to question to what extent Rand's general statements on art may indeed be hampered by her literary orientation. The problem is that in attempting to salvage Rand's esthetics from its literary bias, they end up with a rather reductive presentation of its basic tenets, ignoring or dismissing features that they feel are too strongly anchored in her literary theory.

### Art as Ethical Model-Building

One area where this is evident is in their cursory treatment of Rand's view that art can serve as a form of ethical model-building.

A central idea running through Rand's esthetic essays is the notion that art is an "*indispensable medium for the communication of a moral ideal*" (RM 21). Although Rand maintains that the task of defining moral principles belongs to the philosophical discipline of ethics, she also believed that the task of communicating such principles is best done by means of the concrete image of "an actual human figure" representing man at his best, as he "*ought to be*" (RM 21). Without the assistance of the concretizing function served by art, she states, "ethics remains in the position of theoretical engineering; art is the model-builder" (RM 22). In her formulation of this doctrine, Rand was primarily thinking of its general validity both for the consumer and for the creator of art. But she was also thinking of its specific motivating role in her own literary project. Thus, in her essay "The Goal of My Writing" (1963), she makes it the crux of her personal artistic aims, stating that the primary purpose of her writing is "*the projection of an ideal man*. The portrayal of a moral ideal, as my ultimate literary goal, as an end in itself" (RM 162).

A curious aspect of this model-building view of art—duly noted by Torres and Kamhi—is that Rand erroneously attributes it to Aristotle, quoting him as saying that "fiction is of greater philosophical importance than history, because history represents things only as they are, while fiction represents them 'as they *might be* and *ought to be*'" (RM 168). As they correctly point out, Rand here misrepresents Aristotle, since what he actually stated in the *Poetics* was that poetry presents "a kind of thing that *might be*" (emphasis mine), not as it *ought to be*. His specific point was that poetry is more philosophical than history because while the historian has to stay on the level of particulars, being restricted to the presentation of actual events and characters, the poet enjoys the freedom to present his material according to universal considerations of what is probable or necessary. For Aristotle, as Torres and Kamhi note, the projection of the ideal represents "but one of three possible types" (63). However, as the authors also make clear, in spite of Rand's error on this point and the widespread acceptance of this error in the Objectivist community—where her "purported citation of Aristotle" has been elevated into a major esthetic doctrine, serving as "a justification for idealized fiction"—Rand does not claim that ethical model-building constitutes a universal literary principle, defining the art of literature as such. As they comment, "By suggesting that Aristotle was advocating idealization in literature, Rand is arguing for the sort of fiction she wrote and most valued; she is not stating a proposition true of all fiction" (63–64). Torres and Kamhi thus helpfully remind us that Rand's emphasis on art as ethical model-building does not constitute part of her view of what literature *is*.

Yet in so doing, they also downplay—with less justification—the extent to which this doctrine informs Rand's view of what art—in general, not just literature—*should be*, or what constitutes *good* art. Even if Rand believed that an artwork perfectly well could present more commonplace aspects of reality, even human depravity, and still qualify as art, she also believed that such art was inferior, both morally and esthetically. As she insisted, only life's positives, not its negatives, could be regarded as worthy subjects of artistic re-creation. For only such subjects, "man's greatness, intelligence, ability, virtue, heroism," could serve what she regarded as the most valuable function of art: to provide a rational person with the pleasurable and life-giving experience of contemplating his deepest values in concretized form (RM 167, 170). Whatever the narrowness of this theory, and the unfortunate moralistic approach to art and literature it has generated among many Objectivists, it deserves a much more thorough and searching examination than what Torres and Kamhi offer us.

A major reason for Torres and Kamhi's superficial treatment of Rand's notion of art as ethical model-building is their contention that it pertains mainly to the art of literature and so has little relevance for other art

forms (30). But although it is true that Rand fails to adequately account for the various ways ethical principles may be communicated through the visual arts or through music, she certainly indicates that such communication is possible in these art forms—most notably in her reference in “The Goal of My Writing” to the scene in *The Fountainhead* where Howard Roark tells Steven Mallory that he likes his statues because they show “the heroic in man,” revealing “a magnificent respect for the human being” (RM 168). Similarly, although more problematically, her theory of music may be stretched to include the view that it can express heroic struggle and triumph—as indicated by her description of Halley’s *Fifth Concerto* in *Atlas Shrugged*. Thus, instead of Torres and Kamhi’s categorical dismissal of the general relevance of Rand’s doctrine of art as ethical model-building, what is needed is a careful investigation of its possible implications for the other art forms. Evidently, it represents a view of art that does not interest the authors too strongly. But given its enormous importance in Rand’s personal esthetics, both in her capacity as a creator of art and in her capacity as a consumer of art, together with its impact on many of her admirers, it should have been given a much wider place in what purports to be a comprehensive study of Rand’s esthetic theory.

## Romanticism

Another aspect of Rand’s esthetics also neglected by Torres and Kamhi concerns her view of Romanticism.

Throughout *The Romantic Manifesto*, Rand emphasized the superior value of Romantic art. As the title of her book indicates, this emphasis reflects not only her personal preference for this kind of art but also her desire to bring about a revival of Romantic art in the culture at large. For her, Romanticism was more than an esthetic position; it was a fighting creed proclaiming the need for a cultural revolution. Yet Torres and Kamhi have relatively little to say about this important aspect of Rand’s esthetic theory. Again, their justification is that Rand propounds a view mainly restricted to literature, having little relevance to the other art forms. They argue that Rand’s definition of Romanticism as a value-oriented school of art based on the premise that man possesses the faculty of volition cannot be applied to Romantic art in general. As they write:

Notwithstanding her numerous references to Romantic ‘art,’ Rand offers few clues as to what she considers to be the defining attributes of Romanticism in the visual arts or music. Those she does offer bear no relation to her own definition of Romantic art in terms of the principle of volition (32).

Once again, however, the authors utter a statement that requires more substantiation than they offer. Although, as they claim, they do not mean to deny the existence of “Romantic painting, sculpture, or music” (340 n. 49), they make little effort to find out in what ways or to what extent Rand’s specific analysis of Romanticism may be profitably extended to the other art forms. In my view, this is a serious omission, since it involves a line of investigation well worth pursuing. As Roger E. Bissell has argued, for example, a case can be made for the view that music may express a purposeful progression of action, delineating a pattern of conflict and struggle that parallels plot in fiction (*The Journal of Ayn Rand Studies*, Fall 1999, 76–77). Although this is a view never put forth by Rand, her description of the Halley concerto referred to above makes it highly likely that she would accept it. Similarly, although never saying so, she no doubt believed that in the visual arts, the portrayal of a heroic figure or a figure engaged in dynamic action or expressing strong emotion by implication is based on the premise of volition. Both these possibilities are, however, dismissed by Torres and Kamhi. Commenting on Rand’s reference to the Steven Mallory incident in *The Fountainhead*, for example, they oppose her view that sculpture projecting the heroic in man is peculiar to Romanticism on the grounds that heroic figures existed before the onset of Romanticism (as in ancient Greek sculptures or in Renaissance sculptures like Michelangelo’s *David*), which they regard mainly as “an historical phenomenon” (32). But even though this is a correct historical observation, it does not necessarily invalidate the relevance of Rand’s conception of Romanticism for all the art forms. It merely begs the question of whether Romanticism is indeed just an historical phenomenon, being, as Torres and Kamhi claim, “a product of a unique set of forces in the Western world during the nineteenth century” (32), or whether it can be viewed more broadly as a timeless esthetic movement that may manifest itself during any period. That Rand herself tended to think of Romanticism in this latter way is indicated by the fact that she refers to it as a “category of art” (RM 99) defined by certain fundamental principles—a category, however, that found its most sublime expression during its intense flourishing in the period that carries its name.

In view of the tremendous importance of Romanticism in Rand’s esthetics, I find Torres and Kamhi’s minimization of her Romantic outlook a bit curious. Again, I am tempted to conclude that they choose to ignore a central aspect of her theory that does not fit in with their own esthetic concerns, however indebted these are to Rand. Further evidence of this is the fact that they also fail to consider to what extent Rand’s esthetic theory, considered as a whole, contains features that traditionally are labeled Romantic. It is worth

noting, for example, that Rand follows the Romantics in emphasizing such things as the power of art to express the artist's emotions, the importance of organic unity in art, and creative originality. What distinguishes her views from those of the Romantics is that she saw these features as subordinate to the more basic premise of volition. Although this is a claim open to contention, there can be little doubt that Rand's esthetic philosophy is firmly rooted in Romanticism—in a way that applies equally to all the major art forms, not just to literature.

### Literature as an Art Form

In Chapter 4, which deals with Rand's essay "Art and Cognition" (1971), Torres and Kamhi give an account of Rand's ideas on what distinguishes literature as an art form. Basically, their discussion follows Rand's essay "Basic Principles of Literature" (1968) and her taped course *Lectures on Fiction-Writing* (1958), focusing on what Rand regards as the four essential attributes of literature: theme, plot, characterization, and style. But in tandem with their modest interest in literature as compared to the visual arts and music and dance, they offer little more than a brief synopsis of Rand's own views, with little attempt at critique or evaluation. This contrasts strikingly with their much more critical approach in the corresponding sections on music and the visual arts, where they can draw more strongly on their own expertise. The result is that it is one of the less interesting parts of the book. Whereas the reader familiar with Rand's writings on esthetics may profit a great deal from Torres and Kamhi's critique of Rand's views on painting, sculpture, music, dance, and film, he will learn little from their condensed summary of Rand's literary viewpoints. And this is a pity, since it is here that Rand herself has most to offer. In fact, it may be argued that Rand's esthetics is fundamentally a poetics, in the tradition that developed from Aristotle's *Poetics* and Horace's *Ars Poetica*. It is to be hoped for that future scholarship will delve more deeply into this largely unexplored area of Rand's thought, relating her ideas to this long tradition.

For Torres and Kamhi, however, the major purpose of their presentation of Rand's literary principles is to provide a basis with which to attack certain trends within modern and postmodern fiction.

### Debunking Modern Literature

As already stated, I have strong reservations about Torres and Kamhi's use of Rand's esthetic theory to expose the vagaries of modern art. The reason I offered was that her theory would have been better served by being further explored through art works that test its validity instead of being reduced to a mere vehicle for the debunking of twentieth-century avant-gardism. Another reason for my negative view is that the use of Rand's theory for this debunking task seems largely superfluous. Although Torres and Kamhi throughout the second part of their book try to make references back to Rand, most of their critical statements against the works produced by avant-garde artists serve their polemical aims without the aid of Rand's theory.

The limited value of Rand's theory for a critique of modern art becomes evident in Torres and Kamhi's discussion of three of the most celebrated figures in twentieth-century literature: James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, and John Ashbery. In all these cases, they emphasize that the writer fails to project any meaningful vision of the world because his eccentric use of language bypasses any attempt at rational communication. Although this is a point that may draw some support from Rand's theory of art, it involves a critique that in its force is largely independent of any prior acceptance of her esthetics. Its validity will be evident to any reader who picks up a literary work with the expectation of comprehending what it is all about. Similarly, one does not have to embrace Rand's esthetics to respond negatively to the bleak vision of life projected by Joyce and Beckett. The extent to which one does or does not respond to a work like Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, for example, will have more to do with one's personal sense of life than with one's esthetic convictions. Thus, Torres and Kamhi might have conducted their campaign against modern literature largely without the assistance of Rand. Where she would have been invaluable was in a campaign conducted, not *against* specious forms of literature, but *for* good literature. But this, regrettably, is not what the authors give us.

### Conclusion

In spite of my reservations, I think *What Art Is* is a book well worth reading, especially the first part. I have long been troubled by what I see as a serious neglect of Rand's esthetics within Objectivist debate. Not only is esthetics an integral part of Ayn Rand's overall philosophy, but her whole vision of human existence is in many ways largely esthetic. When she looked at life, she did so through the selective and evaluating eye of an artist. To fully appreciate the range and mode of her thinking, it is necessary to pay greater attention to her esthetic ideas than has been done so far. What is more, an acquaintance with these ideas will help enhance one's appreciation of art. By now offering a book-length study of Rand's esthetic theory, stripped of narrowing dogma and offending moralism, Torres and Kamhi have gone a long way in making the virtues of Rand's

thought on art visible—to Objectivists and art lovers alike. Hopefully, it is a book that will stimulate further inquiry into Rand's esthetic theory in the future.