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NOSTALGIA AS A SOURCE OF MYTH-MAKING IN AYN RAND'S NOVEL "ATLAS SHRUGGED"

Abstract. The recent social and political situation in the USA has caused a noticeable rise in interest in Ayn Rand, the Russian-born American writer. She has become especially popular among neoconservatives of president Trump's time due to the problems she raises, like market economy and government controls. But such popularity results also from the techniques Rand uses to render her vision and assessment of these problems, i.e. her ideology. The most evident among them is her masterful, literarily expressive, myth-making. Rand's kind of myth-making is a manifestation of popular literature; therefore, the current article regards Rand's major novel *Atlas Shrugged* as its sample, which due to its nature lets Rand realize her purpose – to bring her ideology home to a considerable number of readers. *Atlas Shrugged* reflects Rand's assessment of the state of things in the US on her arrival after being driven out of Soviet Russia by a hatred of communism. Finding the reality different from the cherished vision of the USA from Soviet Russia, she sets out on creating two diametrically opposite myths – a critical one about the current reality under President Roosevelt and a nostalgic-idyllic one about the "Golden Age" of American history, thus constructing a major popular mythologeme of the struggle of good against evil. As methodology for the analysis *Retrotopia* by Z. Bauman and *Mythologies* by R. Barthes have been taken. In his work, Z. Bauman presents a new vision of nostalgia – as utopia directed backwards to the past, which turns it into "retrotopia". R. Barthes discloses the techniques of creating popular myths resulting in "the ideological abuse". So, the works help to show how Rand creates her myths about the present and the past of the USA by removing certain historical facts from their real-life contexts, and how these deformed images meet the nation's longing for an idyllic life. It is remarkable that a certain similarity that can be traced between Rand's nostalgia for an idyllic free-market America and the historical narrative underlying President Trump's slogan "Make America Great Again" allows regarding the Rand phenomenon in the context of the present-day political situation in the USA.

Key words: A. Rand; nostalgia; myth-making; retrotopia.

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Ностальгия как источник мифотворчества в романе А. Рэнд «Атлант расправил плечи»**

Аннотация. Современная общественно-политическая ситуация в США вызвала новый всплеск интереса к творчеству Айн Рэнд, американской писательницы.

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це русского происхождения. Особую популярность она снискала среди неоконсерваторов времен президента Трампа, благодаря поднимаемым ею проблемам, таким как рыночная экономика и государственное регулирование. Но популярность Рэнд обусловлена и используемыми ею технологиями в распространении своей идеологии. К таковым можно отнести ее мастерское, литературно-экспрессивное мифотворчество. Мифотворчество Рэнд – одна из манифестаций массовой литературы, что обуславливает рассмотрение ее романа «Атлант расправил плечи» в этом ключе. Использование технологий масслита позволяет Рэнд достичь своей цели – донести свою идеологию до массового читателя. «Атлант» отражает оценку Рэнд положения дел в США по ее прибытии из советской России. Обнаружив, что жизнь в США не соответствует ее представлениям, Рэнд пускается в мифотворчество. Она создает два противоположных мифа – критический об американской действительности времен президента Рузвельта и ностальгически-идиллический о золотом периоде американской истории – XIX веке, выстраивая таким образом популярную мифологему борьбы добра со злом. В качестве методологии для данного исследования были использованы труды Зигмунта Баумана «Ретротопия» и Ролана Барта «Мифологии». Бауман в своей работе представляет новый вид утопии – направленной в прошлое и ставшей поэтому «ретротопией». Барт раскрывает технологии создания мифов массового сознания идеологической направленности. В соответствии с указанными работами, в статье анализируется, как в романе «Атлант расправил плечи» Рэнд создает мифы о настоящем и прошлом США путем изъятия определенных исторических событий из их реального контекста и как эти деформированные образы отвечают ностальгическим устремлениям нации. Примечательно, что определенное сходство между ностальгией Рэнд по идиллической Америке свободного рынка и ностальгически-окрашенным слоганом президента Трампа «Сделаем Америку снова великой» позволяет рассматривать феномен Айн Рэнд в современном контексте.

Ключевые слова: А. Рэнд; ностальгия; мифотворчество; ретротопия.

The recent social and political situation in the USA has caused a considerable increase in interest in Ayn Rand, the Russian-born American writer. Her ideas appeared particularly close to neoconservatives of President Trump's time, who, like her, profess such basic capitalist tenets as market economy along with the least government regulation.

Rand's economic, political and ethical views were arranged as a philosophical system called "objectivism" by her, on which she issued quite a number of books and articles. Though not acknowledged as a philosopher by Academia, her ideologically-influential literary legacy has been studied rather closely, mainly by American researchers. In 2009, two biographies, *Goddess of the Market: Ayn Rand and the American Right* by J. Burns and *Ayn Rand and the world she Made* by A. Heller, appeared. They differ in that that A. Heller focuses more on the details of Rand's biography [Heller 2009], while Burns elicits the evolution of Rand's ideas and their effect on the right political wing [Burns 2009]. Another prominent work is *Ayn Rand: The Russian Radical* by Ch.M. Sciabarra, which dwells on the Russian roots of Rand's radical world vision [Sciabarra 2013].



Though most informative on the essence of Rand's views, their origin and evolution, none of these works closely consider the literary aspect of Rand's novels. And yet, despite Rand's abundant publicism, which enabled her to convey her philosophy most explicitly, "the main written source of her ideas" for her adherents, as the American journalist G. Weiss asserts, is her novel *Atlas Shrugged* [Weiss 2012, 34], which suggests a significant role of the literary component of her writings in popularizing her ideology. The current article is meant to make, to a certain extent, for the shortage of that kind of analysis.

Rand's genuine world vision began to form under the influence of certain historical events in her native country, and namely, the Russian Revolution in 1917 and the hardships of the post-revolutionary era. The revolution deprived Rand's well-to-do parental family, the Rosenbaums, of all their property and that event started Rand's life-long hatred for communism. In 1926, under the pretext of visiting her relatives and continuing her studies she emigrated to the USA and there she began her career of a writer and philosopher.

On arriving in the USA, Rand found America different from what she had expected. To her dismay, the USA was not the stronghold of capitalism she imagined. In the wake of the Great Depression, in the 1930s President Roosevelt instituted economic policies aimed at stimulating the failing economy. Many of those economic policies were similar to those she had witnessed in post-revolutionary Russia and all that made Rand embark on a self-imposed mission of warning her adoptive country of the dangers of communism. In her magnum opus, *Atlas Shrugged*, she condemned the country's present-day loyalty to communism and glorified its past as the time of genuine capitalism.

The plot of the novel centers round a covert strike of the country's most efficient producers against the government, which dictates its irrational laws to them, robs them by means of taxes and encourages the underprivileged part of the population to live at their expense. Stealthily, one by one, they abandon the country and settle down in a hidden gulch in the Colorado mountains. There they build an ideal community ruled only by its inhabitants' minds and industry.

Structurally the novel is divided into two parts: dystopia and utopia. The larger dystopian part is permeated with the nostalgic motif for the country's glorious past; in the utopian part this motif is fantastically materialized. But as is known, nostalgic dreams of the past are not the past "as it really was" [Bauman 2017, 23], which justifies an assertion that the picture Rand presents in both parts of her novel is comprised of myths.

Two classical sociological works, *Retrotopia* by Z. Bauman and *Mythologies* by R. Barthes, serve as the methodological basis for the current study. In *Retrotopia* Bauman analyzes the popular contemporary social tendency of seeking consolation from the unreliable present and the unpredictable future in the memory of the past. With respect to that fact, he states, first, that the recollection of the past as the time of accomplishment and stability is unrealistic; and, second, that those who shape the mass consciousness might be self-interestedly selective when it comes to the historical truth [Bauman 2017, 24]. Barthes's research outlines the contemporary technologies of creating false images –



myths – and instilling them into the mass consciousness by popular culture. Barthes describes myth-making as a process of emptying a certain image (*sign*) of its real meaning and refilling it with a new meaning by removing it from its proper context, resulting, in the long run, in “the ideological abuse” [Barthes 2013, 10]. Both these studies shed light on the process of “retrotopian” myth-making in Rand’s novel, which for that reason may be looked upon as a sample of popular literature conditioning the mass consciousness.

The aim of the present study is to show the mythologization of reality in *Atlas Shrugged*, which, as a technique of popular literature, enables the author to convey her ideology to the mass reader. The aim is achieved by means of tackling the following objectives: analyzing Rand’s critical mythologization of the US reality of President Roosevelt’s time, a source of her retrotopian mood; outlining a nostalgically idyllic presentation of America of the time of the Founding Fathers; and juxtaposing these two myths in the shape of a popular mythologeme of the struggle of good against evil.

The conclusion the present study arrives at is that the reality presented in *Atlas Shrugged* fits in with the phenomenon described by Bauman with respect to the 21st century as retrotopia, and as such it is based on myths aimed at conditioning the mass consciousness, thus matching one of the major functions of popular culture.

Myth about the Present

In *Retrotopia* in the chapter called “Back to Hobbes?” Bauman writes that certain 21st century tendencies, like technological progress, globalization and migration urge people to turn nostalgically back towards the time of strong territorial borders and national states that allegedly provided security to its citizens [Bauman 2017, 13]. Essentially identical (discontent with the present, fear of the future and idealization of the past), Rand’s nostalgia was caused, though, by the diametrically opposite reality determined by the state’s growing weight under President Roosevelt in the US of the 20th century, which, in Rand’s vision, undermined the basics of capitalism laid by the Founding Fathers.

A. Heller in her biography of Ayn Rand writes that in 1932 Rand naively cast her first vote as an American citizen for F.D. Roosevelt but soon after his election she began to strongly disapprove of his economic policy known as the “New Deal” [Heller 2009, 324]. Roosevelt’s programs were intended to help the nation out of the Depression by introducing a great deal of government regulation into the economy. To Rand it meant totalitarianism she had suffered in her youth in Russia. Some of Roosevelt’s economic measures, such as enacting regulatory codes that restricted industrial production, setting wages and prices, limiting competition, and giving rise to government-backed manufacturing enterprises she would, as Heller puts it, “parody to the verge of surrealism in *Atlas Shrugged*” [Heller 2009, 324].

Rand’s parody aimed at ridiculing the “New Deal” programs is performed most masterfully, and in full accordance with V. Propp’s description of this lit-



erary device, which runs as follows: parodying consists in imitating the outer features of some object or life phenomenon, which results in obscuring or denying its essence. So, parody is a device which brings out the inner bankruptcy of a parodied object [Propp 2002, 62].

Such kind of parody appears in Rand's description of a government regulation that bears a self-explanatory caricature of a name "Anti-dog-eat-dog Rule" [Rand 1992, 73], correlating with the aphorism "Homo homini lupus est". The rule is adopted at the meeting of the members of the National Alliance of Railroads. Knowing Rand's obsession with individualism, the description of the Alliance as a form of co-operation, in which individual interests of its members are subordinated to those of the whole industry, sounds like a most despicable characteristic. The organizers of such alliances claim that instead of fighting each other they should unite in the fight against their enemies. When asked who they are going to fight against, they get confused but answer "...against shippers or supply manufacturers or anyone who might try to take advantage of us" [Rand 1992, 73]. As a union their concern is allegedly not profit but public welfare, and therefore, younger railroads are expected to give way to large established ones as the collapse of the latter will cause a national catastrophe. In ridiculing this rule Rand goes further exposing the real motives of its initiators. It turns out that under "the looters' slogan 'of public welfare'" [Rand 1992, 77], there lies a simple scheme to help James Taggart, President of the largest net of railroads in the country, beat his competitor, Dan Conway, president of a growing young railroad. At the meeting the proposal is moved by James' pal, Orren Boyle, President of Associated Steel, who actually has nothing to do with the Alliance of Railroads but wants to oblige James. After the meeting Orren brings it home to James that in return for his favor he expects a good turn from him. Thus, the negative charge of the description of the rule itself is doubled by particularizing the mercenary motives of its initiators.

Of similar nature are a number of other regulations, which Rand mercilessly ridicules by specifying their absurdity. Among them are "an Equalization of Opportunity Bill", which limits business people's activity to one enterprise only in order to give all of them equal rights for competition (the thesis reminds of the classics of satire – G. Orwell's aphorisms: "peace is war". "freedom is slavery"); "a Preservation of Livelihood Law", which prescribes to reduce the production of highly needed Rearden metal (named so after its inventor) to an amount equal to the output of any other steel plant of equal capacity; "a Fair Share Law", which guarantees an equal supply of Rearden metal to every customer who needs it; "a Public Stability Law", which forbids companies from the East to move out of their states. In the same way Rand describes the Unification Board, which controls every wage earner and every branch of industry; the Railroad Unification plan, which dictates the speed limit, the length of freight trains, and the number of trains run in different states; the Steel Unification plan, which means to force the producers of steel to deposit their gross earnings into the Steel Unification Pool, and at the end of the year the total amount of it is supposed to be divided and distributed by the number of furnaces owned by the producers.



The surrealistic parody achieves its acme in the description of the procedure of adopting the Directive 10-289. Its necessity is determined by the situation when Fred Kinnan, an influential trade union leader, demands that in the current emergent situation James Taggart should provide more jobs. James cannot do it because as a result of the previously adopted regulations his railroad makes no profit and he has no money to pay new workers. But understanding the urgent necessity of the measure he bargains a permit to double his freight rates, which arouses Orren Boyle's violent objections. But as "need comes first" [Rand 1992, 535], Orren agrees to reconsider his possibilities on condition that he gets a subsidy from the state. The government's source of subsidies is the businesses of Hank Rearden, the inventor and producer of a miraculous alloy that surpasses in quality all the existing ones, and Dagny Taggart, Vice-President of Taggart Transcontinental, who still manages to run her railroad fighting against insurmountable odds. So, in the end, it is Dagny and Hank that turn out to be those who the Directive has been schemed against. The parody extends also to the content of the Directive. It consists of seven points, which forbid employees to leave their jobs and businessmen – to close their enterprises, prescribe inventors to turn over their patents and copyrights to the nation as a patriotic move; new inventions are not allowed after the date of the directive; people are demanded to spend the same amount of money on purchases per year; wages, prices, profits, and interests are frozen. The observance of all these restrictions is under the charge of the Unification Board, a government organization, which, on the contrary, exercises unrestricted authority.

Furthermore, Rand does not confine herself to condemning only the economic aspect of the "New Deal" policy. She exposes its general demoralizing impact on society. In doing so, she sounds more didactic rather than satirical as if she is sharing her own indisputable knowledge with those who are still happily unaware of it. This is reflected in the episode when Kip Chalmers, a politician running for election as Legislator from California, takes an express train to get to the pre-election rally in San Francisco. Quite predictably due to the generally grievous state of the country's economy, the train breaks down. Chalmers imperatively demands a new train, and though the railway high-ranking executives with James Taggart at the top are well aware of the fact that the only substitute they can provide is in a still worse condition, no one dares to object. The orders to arrange a substitute train for Chalmers pass down from top to bottom enabling those at the top to evade responsibility. At the end of the chain is a night dispatcher, a young boy, who is told not to think but do as he is told; and in the long run it is he who is held responsible for the catastrophe.

The description of this particular railway accident acquires a generalizing meaning and sounds like an accusation of not only the authors and the executives of the directive but also those who readily accepted and supported it and eventually became its victims. In the first place, they are intellectuals whom Rand holds responsible for conditioning the public opinion. Among the victims of the accident are a professor of sociology, a professor of economics, a journalist, an elderly school teacher, a newspaper publisher, a businessman, a financier,



and a mother of two children who taught the ideology of collectivism versus individualism.

Thus, by means of parody Rand presents President Roosevelt's policy of federally-regulated economy, which she unhesitatingly brands as a bent to communism. However, Rand's assessment of Roosevelt's economic course at its face value can be defined in Barthes terminology as the "false evident", presenting the "naturalized" (i.e. perceived as natural, as something that *goes without saying*) [Barthes 2013, 141] vision of the situation. Yet F.D. Roosevelt's presidency, viewed "in its deeper meaning, as describing the whole of human relations in their real, social structure, in their power of making the world" [Barthes 2013, 142], is not so simple. As A. Heller observes, the influence of the New Deal's economic policies on any trend towards socialism in America is debatable, and that "by compromising with a mild form of collectivism" President Roosevelt might have been trying to save capitalism. A. Heller concludes that "Rand apparently never considered that one of Roosevelt's accomplishments may have been to stave off a Russian-style insurrection" [Heller 2009, 326].

To sum up, in the dystopian part of the novel Rand draws an excessively negative image of the American reality of President Roosevelt's time in office in full accordance with Barthes's pattern of myth-making by removing this historical fact from its real-life context and refilling it with a new meaning. Though being a popular literature technique simplifying the complex reality, from the literary viewpoint, the myth-making here is performed most masterfully by means of parody, which undoubtedly contributes to the artistic merit of the novel.

Myth about the Past

Rand's myth-making extends still more naturally to recreating the picture of America's glorious past, as it fits in with the major ideologeme of the American Mass Consciousness – the myth of individualism.

Most obviously it is embodied in the life descriptions of the protagonists' ancestors: Nathaniel Taggart and Sebastian d'Anconia, the founders of great businesses, Taggart Transcontinental and d'Anconia mines, which passed on to their present-day descendants. Related jointly on just a few pages of the 1200-page novel, both these stories serve as a symbolic code, in Barthes's semiotic theory terminology, for daring individualism and ownership.

Arriving in the USA at the dawn of the country's history, Nathaniel Taggart, a penniless adventurer, fully realizes the opportunities provided by the American Declaration of Independence (1776). The right to the pursuit of happiness is his chance to get rich. With this ambition in mind, he sets out to build a railroad across the continent. For Rand it is important to highlight the fact that from the very beginning Nat keeps away from the state: he never seeks any government favors, like bonds, loans, subsidies or grants. For financial support he turns to people giving them reasons why they will make big profits on his railroad. One more thing Rand is particular about lies in a crime-related episode of her protagonist's biography. Once he is accused of murdering a state legislator standing



in his way, though the charge is never proven. Nevertheless, Rand determinately presents him as a hero underlining that “no penny of his wealth had been obtained by force or fraud” [Rand 1992, 60].

Of the same kind is a story of Sebastian d’Anconia, a free-thinking Spanish nobleman, who for that reason has to flee from the Inquisition leaving behind his fortune, his estate and his beloved woman. After fifteen years of hard work with a pickax in his hand in the rocks in Argentina he restores his former wealth. The following generations continue toiling in the same way increasing the number of the d’Anconia copper mines on both American continents.

Both of the stories are heavily packed with the sweetest of romance. Nat Taggart is married to a Southern belle disinherited by her wealthy family for eloping with him, a ragged adventurer at the time. In a desperate need for funds for his construction, he pledges his beloved wife, on her consent, as security for a loan from a millionaire but manages to repay the loan just on time. Sebastian d’Anconia’s beloved woman faithfully waits for him for fifteen years without even knowing whether he is still alive. Her faithfulness is rewarded eventually in the most sentimental way. Sebastian carries her in his arms across the threshold of his newly-built marble palace “as the first Senora d’Anconia of a new world” [Rand 1992, 516].

Both of these stories are also good examples of Barthes’ aforementioned “false evident”, portraying the common understanding of the possibilities the New World opened to those who wanted to use them. They present the reality of the country’s earlier period of cultivating new territories ignoring its complex multifaceted nature. One facet of it is really known to have provided daring and enterprising people with possibilities of making a fortune. But it is also known to have some other sides along. For instance, one of them is captured in Balzac’s aphoristic thesis that behind every big fortune lies a big crime [Balzac 1967, 175]. Even though Nat Taggart’s story seems to prove this truth, it does not stop Rand from portraying him as an absolute hero. In the struggle between good and evil, as they are seen by Rand, he is on the side of good and, in the long run, his act provides the restoration of moral justice. She makes her position on that issue clear in one of her seven books on the philosophy of objectivism, *The Virtue of Selfishness*. She states that people have the right to use force *only* to fight those who used it first; the underlying ethical principle is simple and clear – it is a difference between murder and self-defense [Rand 1964, 39]. This assertion of hers helps overcome the ambiguity of her character’s crime-tinged business success, making it fit for the popular culture pattern of the moral victory of good over evil.

These characters from America’s valorous past have, though few, contemporary counterparts. Like their predecessors, they advocate individualism and industry. Due to the moral they profess, they are most efficient producers advancing technological progress: they invent a new method of extracting oil out of shelf which men considered impossible, create a new alloy which is tougher and cheaper than steel and outlasts any metal in existence, a motor that transforms static electricity of the atmosphere into the power for its own work. But



extolling their accomplishments Rand does not correlate them with the present, she places them in the context of the past by specifying that their lives and deeds are like “the stories of men who had lived in the days of the country’s youth”, “in school books” [Rand 1992, 9].

The American past that those heroes belong to shapes itself into the myth of Atlantis. A direct allusion to the Greek myth appears in an episode related to the initiator of the strike, John Galt, and the Gulch, the strikers’ hidden settlement. The episode describes a social event at which some narrow-minded woman, a minor unnamed character, tries to impress Dagny by telling her that she knows who the mysterious John Galt is. The subterfuge appears fruitful as Dagny has also been trying to identify the person who people around her have kept mentioning since the time the businessmen started to disappear. The woman informs Dagny that he is said to have found Atlantis, “the Isles of the Blessed. That is what the Greeks called it” [Rand 1992, 153]. Francisco d’Ankonia, who by that time has joined the strikers, confirms that, though unknowingly, the woman tells the truth. So, the Gulch lost in the mountains is equated with Atlantis, a legendary island, which sank into the sea.

Though the general implication of that allusion is self-explanatory, the myth of Atlantis has also a special connection with the specific period of US history which Rand is particular about.

Rand uses this myth as a referential / cultural code since the US of the time of the Founding Fathers is commonly correlated with the social formation invented by Francis Bacon in his utopia *New Atlantis* (1627). In fact, this literary source describes how “after the destruction of a morally corrupt civilization the world is recreated anew as New Atlantis” [Dawkins 2020]. It is generally believed that the Founding Fathers intended to create an ideal society similar to Bacon’s utopia as it is known that Bacon’s views on legislation and Parliament served as a foundation for the constitution created by the Founding Fathers [Dawkins 2020].

Being a cultural code, the myth of Atlantis in the dystopian part of the novel prompts, therefore, an image of the ideal social structure of the time of the Founding Fathers. Yet to full extent, the myth is embodied in the utopian part, where the Gulch is drawn as the restored copy of the country, the USA, which, in Rand’s description, “for one magnificent century <...> redeemed the world” [Rand 1992, 771], and which rebirth, “– and of the world – has to start here” [Rand 1992, 771].

Viewed from the literary angle, Rand presents the Gulch in accordance with the pattern of an “idyllic chronotop” elaborated by M. Bakhtin, the noted Russian scholar. The Gulch bears some of the chronotop’s most essential features. First, the Gulch is an idyll because life in an idyll is inherently affixed to a certain place, the latter being restricted in space and disconnected with the rest of the world. Second, life in the Gulch like life in an idyll is limited to a few realities. As such realities, in the Gulch, people’s interrelations under unfettered capitalism are highlighted, minor things (like performing daily household chores) are disregarded.



Such a nostalgically idyllic presentation of America's past is a cast-iron myth which is suggestive of what Bauman says with reference to people's nostalgic feelings for a strong state in the period of globalization. He maintains that the ability of Hobbes' Leviathan, i.e. a state, to regulate its citizens' interrelations, to curb "a war of all against all" [Bauman 2017, 55] has turned out to be a fiction, of which the ever-growing scale of violence in people's community is irrefutable evidence.

To sum up, Rand's nostalgia caused by her discontent with the present state of things in the US of President Roosevelt's time embarks her on mythologizing both the present and the past of her adoptive country. The myths, those deformed images of two historical realities, appear in the form of two extremities, which highlights the contrast between the negative present and the positive past. Moreover, the opposition reads like a popular mythologeme of the struggle of good against evil aimed at drawing readers' sympathies to the side of good. Artistically, the dystopian part is more relevant due to the masterful use of parody. Its excessively idyllic retrotopian counterpart is inferior in that respect. But summarily, they both contribute to the realization of the author's ideological intention. Thus, a literarily masterful exploitation of nostalgia, which is certain to meet a nation's longing for an idyllic life, of which Rand's novel is a sample, may turn out to be very influential, of which President Trump's recent nostalgiating slogan serves as a proof.

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