

Turtle in a Shell

Chris R. Rowland

In high school I was given a book containing *The Heart of Thoreau's Journals*. I was flattered because the person who gave it to me considered me a protege of Thoreau. Although I admired Thoreau and appreciated his writing, I am certainly no protege. In my mind the book represented an object of Thoreau's thought, an ornament of his ideals. I placed it with all the other ornaments on my bookshelf, after barely glancing at it.

Recently, after I read an excerpt from one of Ayn Rand's books, one of Thoreau's passages popped into my mind. It was a short, simple entry which stated, "It takes a man to make a room silent." At first I did not picture the peacefulness in these words. I pictured a wild-eyed man sitting on a wooden chair, in the middle of a room, surrounded by four white walls — staring at nothing in particular and mumbling to himself. I think this morbid interpretation evolved after my reading of Ayn Rand's existentialist views.

I believe Ayn Rand idealizes individuals who are separated by the walls of their own silent rooms. In this isolation of quiet solitude, our minds would be our sole companions, and the popular maxim "I think, therefore I am" would be the only assurance of our existence. "I" or the "self" would be the only purpose for living.

Identifying with Rand's idea of an "I" world is not difficult. I do, occasionally, dream of existing in solitude — even of wishing the entire population of the world into oblivion, except for the single female companion of my choice. I call it my Adam and Eve complex, apple included. My reason for this dream may be the same as Rand's wish for isolation. It comes from a frustration with human faults and an overwhelming inability to do anything about it. Since we cannot control this world, why not create our own "world"? But, to live in a world we create for ourselves is to live in a "world" of nonexistence.

Because existence cannot be comprehended by a single mind, a person living within the parameters of his four walls also lives within the parameters of non-existence. "I think, therefore I am." was a maxim developed for society, from within society. A mind needs other minds to reassure it of its existence. If a tree fell in the forest, but no one was there to hear it, would it make a noise? If a man lived in solitude, and none was aware of his existence, would not his life be a noise unheard?

But I am missing the point. Existence is a social concept not important to an existentialist. People like Rand would describe themselves as tumbleweeds being blown across the plain - free of social concern, responsible only to their "self." I would describe them as turtles hiding in their shells. Rather than advocate change in a world which exists, they retreat to a world they idealize. What these retreatists fail to realize is that turtles may be boiled or baked in their shells, and events occurring in the real world affect them in their world. If a nuclear warhead were to detonate in Washington state, the persons enclosed within their shells of isolation in Idaho would most likely die from the fallout. If the person hiding were to live as part of society and remain worldly conscious and locally active, they might be able to prevent their own untimely demise. Clearly, no one can live completely separate from society or totally alone.

Society consists of the people within it, obviously. Attempting to live apart from society is no less than co-existing with it, like it or not. The idea of an existentialist existing with society is as absurd as the term "jumbo shrimp." It is contradictory to the Rand doctrine. Perhaps this is why Rand's character in *Anthem* proclaims her separation from society atop a mountain — it is not conducive to social gatherings. But I would wish to see her spend her life on top of that mountain; it would be a short "non-existence."

An "I" can neither live within society, nor with other "I"s to be true to belief. "I"s have selfish needs exclusive of anyone else. An "I" is ignorant of other's needs and is concerned only with its own. An "I" in society would be an island in an ocean, slowly being eroded by the actions of the tide until eventually it is gone or covered by the waves. An "I" existing with another "I" would be as pleasant as two carnivores fighting for a carcass. They are oblivious to cooperation as survival and will die hungry because of it.

To die hungry and alone, or to be covered or ignored are the fates of individuals who believe their walls will hold back the progression of society. They may sit in their solitudinal rooms and mumble to themselves until they become drooling effigies to the world around them, or they may choose to leave the sterile white walls they hide behind and come into the warmth of the multitude of men and possibilities. As Thoreau wrote, "It takes a man to make a room silent," but it takes many men to fill the room with the din of existence.