



Book Review by Cheryl Miller

THE GENIUS OF OLD NEW YORK

Edith Wharton, by Hermione Lee.
Alfred A. Knopf, 880 pages, \$35

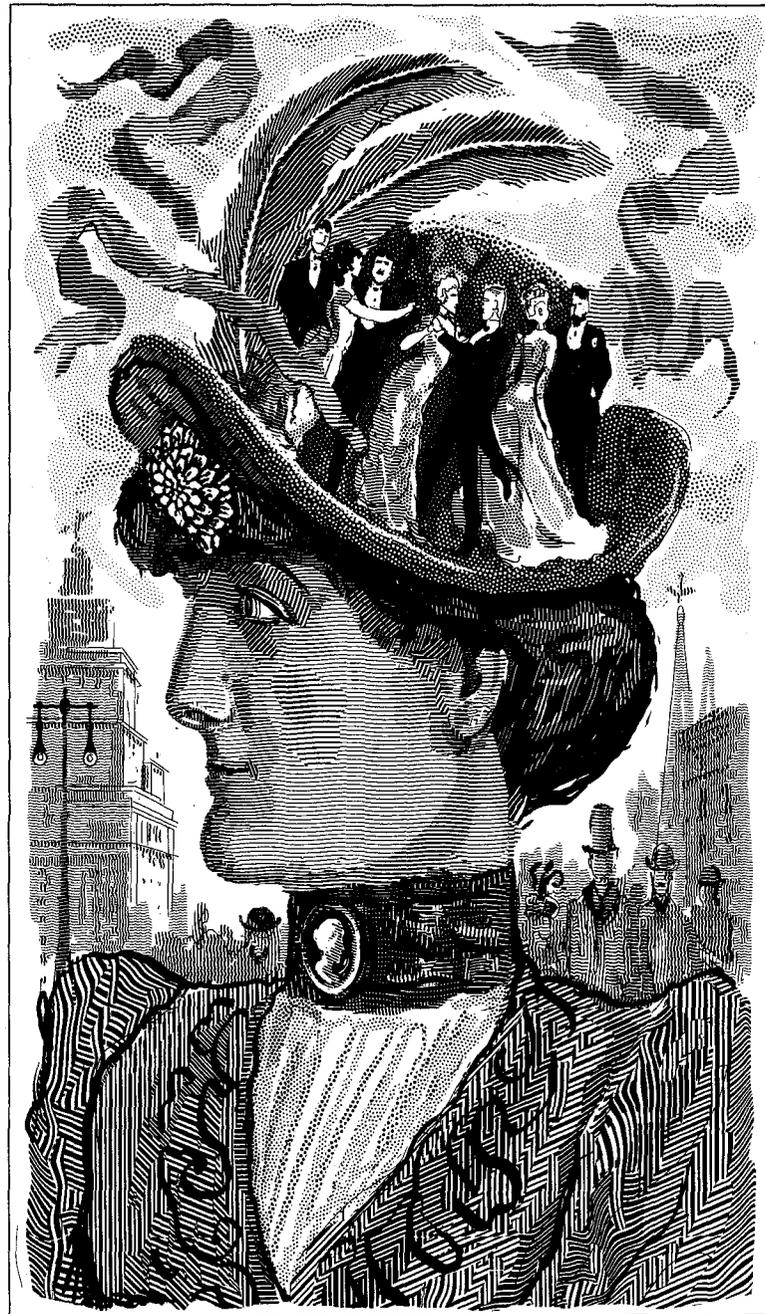


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EDITH WHARTON, THE MASSIVE NEW biography by Oxford English professor Hermione Lee, is the story of success: how Lee's formidable heroine survived a painful childhood, a disastrous marriage, an only slightly less disastrous love affair, repeated bouts of depression and illness, and the German occupation. Through it all, Wharton remained unflappable. Just two months before her death, she paid a visit to a friend and collaborator, the architect Ogden Codman, to discuss a new edition of their *The Decoration of Houses* (one of Wharton's 48 books). "Everyone was on jump all the time," Codman complained of his frail but nevertheless commanding guest. Only

a few days after she arrived, Wharton suffered a heart attack. As she was carried into the ambulance, she admonished her host: "This will teach you not to ask decrepit old ladies to stay."

Wharton's life was a constant flurry of activity. Between 1897 and 1937, she published at least one book a year, including novels, volumes of short stories, memoirs, travel writing, and guides to gardening and interior decoration. She renovated three houses and the accompanying grounds; and she built one from the ground up: The Mount, her stately residence in Lenox, Massachusetts (which was recently restored and opened to the public). She traveled all about the Continent and North Africa. When

World War I broke out, she became a tireless war-worker on behalf of her adopted country, France, lobbying for the U.S. to enter the war, writing propaganda, and opening hospitals and shelters for refugees. "I'm afraid I'm an incorrigible life-lover, life-wonderer, and adventurer," she observed. Henry James, half in awe and half in terror of his unsinkable friend, dubbed her the "Angel of Devastation" and "Firebird." "A lady who consumes worlds as you & I (don't even) consume apples," he described her. "She uses up everything and everyone."

Wharton's self-assurance and *joie de vivre* were hard-won treasures. One friend joked that both Wharton and Teddy Roosevelt (whom



she much admired) were "self-made men." Born Edith Newbold Jones in 1862, Wharton called herself a "morbid, self-scrutinizing and unhappy" child with red hair and big hands and feet. The Joneses were a "patrician clan" and part of "Old New York," the close-knit, conformist society Wharton would later satirize and celebrate in her 1920 masterpiece, *The Age of Innocence*. Although a prosperous household—it was her family that gave rise to the phrase "keeping up with the Joneses"—it was not a happy one. Her mother, Lucretia, bullied Wharton's gentle father and disapproved of her peculiar daughter.

Despite her mother's fastidiousness about written and spoken English, Wharton never received a formal education. (She would always be somewhat self-conscious of her lack of schooling.) Yet "undereducated" as she was, she achieved fluency in French, Italian, and German and was always a voracious reader. Lucretia forbade her to read novels until she was married, so the obedient "Puss" devoured everything else she could find in her father's "gentleman's library"—classics, poetry, history, and philosophy. Browning was her favorite poet, but she loved Whitman too. He proved more of a challenge to procure: in the houses of her childhood, she recalled, "*Leaves of Grass* was kept under lock and key, and brought out, like tobacco, only in the absence of 'the ladies.'"

Besides reading, the young Edith loved telling stories or, as she called it, "making up." In her teens, she wrote a novel, *Fast & Loose*, as well as a collection of poems. But her literary interests were soon set aside, and her new ambition—after her fashionable mother—was "to be the best dressed woman in New York." At 23, Edith was married off to an eligible suitor, Edward ("Teddy") Wharton, and set up house-keeping in Newport.

But she did not settle down to conventional married life. Instead, she began writing, dashing off poems, short stories, and a manual on interior design. A "preponderance of intellectuality on the part of the intended bride" had put an end to Wharton's first engagement, and it would also cause a rift early in her marriage to Teddy, an agreeable man but one whose interests did not extend far beyond hunting and drink. In her diary, Wharton recalled the crucial moment when their incompatibility became clear. She was reading James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough* and pointed out a passage to Teddy for his opinion. He replied: "Does that sort of thing really amuse you?" "I heard the key turn in my prison lock," she wrote. "Oh, gods of derision! And you've given me over twenty years of it!"

She escaped by spending most of her time in France while Teddy remained in Massachusetts to manage affairs at The Mount, their

new home. At 43, Wharton published her first major novel, *The House of Mirth* (1905). It was a best-seller, establishing her as one of the country's foremost novelists. Her family did not welcome the news. In their milieu, novelists were as *déclassé* as tradesmen; her parents never read or even implied any awareness of her work. Teddy was slightly more supportive: "Look at that small waist," he bragged. "You'd never think she wrote a line of poetry."

In Europe, Wharton found a more appreciative (and mostly male) circle of friends, including Henry James, the art historian Bernard Berenson, the lawyer and diplomat Walter Berry, and the novelist Paul Bourget. She also met Morton Fullerton, a "bounder" who was as attractive as he was untrustworthy, and they began a doomed three-year love affair. Fullerton had a long line of famous conquests, both male and female; at the time he met Wharton, he was engaged to his adopted sister.

Meanwhile, Wharton kept writing at a frenetic pace, publishing *Ethan Frome* (1911), *The Reef* (1912), and *The Custom of the Country* (1913), among other books. Her relationship with Teddy deteriorated further as he plunged into alcoholism and began exhibiting signs of bipolar disorder. Things came to a head when Teddy confessed to keeping a mistress—and occasionally a bevy of chorus-girls—in a Boston apartment, which he maintained with money from Edith's trust fund. The Whartons divorced in 1913, and Edith settled permanently in France, where she would die in 1937.

LEE TREATS THESE ORDEALS WITH intelligence and sympathy. (It was good preparation, no doubt, for her to write a biography of another complicated female writer, Virginia Woolf, ten years ago.) Avoiding the excesses of "pathography," she declines to dwell on Wharton's various depressions and breakdowns, instead emphasizing her energy and playful spirit—a choice much more in keeping with the woman who, during the unhappiest days of her marriage, assured a friend: "You mustn't think there haven't been bits of blue sky all the same.... I can hardly ever wholly stop having a good time!"

Lee avoids irresponsible speculation in the face of an incomplete or ambiguous historical record. (Before she died, Wharton recovered and burned most of her letters.) And the biographer deals sensibly with one of her more startling revelations: the discovery of an unfinished novella, "Beatrice Palmato," a frankly pornographic fragment detailing the incestuous affair of a father and daughter. Unlike the Freudian and feminist interpreters of Wharton's life, Lee realizes that an author can write about such a thing without necessarily having lived it. She

chalks it up to a literary experiment—a variation, perhaps, on Wharton's ecstatic love poetry about Fullerton.

EDITH WHARTON, WRITES THE AUTHOR, is "the story of an American citizen in France"—a precise formulation. Although Wharton spent most of her life in France and was often critical of her native U.S., she always remained an American. Unlike James, she never changed her citizenship, and was deeply angry when he did. "A mistake... rather puerile, and altogether unlike him," she wrote of his decision. As a friend said of Wharton, "She loved Europe, England, Italy, better than any native—yet remained an American of the old fashion."

Indeed, it's curious how little France figures in Wharton's novels. Henry James was always urging her to "DO New York," but she never really "DID" anything else. Her novels focus always on Americans, and Europe serves chiefly as a foil to America, as in *The Age of Innocence*, where Paris is alternately a symbol of culture (embodied by Ellen Olenska's French secretary, who lives for "good conversation") contrasted to New York's philistinism, and a symbol of decadence contrasted to New York's decency (Ellen's brutish husband).

More often, Wharton's foreign settings provide just another glamorous backdrop for her characters' schemes and machinations, as in her proto-jet-set novels, *The House of Mirth* and the later "Jazz Age" books. These are the Americans who, Wharton complains, regard Europe "simply as affording exceptional opportunities for bathing and adultery." There are hints of the France-versus-America theme in *The Reef* and *The Custom of the Country*, but only hints. *The Reef* takes place at (the American) Anna Leath's chateau in southern France, but the setting serves chiefly as a symbol of her American characters' emotional displacement, of their alienation from one another. (James, in a letter to Wharton, wondered why all "these non-French people" had "to have their story out there.") The only other character to spend any time in France is Undine Spragg, the social-climbing divorcee of *The Custom of the Country*. With respect to that book, James (giving exasperatingly inconsistent advice) complained that the French section was too short, and wished Wharton had focused more on the comedy of manners between her binational couple. But, as Lee rightly notes, the novel's foremost concern is America: Undine's destruction of her first husband, Ralph, and with him the culture of Old New York.

New York—and thus America—was always Wharton's true subject. Lee calls her "a social anthropologist of her tribe" and a "nov-



elist-ethnographer." She was an avid reader of sociology and science. Her library featured works by Darwin, Weber, T.H. Huxley, Herbert Spencer, and Thorstein Veblen—and she used insights from their researches to understand American society. As a kind of outsider, she felt she could see more deeply into the American soul—claiming as her “symbolic watchword” Rudyard Kipling’s famous line, “And what should they know of England who only England know?”

Wharton knew the truth of those words first hand: only after she had left Old New York could she see its value. As a young woman, she had chafed against her society’s prejudices and conventions, its narrow-mindedness, its insistence on ignoring all things “unpleasant.” But as the world of her youth faded away, she began to question the society that had formed in its wake. Writing to James, she lamented:

Everything that used to form the fabric of our daily life has been torn in shreds, trampled on, destroyed; and hundreds of little incidents, habits, traditions, which, when I began to record my past, seemed too insignificant to set down, have acquired the historical importance of fragments of dress and furniture dug up in a Babylonian tomb.

WHARTON WAS NOT RELIGIOUS, BUT she shared with the other writers she admired, like Hawthorne and James, what she called a “New England conscience,” the awareness of something like original sin. This tragic sense of life gave her a profoundly conservative respect for the past. What Wharton wrote of George Eliot applies equally to herself: “She felt no call to found a new school of morals. A deep reverence for family ties, for the sanctities of tradition, the claims of slowly acquired convictions, and slowly formed precedents, is revealed in every page of her books.” Wharton was distrustful of modernity with its abstractions and “theoretical visions of liberty.” “Life is not a matter of abstract principles,” she wrote, “but a succession of pitiful compromises with fate, of concessions to old tradition, old beliefs, old charities and frailties.”

In her books, utopian schemes invariably lead to ruin. For Wharton, Lee writes, “there is no other world, no escape, no exit point to the Happy Isles.” In *The House of Mirth*, Lily Bart seals all her letters with a stamp of a boat setting sail, with the word “Beyond!” below. But the “Beyond!” Lily seeks—wealth and a place in society, or freedom—always escapes her. Undine Spragg, the grasping embodiment of American capitalism (notice the initials), is always searching for something “more luxuri-

ous, more exciting, more worthy of her!” But no matter what she attains, she remains perpetually unsatisfied: “She had everything she wanted, but she still felt, at times, that there were other things she might want if she knew about them.”

Nowhere is Wharton’s tragic sense more evident than in *The Age of Innocence*, what she called her “simple and grave story” about “two people trying to live up to something that was still ‘felt in the blood.’” It is the novel that most recalls James—in its allusions (its protagonist’s name, Newland Archer, is a combination of Isabel Archer’s in *The Portrait of a Lady* and Christopher Newman’s in *The American*) and in its theme. When the story begins, Newland Archer is a young man in his twenties and is about to marry into one of the best families of Old New York. Then the Countess Ellen Olenska—cousin to Archer’s betrothed, May Welland—returns from a disastrous marriage in Europe. The two fall deeply in love, but Ellen, unwilling to hurt her cousin, refuses to run away with Archer. Archer and May marry as planned, and Ellen returns to Paris to live alone.

Around this simple storyline Wharton fashions a complicated portrayal of Old New York. Ellen Olenska, like Wharton herself, had fled the stuffiness of Old New York for the freedom of Europe. She is New York’s most perceptive critic because she can see it as Archer cannot, as an outsider. Archer tells her she has “opened his eyes,” but America has opened her eyes as well. It is Ellen, not Archer, who becomes the defender of Old New York. When Archer tries to persuade Ellen to run away with him, she asks if he means her to be his mistress, since she cannot be his wife. He protests: he is “beyond” all that; he wants to find a place where they can be “simply two human beings who love each other.” Ellen laughs:

Oh, my dear—where is that country?... I know so many who’ve tried to find it; and believe me, they all got out by mistake at wayside stations...and it wasn’t at all different from the old world they’d left, but only rather smaller and dingier and more promiscuous.

Ellen, the realist, refuses to engage in fantasies. Archer claims to be “beyond” the moral categories of Old New York, but there is no place “beyond” to go. Having lived in Europe, Ellen knows the price of freedom from social convention: “happiness bought by disloyalty and cruelty and indifference.” Europe is cultured and enlightened, but it is also “promiscuous” and “dingy.” This new appreciation of America makes the things that were most “precious” to Ellen in her former life seem “cheap in

comparison.” “I can’t go back to that other way of thinking,” she explains, “I can’t love you unless I give you up.”

Ellen has been Americanized. As the French secretary explains, for “an American...of your kind” (that is, an Old New Yorker), “things that are accepted in certain other societies, or at least put up with as part of general convenient give-and-take—become unthinkable, simply unthinkable.”

Such things would not remain unthinkable for long. Indeed, polite society would soon come to regard it as tragic that Ellen Olenska and Newland Archer did *not* run away together. How could they defer to social mores in a world where, as one of Wharton’s characters observes, “the new adultery was unfaithfulness to self”?

GIVEN HER SKEPTICISM OF MODERNITY, it’s not surprising that Wharton always avoided her neighbor in France, the poet Paul Eluard, who hosted at his country home a procession of *avant-garde* artists and writers, including Tristan Tzara, Man Ray, and Marcel Duchamp. She detested modernist art, which she considered over-theorized and sensationalistic. She condemned James Joyce’s *Ulysses* as “a turgid welter of schoolboy pornography,” and Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* as a work of pure “exhibitionism.” When her novel, *The Mother’s Recompense* (1925), was compared unfavorably to *Mrs. Dalloway*, Wharton tartly observed, “My heroine belongs to a day when scruples existed.”

Wharton also disliked the new “proletarian” or democratic novel for its utopianism and its denigration of the past. Why should art focus on “persons so limited in education and opportunity that they live off from all the varied sources of culture which used to be considered the common heritage of English-speaking people?” After Upton Sinclair published *Oil!*, a call for proletarian revolution, Wharton chastised him: “I believe that a wider experience would have shown you that the evils you rightly satirize will be replaced by others more harmful to any sort of civilized living when your hero and his friends have had their way.” To another friend, she expressed her doubts that all that was required for the “regeneration of the world” was “exterminating the Vanderbilts.”

“There is nothing like a Revolution for making people conservative,” Wharton remarked in *French Ways and Their Meaning* (1919), and that epigram would serve as the theme of her Jazz Age novels, *The Glimpses of the Moon* (1922), *Twilight Sleep* (1927), and *The Children* (1928). In all three works, Wharton follows a set of emancipated moderns who find themselves “continually tripped up by obsolete sensibilities & discarded ideals.”



Old New York might shy away from anything “unpleasant,” but the new society is more childish and self-deceiving, believing as it does that we can “refuse ourselves to pain,” that human nature can be remade to serve our purposes. The title *Twilight Sleep* refers to the drug-induced state into which women went to avoid the pains of childbirth. It serves too as a metaphor for its heroine, Pauline Manford, for whom the “avoidance of pain” is the “ultimate end.” Pauline believes that to deny evil is to “prevent its coming into being,” and she works endlessly to improve herself, partaking in all the latest 1920s fads: New Age spiritualism, free love, exercise regimes, psychoanalysis, self-help books, consumer science (“[s]he wanted to de-microbe life”), drugs, and eugenics (Aldous Huxley’s *A Brave New World* was inspired in part by *Twilight Sleep*).

But beneath this welter of activity, Pauline remains dissatisfied. She is vaguely aware that something is lacking but doesn’t know what. She experiences what Huxley described as the “contemporary tendency for superstition to be magical rather than religious—to aim at specific acts of power, such as hip-slimming, rather than at a theory of the cosmos.” Romance is dead, for example; intimacy, for Pauline, “meant the tireless discussion of facts.” The consummate consumer, Pauline acquires more and more, but cannot identify the end for which she strives. “They all had these colossal plans for acquiring power,” Wharton writes, “and then, when it was acquired, what came of it but bigger houses, more food, more motors...and more self-righteous philanthropy?”

HER CHARACTERS CONSCIOUSLY BREAK with the past, believing themselves beyond their forebears’ anachronistic social conventions. But they also cast off the understanding of human nature latent in those conventions. As a consequence, Wharton’s characters face all the problems and conflicts that human beings have always experienced, but they do so blindly, ignorantly.

In *The Glimpses of the Moon*—a comedic version of *The House of Mirth*—a penniless young couple, Nick and Susy Lansing, agree to a “trial marriage” that can be broken off if one gets a “better chance” with a wealthy suitor. The experiment is a failure—jealousy, Susy’s maternal

longings, and Nick’s sense of honor all undo what seems, to them both, a sensible and logical arrangement. Neither Susy nor Nick can explain what went wrong. Their moral vocabulary of self-actualization and personal freedom is too impoverished to explain the “deep-seated instinctive need” that actually guides their behavior. “That was the way of the world they lived in,” the narrator explains. “Nobody questioned, nobody wondered anymore—because nobody had time to remember.”

Wharton had planned a sequel to *The Age of Innocence* to be called either *The Age of Wisdom* or *Homo Sapiens*. The story was to focus on Newland’s thoroughly modern son, Dallas, who married “his Ellen,” Fanny Beaufort, at the end of *The Age of Innocence*. Dallas and Fanny believe themselves to have “settled in advance all social, religious and moral problems,” yet still come “to grief over the same old human difficulties.”

It was a theme already latent in *The Age of Innocence*. In the novel’s final chapter, Newland Archer, now widowed, prepares for a last trip to Paris with Dallas, who will soon be married. Dallas wants to know about Ellen Olenska, who is now living in Paris; he knows that Archer was once in love with her, and he wants to know why they separated. He then gives an astonishing source for this intelligence: on her deathbed, May had told Dallas that she knew he would always be safe with his father because when she had asked he had “given up the thing [he] most wanted.”

It is the “innocent” May, the symbol of the old order, who alone understands the extent of her husband’s sacrifice. By contrast, the “wise” Dallas is wholly uncomprehending; to him, the thwarted romance is “prehistoric,” “a pathetic instance of vain frustration, of wasted forces.” The depth of feeling possible to Archer and Ellen is alien to him; like Pauline, he and his generation are too busy with their “fads and fetishes”:

The boy was not insensitive, he knew; but he had the facility and self-confidence that came of looking at fate not as a master but as an equal. “That’s it: they feel equal to things—they know their way about,” he mused, thinking of his son as the spokesman of the new generation

which had swept away all the old landmarks, and with them the sign-posts and the danger-signal.

Dallas, of course, is mistaken in his facility and self-confidence. We can no more be equal to fate than we can cast off the “old human difficulties.” Thus the wise son Dallas is the true innocent.

The wise are really innocent; the innocent are wise—it’s a reversal that keeps occurring in Wharton’s novels. In *The Children* (which Lee rightly calls underrated), a band of children, led by their 15-year-old sister and surrogate mother, Judith, try to make a home together while their frivolous, pleasure-seeking parents marry, divorce, and remarry on a whim. Who are the real children, the novel asks: the youngsters who try to fulfill the duties of family, or the supposed adults who understand no obligation beyond self-fulfillment?

WHARTON’S TRAGIC SENSE, SO EVIDENT in her fiction, never caused her to despair. Despite her epicurean appetites, she retained a stoic acceptance of hardship. Her commonplace book abounds with quotations from Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, and Seneca. Her favorite was from Epictetus: “On the occasion of every accident that befalls you, remember to turn to yourself and inquire what power you have for turning it to use.”

Wharton took a life of adversity—an unhappy childhood, a loveless marriage, an unfaithful lover—and turned it into a life rich in all her “Ruling Passions”: travel, good conversation, architecture, and books. She found sanctuary first in her father’s library, then in France and her many friends there, and finally in her writing. A stranger in both America and France, she made a “Country of [Her] Own” in the “Land of Letters.”

“We’re all imprisoned, of course—all of us middling people, who don’t carry our freedom in our brains,” a character explains in the short story “Autres Temps.” Imprisonment was the fate of many of Wharton’s characters, but not of Wharton. She carried her freedom in her brains, and that was the secret of her success.

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Book Review by Mark A. Heberle

MAKING IT NEW

The Curtain: An Essay in Seven Parts, by Milan Kundera,
translated by Linda Asher. HarperCollins, 176 pages, \$22.95



THE CURTAIN WAS PUBLISHED BY GAL-
limard as *Le Rideau* in April 2005.
When HarperCollins published its
English translation this January, the work had
already appeared in Spanish, German, Portu-
guese, Polish, Greek, and Croatian translations.
Its reappearances exemplify the notion of world
literature that Milan Kundera argues for in this
long essay, and that he has realized in nine nov-
els and one short story collection between 1967
(*The Joke*) and 2000 (*Ignorance*). A literary emi-
grant who in 1975 left the Czechoslovak Social-
ist Republic for Paris, he has moved success-
fully from writing in Czech to writing in French,
the language of his last three novels—although
Identity, his most recent, was first published in
Spanish! Kundera's *œuvre* includes three early
volumes of poetry, four plays, and seven previ-
ous essays, but his claim to world literary im-
mortality will rest on his novels. *The Curtain*
serves, among other things, to justify his choice
of that art form.

Like the 1986 *The Art of the Novel* (Kundera's
first work written and published in French), *The
Curtain* is divided into seven parts; also like the
earlier work, it "intend[s] no theoretical state-
ment at all," though it does sport a more con-
tinuous argument. Indeed, *The Curtain's* power
and charm spring from the author's identity as
a writer and reader of novels. Kundera has little
favorable to say about professional or academic
literary criticism or critics, and any gestures
in that direction are ironic: the subsection,
titled "Theory of the Novel" is two pages long
and simply sums up Henry Fielding's author's
reflections in *Tom Jones*. And Kundera's con-

cluding celebration of the "miracle" of Europe's
development of the arts since the Renaissance
is undercut by the book's final two sentences:
"For the history of art is perishable. The babble
of art is eternal."

Taken as a whole, the seven "parts" of
Kundera's essay move circuitously from the
beginnings of the novel to its present and future
prospects. *The Curtain* traces the novel's origins
to the work of Rabelais and Cervantes, whose
works predate the use of the term in English
by almost two hundred years. Even Fielding,
one of the novel's fathers, saw himself in 1749
as "the founder of a new province of writing,"
as yet unnamed, to which he attached the label
"prosaic-comic writing." In conventional
literary criticism, the "newness" of the novel
is linked to formal and social changes (from
poetic to prose fictional narratives, from
aristocratic/courtly characters and audiences
to middle-class/popular ones), but Kundera
defines innovation in more fundamental terms.
Drawing on Fielding's proposition that the
novel's "new province" is the investigation of
"Human Nature," and Laurence Sterne's "radical
and total dethroning of 'story'" and focus on
seemingly insignificant topics in *Tristram Shandy*
(1759), Kundera claims that "in the art of the
novel, existential discoveries are inseparable
from the transformation of form." This
emphasis on new understandings of the human
creature through new representations guides
his pithy, illuminating account of the novel's
development: from a focus on plot and story,
to an emphasis on psychological plausibility
and material circumstantiality (from Balzac

and Flaubert through Joyce and Proust), to the
surrealist-existentialist-metafictional works
of such writers as Kafka, García Márquez, and
Kundera himself. Whatever the era, however,
Kundera's definition of the novel as "great
antilyrical poetry" applies to the work of every
author he covers, from Rabelais to Salman
Rushdie.

KUNDERA REPRESENTS SUCH INNOVA-
tions in understanding and artistic rep-
resentation through the metaphor of
tearing through the curtain of pre-interpretation
that determines our view of the world, whether
we are "conformists" or "rebels," whether the
world is being interpreted through our own eyes
or through the representations of lesser artists,
or whether we may call such pre-interpretation
ideology, common sense, the way things are,
what is right, or the best-seller list. In Kundera's
account of the novel, the great innovators are
Rabelais and especially Cervantes, who "sent
Don Quixote journeying and tore through the
curtain. The world opened before the knight er-
rant in all the comical nakedness of its prose,"
and Cervantes's "destructive art echoes and ex-
tends to every novel worthy of the name; it is the
identifying sign of the art of the novel."

Kundera's history is therefore not progres-
sive: "The novelist's ambition is not to do some-
thing better than his predecessors but to see
what they did not see, say what they did not
say. Flaubert's poetics does not devalue Balzac's,
any more than the discovery of the North Pole
renders obsolete the discovery of America."
Don Quixote tore through the curtain, but so