

THE  
NEW YORKER

# FESTIVAL

## FICTION AND POETRY

TICKETS STILL AVAILABLE

### FICTION

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 6th

**Monica Ali and  
Aleksandar Hemon**

Ailey Citigroup Theatre  
7 P.M.

**Antonya Nelson and  
Thomas McGuane**

Anthology Film Archives  
7 P.M.

**Andrea Lee and  
T. Coraghessan Boyle**

Cedar Lake Dance Studios  
9:30 P.M.

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 7th

### POETRY

A poetry reading by  
**John Ashbery**

Florence Gould Hall  
French Institute Alliance Française  
4 P.M.

Tickets are available at  
ticketmaster.com, at tri-state  
ticketmaster outlets, or by  
calling 1.877.391.0545.

All ticket orders are subject  
to service charges.

For more information,  
visit [festival.newyorker.com](http://festival.newyorker.com).

LIFE AND LETTERS

# WHAT IS A NOVELIST?

*How great writers are made.*

BY MILAN KUNDERA

TO UNDERSTAND, WE  
MUST COMPARE

When the great Austrian novelist Hermann Broch wanted to block out a character, he first seized on the character's essential position and then progressed to his more individual traits. From the abstract, he moved to the concrete. Esch is the protagonist of the second novel of Broch's trilogy "The Sleepwalkers" (1931-32). In essence, Broch says, he is a rebel. What is a rebel? The best way to understand the phenomenon, Broch goes on to say, is by comparison. Broch compares the rebel to the criminal. What is a criminal? A conservative, who relies on the present order and wants to join it, who considers his thefts and his frauds to be a professional activity that will make him a citizen like everyone else. The rebel, by contrast, fights the established order to bring it under his own domination. Esch is not a criminal. Esch is a rebel. A rebel like Martin Luther, Broch says. But why am I discussing Esch? It's the novelist who interests me! And to whom shall we compare the novelist?

### THE POET AND THE NOVELIST

To whom shall we compare the novelist? To the lyric poet. The content of lyric poetry, Hegel says, is the poet himself; he gives voice to his inner world so as to stir in his audience the feelings, the states of mind he experiences. And even if the poet treats "objective" themes, external to his own life, "the great lyric poet will very quickly move away from them and end up drawing the portrait of himself" ("stellt sich selber dar").

Music and poetry, Hegel says, have an advantage over painting: lyricism. And in lyricism, he continues, music can go still further than poetry, for it is capable of grasping the most secret movements of the inner world, which are inaccessible to words. Thus there does exist an art—in

this case, music—that is more lyrical than lyric poetry itself. From this we can deduce that the notion of lyricism is not limited to a branch of literature (lyric poetry) but, rather, designates a certain way of being, and that, from this standpoint, a lyric poet is only the most exemplary incarnation of man dazzled by his own soul and by the desire to make it heard.

I have long seen youth as the *lyrical age*—that is, the age when the individual, focussed almost exclusively on himself, is unable to see, to comprehend, to judge clearly the world around him. If we start with that hypothesis (necessarily schematic, but which, as a schema, I find accurate), then to pass from immaturity to maturity is to move beyond the lyrical attitude.

[If I imagine the genesis of a novelist in the form of an exemplary tale, a "myth," that genesis looks to me like a *conversion story*: Saul becoming Paul; the novelist being born from the ruins of his lyrical world.]

### A CONVERSION STORY

From my bookshelf I take a copy of "Madame Bovary," the pocket edition from 1972. There are two prefaces, one by a writer, Henry de Montherlant, the other by a literary critic, Maurice Bardèche. These men saw nothing wrong with positioning themselves at a distance from the book in whose vestibule they are squatters. Says Montherlant, "Neither wit . . . nor freshness of idea . . . nor salacity in the writing, nor unexpected soundings of the depths of the human heart, nor expressive discoveries, nor nobility, nor humor: Flaubert lacks genius to an astounding degree." No doubt, he goes on, one might learn something from Flaubert, but on the condition that one grants him no greater value than he's worth, and knows he is not "made of the same stuff as a Racine, a Saint-Simon, a Chateaubriand, a Michelet."

Bardèche seconds the verdict, and recounts the genesis of Flaubert the novelist: in September, 1849, he read to a couple of friends the manuscript of "The Temptation of St. Anthony," a "great romantic prose piece" (I'm still quoting Bardèche), into which "he put all his heart, all his ambitions," all his "grand thinking." The piece was roundly condemned, and his friends advised him to drop his "romantic flights," his "great lyrical transports." Flaubert obeyed, and two years later, at the end of 1851, he began writing "Madame Bovary." He did so "without pleasure," Bardèche says, as "a penance" that he "constantly curses and complains" about in his letters: "Bovary bores me, Bovary irritates me, the vulgarity of the subject gives me bouts of nausea," and so on.

I find it hardly likely that, against his will, Flaubert would smother "all his heart, all his ambitions" merely to follow his friends' wishes. No, what Bardèche relates is not the story of a self-destruction. It is the story of a conversion. Flaubert is thirty years old, the appropriate age for tearing away his lyrical chrysalis. Complaining afterward that his characters are mediocre is the tribute he is paying to what has become his passion: the art of the novel and the territory it explores, the prose of life.

### THE SOFT GLEAM OF THE COMICAL

After a society evening spent in the presence of his beloved Madame Arnoux, Frédéric, in Flaubert's "Sentimental Education," intoxicated with his future, goes home and stands at his mirror. I quote: "He thought himself handsome, and lingered a minute to gaze at his image."

"A minute." In that precise unit of time there is the whole enormity of the scene. He lingers, he gazes, finds himself handsome. For a whole minute. Without budging. He is in love, but he is not thinking about the woman he loves, so dazzled is he by his own self. He gazes at the mirror. But he does not see himself looking into the mirror (as Flaubert sees him). He is enclosed in his lyric self and is unaware that the soft gleam of the comical has settled over him and his love.

The anti-lyric conversion is a fundamental experience in the curriculum vitae of the novelist: separated from himself,

he suddenly sees that self from a distance, astonished to find that he is not the person he thought he was. After that experience, he will know that nobody is the person he thinks he is, that this misapprehension is universal, elementary, and that it casts on people (for instance, on Frédéric, standing there at the mirror) the soft gleam of the comical. (That

will never leave her, even as she progresses toward the death that is already so near.

### THE TORN CURTAIN

A magic curtain, woven of legends, hung before the world. Cervantes sent Don Quixote journeying and tore through the curtain. The world opened before the



Flaubert watches Madame Bovary watch herself, while giving alms to a beggar.

gleam of the comical, suddenly discovered, is the silent, precious reward for the novelist's conversion.)

Toward the end of her story, Emma Bovary, after being turned away by her bankers and abandoned by Léon, climbs into a coach. At its open door a beggar "emitted a sort of muffled howl." She instantly "flung him a five-franc coin over her shoulder. It was her whole fortune. She thought it quite fine, tossing the coin like that."

It really was her whole fortune. She was coming to the end. But the last sentence, which I put in italics, reveals what Flaubert saw very well but Emma was unaware of: she did not merely make a generous gesture; she was pleased with herself for making it—even in that moment of genuine despair, she did not miss the chance to display her gesture, innocently, wishing to look fine for her own sake. A gleam of tender irony

knight-errant in all the comical nakedness of its prose.

Like a woman who has applied makeup before hurrying to her first tryst, the world, when it rushes toward us at the moment of our birth, is already made-up, masked, reinterpreted. And the conformists won't be the only ones fooled; the rebel types, eager to stand up against everything and everyone, will not realize how obedient they themselves are; they will rebel only against what is interpreted (pre-interpreted) as worthy of rebellion.

Delacroix, for his famous painting "Liberty Leading the People," copied the setting from the curtain of pre-interpretation: a young woman on a barricade, her stern face, her naked breast inciting fear; at her side, an oaf with a pistol. Little as I care for this picture, it would be absurd to exclude it from what we call great painting.

But a novel that glorifies such con-

# THE NEW YORKER FESTIVAL

## ONLINE FOR THE FIRST TIME

This fall, The New Yorker Festival will offer online video of five events, available for viewing only at [newyorker.com](http://newyorker.com).

Fiction: GARY SHTEYNGART  
and GEORGE SAUNDERS

THE NEW YORKER  
TOWN HALL MEETING  
ON ISLAM AND THE WEST

The Honorable  
STEPHEN G. BREYER  
and JEFFREY TOOBIN

ROZ CHAST interviewed  
by STEVE MARTIN

MALCOLM GLADWELL:  
The Case Against Secrets

Online beginning next week.  
[newyorker.com](http://newyorker.com)

SPONSORED BY:  
Bloomberg.com



ALSO, THIS WEEK'S WEB EXCLUSIVE:  
ROGER ANGELL talks about  
his recent memoir, his fifty  
years of editing fiction, and  
the major-league playoffs.

ventional poses as these, such hackneyed symbols, does exclude itself from the history of the novel. For it is by tearing through the curtain of pre-interpretation that Cervantes set that new art going; his destructive act echoes and extends into every novel worthy of the name; it is *the identifying sign of the art of the novel.*]

### FAME

In "The Hugoliad," a 1935 pamphlet against Victor Hugo, the playwright Eugène Ionesco, who was twenty-six and still living in Romania, wrote, "The characteristic of the biography of famous men is that they wanted to be famous. The characteristic of the biography of all men is that they did not want to be, or they never thought of being, famous men. . . . A famous man is disgusting."

Let us try to sharpen the terminology: a man becomes famous when the number of people who know him is markedly greater than the number he knows. The recognition enjoyed by a great surgeon is not fame: he is admired not by a public but by his patients, by his colleagues. He lives in equilibrium. Fame is a disequilibrium. There are professions that drag it along behind them necessarily, unavoidably: politicians, supermodels, athletes, artists.

[Artists' fame is the most monstrous of all, for it implies the idea of immortality. And that is a diabolical snare, because the grotesquely megalomaniac ambition to survive one's death is inseparably bound to the artist's probity. Every novel created with real passion aspires quite naturally to a lasting aesthetic value, meaning to a value capable of surviving its author. To write without having that ambition is cynicism: a mediocre plumber may be useful to people, but a mediocre novelist who consciously produces books that are ephemeral, commonplace, conventional—thus not useful, thus burdensome, thus noxious—is contemptible. This is the novelist's curse: his honesty is bound to the vile stake of his megalomania.]

### THEY KILLED MY ALBERTINE

Ten years older than I, Ivan Blatný (dead for years now) is the poet I most admired when I was fourteen. In one of his collections, a certain line kept recurring,

with a woman's name in it: "*Albertinko, ty*," which means "Albertine, you." It was an allusion to Proust's Albertine, of course. That name became for me, as an adolescent, the most captivating of all female names.

All I knew of Proust was the spines of the twenty or so volumes of "In Search of Lost Time" in Czech translation, lined up in a friend's bookcase. Because of Blatný, because of his "*Albertinko, ty*," one day I plunged into them. When I got to the second volume, Proust's Albertine imperceptibly became entangled with my poet's Albertine.

Czech poets adored Proust's work but did not know his biography. Ivan Blatný did not know it. And it was actually fairly late when I myself lost the privilege of that lovely ignorance, when I heard it said that Albertine was inspired by a man, a man Proust was in love with.

But what are they talking about! No matter who inspired her, man or woman, Albertine is Albertine, and that's that! A novel is the product of an alchemy that turns a woman into a man, a man into a woman, sludge into gold, an anecdote into drama! That divine alchemy is what makes for the power of every novelist, the secret, the splendor of his art!

But it was no use; I did my best to believe that Albertine was an utterly unforgettable woman, but, once I'd been told that her model was a man, that useless information was lodged in my head like a virus infecting a computer program. A male had slipped in between me and Albertine; he was scrambling her image, undermining her femininity. One minute I would see her with pretty breasts, the next with a flat chest, and every now and then a mustache would appear on the delicate skin of her face.

They killed my Albertine. And I recall Flaubert's words: "The artist must make posterity believe he never lived." Understand the meaning of that line: what the novelist seeks to protect above all is not himself; it is Albertine and Madame Arnoux.

### MARCEL PROUST'S VERDICT

In "In Search of Lost Time," Proust is absolutely clear: "In this novel . . . there is not one incident that is not fictional . . . not one character a clé." However tightly bound to the life of its author,



"Stan thinks he's better than us now that he's a bowling consultant."

Proust's novel stands, without question, at the opposite pole from autobiography: there is in it no autobiographical intention; he wrote it not in order to talk about his life but to show his readers their own lives. "Every reader, as he reads, is actually the reader of himself. The writer's work is only a kind of optical instrument he provides the reader so he can discern what he might never have seen in himself without this book. The reader's recognition in himself of what the book says is the proof of the book's truth." Those lines of Proust's define not only the meaning of the Proustian novel; they define the meaning of the very art of the novel.

### THE ETHIC OF THE ESSENTIAL

Bardèche sums up his verdict on "Madame Bovary": "Flaubert missed his calling as a writer! And is that not basically the judgment of so many Flaubert admirers who end up telling you, 'Oh, but if you read his correspondence, what a masterwork, what an exciting man it reveals!'"

I, too, often reread Flaubert's letters, eager to know what he thought about his art and that of other writers. Still, fascinating as the correspondence can be, it is neither a masterwork nor a work. Because "the work" *l'œuvre*, is not simply everything a novelist writes—notebooks, diaries, articles. It is *the end result of long labor on an aesthetic project.*

I will go still further: "the work" is

what the writer will approve in his own final assessment. For life is short, reading is long, and literature is in the process of killing itself off through an insane proliferation. Every novelist, starting with his own work, should eliminate whatever is secondary, lay out for himself and for everyone else *the ethic of the essential!*

But it is not only the writers, the hundreds and thousands of writers; there are also the researchers, the armies of researchers, who, guided by some opposite ethic, accumulate everything they can find to embrace the Whole, a supreme goal. The Whole, which includes a mountain of drafts, deleted paragraphs, chapters rejected by the author but published by researchers in what are called "critical editions," under the perfidious title "variants," which means, if words still have meaning, that anything the author wrote is worth as much as anything else, that it would be similarly approved by him.

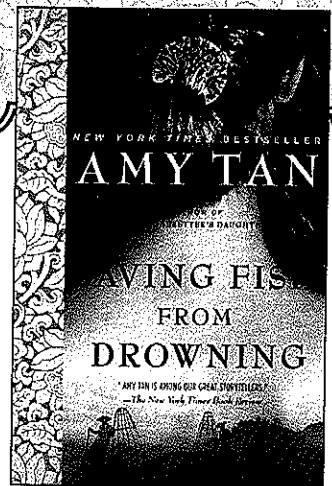
The ethic of the essential has given way to *the ethic of the archive.* (The archive's ideal: the sweet equality that reigns in an enormous common grave.)

### READING IS LONG, LIFE IS SHORT

I am chatting with a friend, a French writer; I urge him to read Witold Gombrowicz. When I run into him sometime later, he is uncomfortable: "I obeyed you, but, honestly, I couldn't under-

AMY TAN  
"is among our  
great storytellers."

—The New York Times  
Book Review



## SAVING FISH FROM DROWNING

The New York Times  
bestseller from

AMY TAN

author of  
*The Bonesetter's Daughter*

"Pure pleasure!"

—San Francisco Chronicle

"Amy Tan has created  
an almost magical  
adventure that, page  
by page, becomes  
a metaphor for  
human relationships."

—ISABEL ALLENDE



When you see this seal on the outside,  
there's a great book club read on the inside.

The Random House Publishing Group  
[www.thereaderscircle.com](http://www.thereaderscircle.com)

THE  
**NEW YORKER**  
**FESTIVAL**

**OCTOBER 6•7•8**  
NEW YORK CITY

During Festival weekend,  
visit our headquarters at  
**Barnes & Noble**  
Union Square,  
33 East 17th Street, for:

Last-Minute Tickets

•  
Author Signings

•  
Giveaways

•  
and more

Tickets are available at  
[ticketmaster.com](http://ticketmaster.com), at tri-state  
*ticketmaster* outlets, or by  
calling 1.877.391.0545.

All ticket orders are subject  
to service charges.

SUPPORTED BY

**SAMSUNG**

stand your enthusiasm." "What did you read?" "Possessed." "Damn! Why 'Possessed'?"

"Possessed: The Secret of Myslotch" appeared in book form only after Gombrowicz's death. It is a popular novel that he published, as a young man, under a pseudonym, as a serial in a prewar Polish magazine. He never made it a book; he never intended to. Toward the end of his life, a long interview with Dominique de Roux was published in a volume called "A Kind of Testament." In it Gombrowicz discusses all of his work. *All of it*. One book after another. Not one word does he utter about "Possessed"!

I tell the fellow, "You've got to read 'Ferdydurke'! Or 'Pornografia'!"

He looks at me sorrowfully. "My friend, the life ahead of me is growing short. The time I could spare your author is used up."

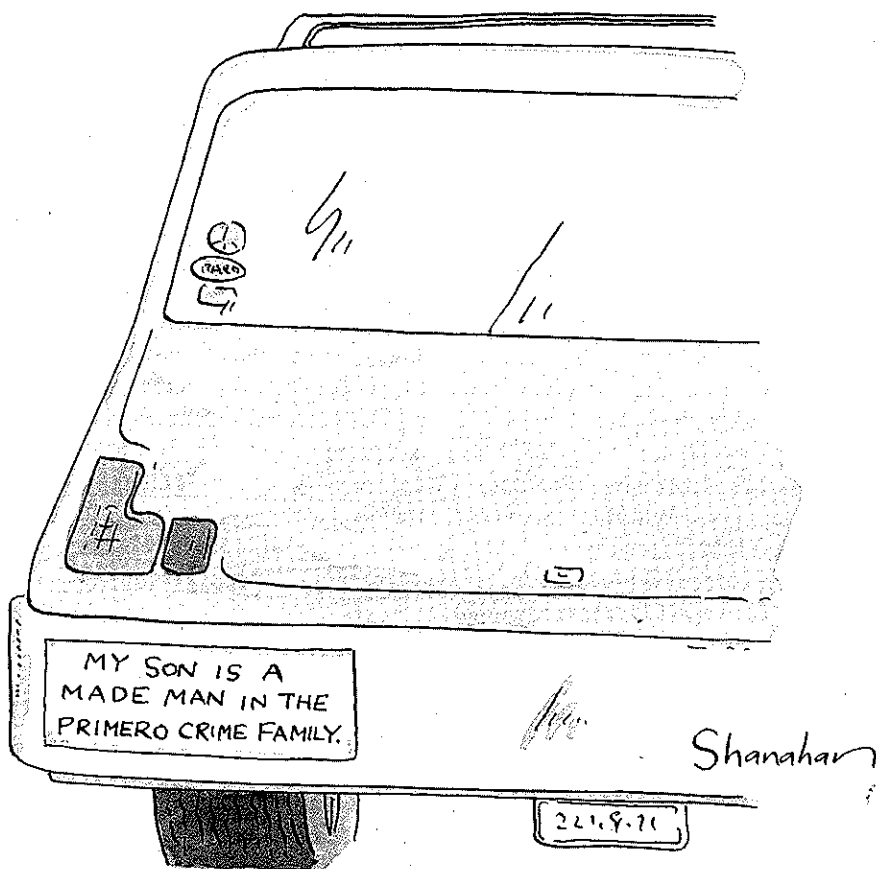
THE LITTLE BOY AND HIS  
GRANDMOTHER

Stravinsky definitively broke off his long friendship with the orchestra conductor Ernest Ansermet when the latter tried to

make cuts in his ballet "Jeu de Cartes." Later, Stravinsky himself revisited his "Symphonies of Wind Instruments" and made a number of revisions. Hearing of this, Ansermet was indignant: he didn't like the revisions, and he disputed Stravinsky's right to change what he had originally written.

In the first instance as in the second, Stravinsky's reaction was equally apt: It's none of your business, my good fellow! Don't you go carrying on in my work the way you do in your bedroom! Because what an author creates doesn't belong to his papa, his mama, his nation, or to mankind; it belongs to no one but himself; he can publish it when he wants and if he wants; he can change it, revise it, lengthen it, shorten it, throw it in the toilet and flush it down without the slightest obligation to explain himself to anybody at all.

I was nineteen when, in my home town, a young academic gave a public lecture; it was during the first months of the Communist revolution, and, bowing to the spirit of the time, he talked about the social responsibility of art. After the conference, there was a discussion; what I remember is the poet



Josef Kainar (a man of Blatny's generation, also long dead now), who, in response to the scholar's talk, told this anecdote: A little boy takes his blind grandmother for a walk. They are strolling down a street, and from time to time the little boy says, "Grandma, watch out—a root!" Thinking she is on a forest trail, the old woman keeps jumping. Passersby scold the little boy: "Son, you're treating your grandmother so badly!" And the boy says, "She's my grandma! I'll treat her any way I want!" And Kainar finishes, "That's me, that's how I am about my poetry."

I'll never forget that demonstration of an author's rights proclaimed under the mistrustful gaze of the young revolution.

### CERVANTES'S VERDICT

Several times in his novel, Cervantes sets out long lists of books on chivalry. He gives their titles but does not always feel it necessary to name the authors. At the time, respect for authors and their rights had not yet become customary.

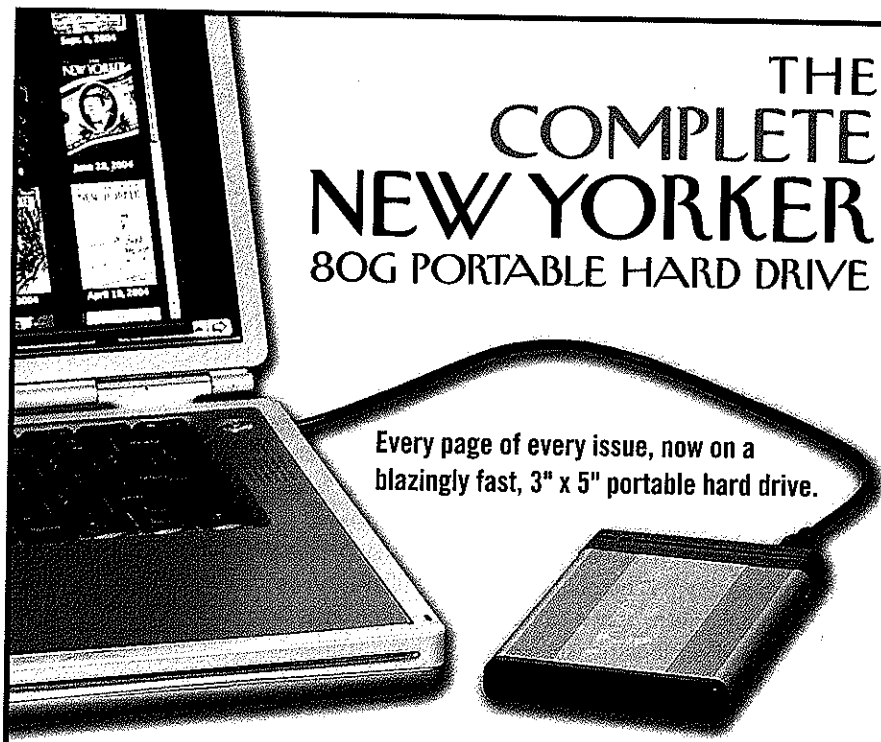
Before Cervantes had completed the second volume of his novel, another writer, still unknown, preceded him by publishing, under a pseudonym, his own sequel to the adventures of Don Quixote. Cervantes reacted at the time the way a novelist would react today: with rage. He attacked the plagiarist violently and proudly proclaimed, "Don Quixote was born for me alone, and I for him. He knew about action, I about writing. He and I are simply one single entity."

Since Cervantes, this has been the primary, fundamental mark of a novel: it is a unique, inimitable creation, inseparable from the imagination of a single author. Before he was written, no one could have imagined a Don Quixote; he was the unexpected itself, and, without the charm of the unexpected, no great novel character (and no great novel) would ever be conceivable again.

The birth of the art of the novel was linked to the consciousness of an author's rights and to their fierce defense. The novelist is the sole master of his work; he is his work. It was not always thus, and it will not always be thus. But when that day comes, then the art of the novel, Cervantes's legacy, will cease to exist. ♦

(Translated, from the French, by Linda Asher.)

## THE COMPLETE NEW YORKER 80G PORTABLE HARD DRIVE



Every page of every issue, now on a blazingly fast, 3" x 5" portable hard drive.

The Complete New Yorker DVD-ROM set is also available. Both products now include all issues from February, 1925, through April, 2006. For Mac and PC.

To order, call 877-408-4269 or shop online for free shipping and free personalization:

[www.thenewyorkerstore.com](http://www.thenewyorkerstore.com)

ADMI(RED)