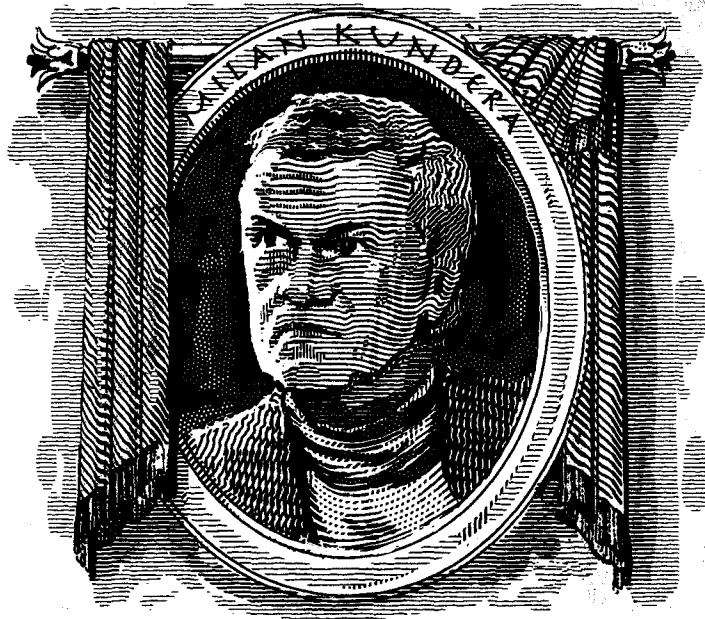


Book Review by Mark A. Heberle

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

did novels like *The Internal-Combustion Monster*, a forgotten work by the Czech novelist Jaromir John, who in 1932 provided a comic, surrealist forecast of human life disrupted and determined by the automobile. Nor is Kundera's history timeless or universal: what he calls "the shame of repeating oneself" would prevent a 21st-century writer from mimicking Hemingway, let alone Fielding, and would prevent readers from accepting such fiction as anything other than parody or plagiarism. Nor is Kundera's history comprehensive. Mediocre novels—most novels—have no place here because they have not fulfilled the criteria for innovative illumination of human nature.

FOR KUNDERA, THE HISTORY OF THE novel—like the history of all arts—is a history of "values," constituted over time and subject to reappraisal over time. Rabelais and Cervantes could only be recognized as the founders of this art once readers and writers of novels had come to realize what constitutes its distinctive "aesthetic value—that is to say: the previously unseen aspects of existence that [a] particular novel has managed to make clear; the novelty of form it has found." As a result,

in the collective consciousness, the history of the novel over its whole span from Rabelais to our own time is thus in constant transformation, shaped by competence and incompetence, intelligence and stupidity, and above all, forgetting, which never stops enlarging its enormous cemetery where, alongside nonvalues, lie buried values that have been underestimated, unrecognized, or forgotten.

Finally, "[t]he novelist is not a valet to historians"—novels cut through the curtain of what has been reified as History in order to understand how human beings subject themselves to its conditions. But this understanding, whether in the novel or in other arts, is ultimately more valuable and enduring:

Art is not a village band marching dutifully along at History's heels. It is there to create its own history. What will ultimately remain of Europe is not its repetitive history, which in itself represents no value. The one thing that has some chance of enduring is the history of its arts.

About midway through the essay, Kundera identifies *The Curtain* as a "personal history of the novel." The quotation marks point to the subjectivity of his account but also to its authoritativeness—who better to interpret and evaluate novels than a novelist, after all? Indeed,

insofar as it persuades readers of its aesthetic judgments through literary interpretation and analysis, *The Curtain* is masterly. As a reader and critic of great fiction, Kundera is lucid, elegant, engaging, and convincing—whether he is pointing out how Flaubert's 1879 revision of *Sentimental Education* marked an evolution from scene-centered, overly dramatized realism toward the beauty of "everyday banality"; analyzing how Tolstoy managed to represent so superbly the "prose of a suicide" near the end of *Anna Karenina*; showing how Kafka transmuted the romanticism of Adalbert Stifter's *Indian Summer* (1857) into the world of *The Castle*, "defiled" comprehensively and irrevocably by bureaucratization; or arguing why in his short story "Sheep" (1958), Kenzaburo Oe refrains from identifying as Americans the drunken, brutish foreign soldiers who force the Japanese passengers on a bus into self-humiliation: "Just forgoing that one adjective was enough for the political aspect to recede into dim shadow, and for the light to focus on the enigma that most interested the writer, the existential enigma."

Many of the chapters of *Immortality*, Kundera's last novel written in Czech, involve dialogues of mutual admiration between Goethe and Hemingway, who encounter each other wherever it is that great writers end up (at least in the works of other writers). Kundera notes that the "honesty" of any great novelist (i.e., any real novelist) "is bound to the vile stake of his megalomania," because "[e]very novel created with real passion aspires quite naturally to a lasting aesthetic value, meaning to a value capable of surviving its author." Near the end of *The Curtain*, Kundera refers to the inexhaustible influence of Rabelais upon later writers from Sterne to Rushdie as an instance of how novels have renewed themselves and enlightened their readers for nearly 500 years: "their common history puts them in many mutual relationships which illuminate their meaning, extend their effect, and protect them against forgetting." But forgetting, a major theme throughout Kundera's work, may also be closely linked to the anxieties of a novelist in his late 70s whose greatest work, beginning with *The Joke* and culminating in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984), seems to lie behind him, and was closely connected to the stifling effects of Czech Communist ideology, the trauma of the Soviet invasion in 1968, and Kundera's subsequent flight to and residence in France. The novels written since then call attention to philosophical problems and existential concerns of the human condition in their very titles (*Immortality*, *Slowness*, *Identity*, *Ignorance*), but Kundera's three French works are his shortest, and half of the books composed in his adopted language are essay collections, including *The Curtain*.

Another anxiety in *The Curtain* is suggested

in Kundera's calling attention to Jaromir John's prophetic but unknown novel about automobiles, as well as his observation that the earliest Western prose fictions were Icelandic sagas—magnificent narratives that had no influence on the novel (some late Victorian poets were the first in English literature to rediscover them, and Tolkien was the first to borrow from them in prose narratives). After all, Czech and Icelandic have never been, nor ever will be, read by a large number of readers, let alone novelists—and inadequate English translations of Witold Gombrowicz (a novelist much admired by Kundera) have distorted or delayed his reception in America. Kundera's decision to write in French rather than Czech may reflect an anxiety about being forgotten himself. Moreover, his painstaking revision between 1985 and 1987 (and thereafter) of all the French translations of his novels testifies to his concerns about the novelist's right to control the form of his immortality. In fact, according to the Author's Note to the 1995 English translation of *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, "the French translations have become, so to speak, more faithful to the Czech originals than the originals themselves," so Kundera had Aaron Asher use the newer but more authentic French version of the novel as his source text.

KUNDERA'S CURIOUS RE-AUTHORIZATION of himself illustrates an important claim in *The Curtain* that makes possible the novelist's privilege—and obligation—to write for all readers, regardless of History, nation, or language: novels written in any language can be read, understood, and judged by readers ignorant of that language. Kundera supports his argument by striking instances from literary history: not only was Rabelais better understood by Bakhtin than by the Russian's French contemporaries, but Dostoyevsky was best understood by Gide, who knew no Russian, and Dos Passos by Sartre, who did not read him in English. Kundera's claim gives the novelist an unrivaled opportunity to write in the largest context possible—world literature. Kundera endorses Argentinian novelist Ernesto Sabáto's comment on the novel's audience: "in the modern world, abandoned by philosophy and splintered by hundreds of scientific specialties, the novel remains to us as the last observatory from which we can embrace human life as a whole." Whether the numerous translations of his own novels point to Kundera's literary immortalization must be left to novelists and novel readers yet to come. For the moment, however, *The Curtain* provides an elegant and compelling brief for the novel, past, present, and future.

Mark A. Heberle is professor of English at the University of Hawaii at Manoa in Honolulu.



Book Review by David L. Tubbs

FROM UNDER THE RUBBLE

The Solzhenitsyn Reader: New and Essential Writings, 1947–2005, by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, edited by Edward E. Ericson, Jr., and Daniel J. Mahoney. ISI Books, 634 pages, \$30



Александр
Солженицын

IN NOVEMBER 2006 A PUBLISHING HOUSE IN Moscow issued the first three volumes of the collected works of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. The remaining volumes will be released through 2010, and the 30-volume set will be the first full collection of Solzhenitsyn's works to be published and sold in Russia.

The Solzhenitsyn Reader is a noteworthy publishing event in its own right. The need for such an anthology in English has been apparent for some time, and not only to acquaint a new generation with his works. The range of his writing is wide, and over the years various shorter pieces—essays, speeches, and the prose poems he calls “miniatures”—have been hard to obtain, even for the resourceful.

The anthology was worth the wait. A labor of love for editors Edward Ericson and Daniel Mahoney, this project also involved some of Solzhenitsyn's best translators, including his sons Yermolai, Ignat, and Stepan. As both an

introduction to Solzhenitsyn and a collection of some of his best writing, the book will be a splendid resource for many years.

As one would expect, the *Reader* includes selections from the author's principal literary works, *The First Circle*, *Cancer Ward*, *The Gulag Archipelago*, and *The Red Wheel*. But there is one surprise—without comment, the editors have left out *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, the brilliant 1962 novella that launched Solzhenitsyn's career. Given the brevity of *Ivan Denisovich* and its special status among works written under Communism, perhaps the editors decided that an abridgement would be inappropriate.

In the main, the selections Ericson and Mahoney have chosen are engrossing. Those familiar with the author's *oeuvre* might question a few of their choices—I would have liked to see several more chapters from *The Gulag Archipelago*—but the editors cannot be accused of unreasonable bias.

The *Reader* contains some of Solzhenitsyn's best poems, short stories, speeches, and essays. To have these in one place is a delight. The highlights include the short story “Matryona's Home”; excerpts from *The Trail*, an autobiographical poem exceeding 7,000 lines; the Nobel Lecture, published in 1972; and Solzhenitsyn's 1978 Harvard University commencement address. The *Reader* also has excerpts from the first volume of Solzhenitsyn's memoirs (*The Oak and the Calf*) and his historical study of Russian-Jewish relations in his homeland (*Two Hundred Years Together*).

THE EDITORS' GOOD JUDGMENT DERIVES from their extensive knowledge of Solzhenitsyn, which probably matches that of any American scholar or journalist alive today. Ericson has published two books on Solzhenitsyn's thought; Mahoney one. In their introductory essay to the *Reader* and in the com-