LIBRO RESEÑADO
Milan KUNDERA (2005),
*The Curtain: An Essay in Seven Parts*, trans. Linda Asher,

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FECHA
10 agosto 2008
The Curtain is a work of criticism, yet it is fascinating to recognize Milan Kundera’s dual identity, for he is a celebrated novelist. That he knows whereof he speaks is apparent on every page of this gem-laden volume. One does not have to speculate, in chicken-versus-egg fashion, on how he came to be so conspicuously perceptive—via writing, via reading, or, what is more likely, through some form of synthesis—but rather can enjoy the fruits of his labors and, it could be added, of his rare instincts. Kundera offers a variety of approaches to the novel, but this is hardly the traditional manual. The commentary provides a steady stream of insights that, while they cannot be validated scientifically, of course, both reveal and inspire, as profoundly thoughtful and thought-provoking exercises. This is a book for lovers of literature, but despite its impressive range it should give special pleasure to devotees of Don Quixote, which often comes into Kundera’s dialogue with the novel and with novelists.
Part 1, “The Consciousness of Continuity,” looks at the relation of history and aesthetics and of praxis and poetics. The protagonists include Cervantes, Fielding, Sterne, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Flaubert. Time is of the essence in this section, and Kundera reexamines prose and the prosaic in this section. He sees the novel as converting the past into the present, and he pays attention to crucial details such as how death scenes in the novel gain depth by losing the grandeur of tragic drama. Concisely, but significantly for the development of metafiction, he calls Tristram Shandy “the first radical and total dethroning of ‘story’” (11). Part 2, “Die Weltliteratur,” explores topics that include a reconfigured definition of provincialism and the resistance by large nations to Goethe’s concept of “world literature.” The dialectics of world and nation is inflected by Kundera’s experience as “an East European exile.” The treatment of kitsch in this essay is itself a substantial treat. Part 3, “Getting into the Soul of Things,” takes as its point of departure what the novel does and does not do. The essay has its own narrative scheme, of sorts, in which Kundera’s own trajectory—through literature and through life—takes him to France, where he meets the Mexican ambassador Carlos Fuentes. The story reaches a climax when Kundera finds affinities between Ernesto Sábato’s The Exterminating Angel (1974) and Hermann Broch’s The Sleepwalkers and Robert Musil’s The Man Without Qualities, written half a century earlier. The message of each of the novels is that within the splintering of the modern world, the novel remains as “the last observatory from which we can embrace life as a whole” (83). Part 4 asks “What Is a Novelist?” and answers that an aspect of the art of writing a novel is acknowledging a fundamental misapprehension: people are not who they think they are. A key feature of the essay is the contention, with Don Quixote (Cervantes’s and Avellaneda’s) as examples, that the birth of the novel and its separation from the efforts of the past are linked to a defense of the author’s rights. Part 5, “Aesthetics and Existence,” reflects upon links, and paradoxes, between comedy and tragedy. The essay ends with the sentence “Hell (hell on earth) is not tragic; what’s hell is horror that has not a trace of the tragic” (115). Part 6, “The Torn Curtain,” begins with allusions to anecdotal examples of Don Quixote’s behavior, in order to note that the history of the novel begins with three questions: what is individual identity, what is truth, and what is love? Alonso Quijano is prepared to sacrifice his life—that is, he is primed for tragedy—but Cervantes (and the novel in general) turns to comedy. Kundera shifts to the themes of bureaucracy and the factor of the age of artists in the assessment of
their works (“It is not easy for an innovative young artist to seduce the public and make himself beloved,” 143). Part 7, “The Novel, Memory, Forgetting,” addresses the reading process and the ways in which memory serves and deceives the consumer of literature. Kundera refers not only to selective memory but to the tricks that our memories play on us. Novelists, most strikingly those of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, aid in the creation of memory gaps by blending historical periods and juxtaposing cultural specificities. Kundera cites Fuentes’s *Terra Nostra*, in which a mad scientist houses in his laboratory a “theater of memory,” in which he can project on screen all past events and even those that could have occurred but did not. Fuentes himself does the name, producing, in lieu of a history of Spain, a fantasy variation of Spanish history. Kundera ends his book on an argument raised in the first essay, with a nod to Jan Mukarovsky, to the effect that “the great miracle of Europe [was] not its art, but its art become history” (168).

Kundera shows himself to be wary of theory, or, perhaps more accurately, of theorists, while he fashions the outline for a poetics of the novel. One might contend that the crosscurrents of the synchronic and the diachronic presented here—the shared characteristics of the genre and the implied mandate for authors to invent anew—are, at the same time, illuminating and frustrating, but I would submit that the tension is essential, rewarding, and entertaining, and that Kundera delivers a veritable master class for students of the novel.