

of war-torn Sarajevo as Brik nears his roots.

Brik's wild pilgrimage becomes a sardonic search for his soul, which "most people" locate "somewhere in the abdominal area." At the Chervivitsi Jewish Center, however, a man observes, "God will take care of the dead. We need to take care of the living." And in the Chişenău (Kishinev) Jewish cemetery, in response to Kirk's existential query about whether the world is about life or death, his guide responds: "I think it is about life. I think there is always more life than death."

From these threads Brik fashions Lazarus's sister Olga, strong and clear-sighted. After grave robbers "raise" and mutilate Lazarus's body, thus literalizing Brik's conflation of Averbuch with his biblical counterpart, Olga attends a public burial of the rediscovered corpse, compromising her Orthodox faith to spare her community a possible revenge attack. Her imagined letter to her mother echoes the Ukrainians' words: "I chose life over death. God will take care of the dead. We have to take care of the living."

No less lost in the East than in America, Brik muses, "Home is where someone might notice your absence." But visiting Rora's surgeon sister Azra, to fix the hand he broke freeing a Moldavian girl from her would-be pimp, he abandons irony: "The seat of her soul was in her deep, sea-green eyes. Somehow, she reminded me of Olga Averbuch." Shortly after a nurse urges him to stay—"This is your home"—Brik meets an old girlfriend who asks, "Where have you been?" Someone has finally noticed his absence: he is home. After Rora is gratuitously murdered, Azra encourages Brik to finish his project.

Ultimately, Hemon's completed work is both a postmodern tour de force whose ironic style evokes Conrad and Flaubert and an existential call to embrace life despite its horrors, one's self despite its flaws, and a commitment to the living that acknowledges and nurtures the soul.

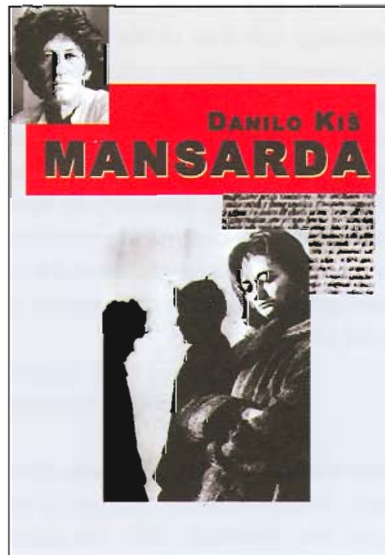
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Danilo Kiš. **Mansarda**. John K. Cox, tr. New York: Serbian Classics. 2008. 112 pages. \$19.95. ISBN 978-0-9678893-7-5

*Mansarda* is the first English translation of Danilo Kiš's novel published in Yugoslavia in 1962. The author's emphasis on bohemian and socially transgressive behavior goes against the grain of "socialist realist" tendencies that elevated the collective spirit and self-sacrifice of the individual for the creation of socialist utopia. The protagonist is an urban bohemian whose lofty dissociation from the mundane and socially responsible is declared by the epigraph of the novel taken from Alexandr Blok: "The more that life

pushes a person up to greater and greater heights, the colder it gets for him or her, and the less one is capable of comprehending life and adjusting to it." The attic room, *mansarda*, thus becomes a metaphor for the rather carefree life of the aspiring writer, Orpheus, and his roommate and alter ego Igor—"Perpetual student. Student-vagabond. Stargazer. Sleepwalker"—a life that revolves around the girl Eurydice, drinking, womanizing, and discussions on the relation of art to reality.

The beginning of Orpheus's transformation occurs following his (real or imaginary) "visit" to the Pacific islands, bringing over non-European "wisdom" and a realization that everything in his life has been a construct, even the *mansarda* and Eurydice. Challenged to "move down to the ground floor," exchange his candlelit night musings with daylight writing that offers a better look at people below, and engage in writing about the poor, Orpheus insists that his book will be "without dialectics and ethics," devoid even of love. His work, he emphasizes, is an exercise in the emancipation from egoism that, however, soon turns into a revolt against the indulgent artifice of literature and the urge to acknowledge the "reality" of life through rituals of everyday life and charitable work. "Doesn't real life, *realitas*, lie somewhere between your *mansarda* and your Walpurgis Night?!" a friend inquires of him. The mythical Orpheus descended into the Underworld in order to bring back Eurydice, and was the only man to come back alive. Doesn't *realitas*, therefore, lie between the palpable misery of the people "below" and his disinterestedness in daily matters? Orpheus's gaze, most celebrated in the writings



of French philosopher Maurice Blanchot, transmutes his desire for the lost Eurydice into art.

Erudite and containing references to and quotations from many of Kiš's influences, *Mansarda* is "a blend of autobiography and mission statement," as the translator John Cox notes in his introduction. It reveals itself as a bildungsroman at the conclusion of which Orpheus, who is also the author of the novel, "dismounts" from his lofty existence in full awareness of the life surrounding him. "Dethrone Mansarda! Warm it up with the sun" becomes Orpheus's new project, as he composes a registry of all the tenants of his apartment block, complete with brief biographical notes.

Does this mean that as the narrative voice of Orpheus metamorphoses into that of the student Igor, and as he "matures" as a writer, he assumes the existentialist position exchanging his modernist explorations for *engagé* literature? Not really, for there is nothing more prominent in Kiš's poetics than his refusal to create literature responding to political and/or social prescriptions. In

this respect, *Mansarda* is the embryo of his later prose which further articulates his opposition to literature's subservience to political dictates.

It is welcome news that this text is finally available in an English translation, and the translator's explanatory notes are very useful in clarifying instances in which Danilo Kiš's erudition could present obstacles to the understanding of the text.

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David Lodge. **Deaf Sentence.** New York: Viking, 2008. 294 pages. \$25.95. ISBN 978-0-670-01992-2

David Lodge is not a great novelist, and by modernist or postmodernist standards he is hardly a novelist at all since his technique would not startle Trollope or even Fielding. But in this novel and several others, he does for the academic world what Tony Hillerman does for the Navajo Reservation: describe and give some insight into rituals and some of the reasons behind them, present stimulating but easily forgettable information more or less connected to the plot, create believable characters performing comprehensible actions for readily understandable reasons without undue interior thrashing, and describe accurate topographies of physical and cultural landscapes.

*Deaf Sentence* lacks the energy of *Changing Places* and *Small World*—understandably, since protagonist Desmond Bates, in his sixties, is a linguistics professor retired from a British university and deprived of the structure of the academic year, who lacks the sexual energy to keep up with a younger wife with a flourishing career. He is anxious about an aging and failing father and is

increasingly separated from social contact by his progressive hearing loss—which accounts for the title and for innumerable puns on *deaf/death*.

His life is unsettled by a young American woman, a graduate student, charming, attractive, manipulative, and either disturbed, dishonest, or both. She draws Desmond into her dissertation project and threatens—mostly in his guilty conscience—his relationship with his wife. But she is conveniently and painlessly removed from the center of his attention by an unexpected British Council invitation to lecture in Poland (where he takes a documentary-style trip to Auschwitz that seems to have little to do with the rest of the novel), the birth of his first grandchild, the last illness and death of his father, and by her defaulting on various financial obligations and disappearance, presumably back to America.

Desmond becomes somewhat reconciled to his deafness, realizing that it is not death, and at the end enjoys a lip-reading class because, he says with some satisfaction, "I always learn something new."

That might also be said of the novel's readers, who can acquire a good deal of information about odd bits of linguistic trivia from Desmond's internal musings and external monologues. As for the deeper implications, I'm reminded of Dwight Macdonald's remark that John Galsworthy's plays "offer tests for right feelings." *Deaf Sentence* holds up a mirror to the reader's—especially the aging reader's—circumstances and evokes sympathetic reactions. It's a good read, take that how you will.

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