

But the most unfortunate aspect of Kadir's book is its thoroughly pervasive, self-indulgently baroque, utterly opaque language, i.e.: "The catholicity of the iconography, racially ambiguous, sensuously polychromatic, paradigmatically pluralistic, symbolically syncretic, becomes hermeneutically substantiated before Ti Noël's eyes as the altar of Damballah, the god-serpent of his African forefathers" (101). Kadir frequently links series of three or four appositives, each of which, rather than clarifying its predecessor, further compounds its abstruseness. As is apparent from the above citation he also incessantly indulges a whim for sesquipedalian vocabulary in annoyingly alliterative phrasing, no doubt counting "filial fictions" (3) and "factitious facticities" (35) as triumphs of wit. Etymological analysis which, sparingly used, might offer fresh insights, is regularly extended to ludicrous extremes. The amputation of a hand becomes "manual severance" (97), or something out of time becomes "untimely" (39). But despite the etymological origins of a term, it can not be divorced from its contemporary denotation, and the attempt to classify an ending which seems to predate its beginning as "pre-posterous" (8) is preposterous indeed. (That paragraph alone contains four such misbegotten etymological neologisms.) The most succinct example of Kadir at his inappropriately punning, etymologically unrestrained, stylistic worst is perhaps his description of the baroque: "Pearl with a bias, *ostracized* semi-preciosity, it seeks after the other half, striving for the bivalve, the vacated space, the home of pre-excrecency" (86). Series editor Terry Cochran, perhaps desensitized by his own familiarity with baroque prose, must bear ultimate responsibility for allowing such an out-of-control manuscript, too long by a third, to see print.

Danilo Kis

HOURGLASS

Translated from the Serbo-Croatian by Ralph Manheim.

Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1990. Pp. 274. \$22.95

Reviewed by Robert DiAntonio

Hourglass is one of the most demanding novels of recent memory, a challenge for even the most diligent reader. This complex work evolved from an actual letter written in 1942 by the author's father some two years before his death at Auschwitz. The letter appears in its entirety at the work's conclusion and is an essential component of the book.

Danilo Kis was born near the Yugoslavian-Hungarian border in 1935. He is the author of several novels in his native Serbo-Croatian, of which three have been translated into English: *Garden, Ashes, A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*, and *The Encyclopedia of the Dead*. This last work will be republished by Penguin Books in a new series entitled "One Europe." By all counts, *Hourglass* ranks with the very best of contemporary experimental fiction.

Kis compels his reader to participate actively in the novel's flow and interpretation. Events are not neatly laid out, but are indirectly alluded to in a series

of questions and answers. The work consists of a transcript of a political investigation, travel scenes, and series of chapters entitled "Notes from a Madman."

The reader slowly comes to understand the state of mind of a fifty-two-year-old retired employee of the Hungarian State Railway. The employee, who is simply referred to as E.S., evolves as a middle-aged Everyman. "The host complained of his daughter, who was planning to marry an adventurer, of his more and more painful gastritis, of pains in the back, asthma, increasing nearsightedness, insomnia, of baldness, loss of virility, failing memory, gluttony, and an infantile craving for sweets. The guest observed that he shared most of the host's ailments" (76-77).

The book exists on two levels. On the first level, E.S. discloses to his interrogator his concerns, his ever-present fear of death, his quarrels with his well-to-do sister, his inquiries about his pension which has been inexplicably cut off, and his possible involvement in a resistance plot. On the second level of meaning the reader comes to the realization that the world E.S. is describing so objectively is one where Jews face confiscation of property, seek baptismal certificates, commit suicide, attempt to flee the country, and work in forced-labor brigades and brickyards. E.S., like many of his friends, has become enmeshed in this restricting, nightmarish world.

Some of the work's most eloquently written passages deal with the pre-war era, and with the peoples of Yugoslavia and Hungary with their vast multi-ethnic and religious diversity. There are marvelous stories of Gypsies, Muslims, Sephardim, Slovaks, Croations, Russians, Poles, and Italians. In one memorable passage, the answer to the question, "What acquaintances had the two men in common?" fills five pages (78-82). This passage forms a microcosmic history of the Balkans in this century as well as a history of the daily lives of a people in the midst of war.

E.S. fixates upon his personal quarrels as larger political events are destroying his world. While the Holocaust inescapably pervades the narrative, it is never directly mentioned. Kis reconstructs the tensions and horrors of these years by avoiding historical detail in favor of depicting the private world of E.S. Few other novels about the Holocaust years chronicle as vividly the bureaucratic stranglehold that controlled and slowly dehumanized the Jews of Central Europe. In the poignant closing of his final letter we come to realize the E.S. has always been aware of his fate. "It is better to be among the persecuted than among the persecutors" (274).

Kis's book is awash in an undercurrent of bitter emotion. *Hourglass*, through the artifice of indirection, combines the sweep of social and political history with revelations and insights into an individual character. The book is another excellent example of the wealth of Eastern European fiction that is being brought to the attention of the English-speaking reader.