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MEŠA SELIMOVIĆ

DEATH AND THE DERVISH

Translated by Bogdan Rakić and Stephen M. Dickey
Introduction by Henry R. Cooper, Jr.

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To Darka

INTRODUCTION

Faintheartedness, or, more emphatically, moral cowardice, or, stronger still, pusillanimity – all rendered in Selimović's language by one word, *malodušnost* – epitomize Ahmed Nuruddin, the first-person narrator of *Death and the Dervish.* On one level at least, the novel is a case study of narrowness of spirit, emotional cowardice, and moral indecisiveness. One would be hard-pressed to find a better treatment of this particularly twentieth-century malady in any other modern literature. Meša Selimović, one of Bosnia's very best novelists, in his finest work, offers his readers an extraordinarily intricate examination of the anxious and incapacitated human heart, splayed against a backdrop of unsettling vagueness and mystery.

Death and the Dervish is set in Bosnia sometime during Ottoman rule, which lasted from the latter part of the fifteenth century to the latter part of the nineteenth. No specific date is ever mentioned (although the rebellions in the Krajina and Posavina suggest the seventeenth century), so that the reader is left with the feeling of timelessness, as if it had always been thus and would always continue to be. Islam is the established religion and no other faith is considered, let alone depicted, although ample reference is made to "Saint George's Day," an obviously Christian holiday that is treated in the novel as a moment of pagan relapse, an atavistic hearkening to a time before the "light of faith" (the meaning of Ahmed Nuruddin's name) arrived to impose its benevolent rule. Even the town itself, wherein virtually all the action of the novel occurs, remains obstinately anonymous (although, once again, the suggestion is Sarajevo; compare the references to the Sinan Tekke and Mount Igman). It is neither Tuzla (Selimović's birthplace) nor Travnik (Ottoman Bosnia's capital), for characters in the novel can be sent

there. It is simply the *kasaba*, a generic term for any town with its market and institutions and homes. This *kasaba*, however, is more important than most, for it has its own fortress, in reality less a defensive construction than an enormously oppressive jail, the menacing presence of which plays an important role in the story. Indeed Selimović even called *Death and the Dervish*'*s* sequel *The Fortress*, to underscore the centrality that jails (and freedom) play in his Bosnian world.

Equally vague is the timing of the novel, despite the narrator's assertion early on that "it all began to occur two months and three days ago," on the eve of Saint George's Day (23 April, new style 6 May). As the novel progresses no further precision is offered regarding time, although the change of seasons, eventually moving from spring to summer to fall with forebodings of a severe winter to come, is mentioned. Lapses occur in the manuscript, which is what the novel claims in fact to be: Ahmed Nuruddin avers he has left off writing for a while, as other matters preoccupy him. Nonetheless the narrative flow is seamless, both beginning and ending with the same (mis)quote from the Koran; somehow, quite mysteriously, both beginning and end are on the eve of Ahmed Nuruddin's execution.

The characters are vague as well, more often than not they are called not by their names (if indeed they have any) but by their titles. So Ahmed Nuruddin himself, who makes so much of the meaning of his name, admits it was assigned to him; it is not really his own. In any event he is usually called the "sheikh," or head of a religious community. There is the kadi, or judge, and the kadi's wife; the musellim or sheriff; various tradespeople; guards; the miralay and his retinue; the mullah, the mufti, the defterdar, and so on (a Glossary has been provided at the back of this book.) Only two names figure at all prominently in the novel: Is-haq the fugitive, but then that is the name Ahmed Nuruddin capriciously gives him, without knowing his real name; and Hassan, the friend, active force, and moral and emotional counterweight to Ahmed Nuruddin. Only Hassan's then is a real name, only Hassan is unburdened by a title. All the rest are as vague and as shaky as their inauthentic names and insecure positions suggest.

Even the faith of Islam itself wavers in *Death and the Dervish*, though dervishes represent the most powerful, most severe, most pure witness among the various Islamic holy orders. The tekke, the order's home, is no safe haven. Its inhabitants are sick or scoundrelly or morally so indefinite that the regular performance of their religious rites imparts no piety to them,

only an air of hypocrisy or at best meaninglessness. The administration of the town, and indeed even of the empire, is corrupt and unprincipled despite the omnipresence of Islamic structures and laws. And the sacred text of Islam itself, the Koran, a verse of which precedes each chapter, is unreferenced and often distorted. Thus, the surest guide itself can be used to contribute to the novel's unremitting air of spiritual ambiguity, confusion, and compromise. In other words, every feature of *Death and the Dervish*, its timing, setting, characterizations, and allusions, underscores Ahmed Nuruddin's own faintness of heart and soul.

The plot of the novel is based on an event in Selimović's own life. The confessional tone of the novel, from its first-person narration to its mention of Selimović's own executed brother, Šefkija, by name and in tandem with Ahmed Nuruddin's executed brother, Harun, is straightforwardly autobiographical. Meša (originally Mehmed) Selimović was born in Tuzla, northwestern Bosnia, in 1910, to a fairly well-to-do family. Though Selimović's mother was religiously observant, it seems the rest of the family was not. Selimović himself claimed to be a Communist and an atheist, and his brothers and sisters were active in the Yugoslav Communist Party before World War II and in the Communist-led partisan resistance movement during the war. In fact it was at the very end of the war in the Balkans that the episode occurred that would lead to the writing of *Death and the Dervish*. Šefkija Selimović, Meša's older brother, a Communist and partisan, was put in charge of a warehouse of property stolen by the Nazi and Ustaša occupiers of Tuzla. Needing some furniture to outfit an apartment for himself and his new wife after their home had been destroyed, Šefkija removed a few inconsequential pieces from the warehouse. Perhaps egged on by enemies he had made in the local party administration, or merely in a perverse streak of puritanism, the Communist authorities accused Šefkija of impropriety with the people's property and in very short order executed him as an example to others. Meša and his other brother, Teufik, also a Communist, were unable to prevent the tragedy; many felt that they had not tried hard enough to do so.

After the war, despite his activities as a Communist and partisan, Selimović was expelled from the Communist Party for abandoning his wife and newborn daughter for another woman, who was in fact a "bourgeoise" (this was Darka Božić, daughter of the former royal Yugoslav commandant of Sarajevo; it is to her that *Death and the Dervish* is dedicated).

Though he was eventually reconciled with and readmitted to the party, and he found a very stable and important partner in Darka, the decade of the 1950s was difficult for Selimović: essentially he made his living at odd writing and scripting jobs, and the little fiction that he published was not received with critical acclaim. It was only in the 1960s that stability – a job as editor of a major Sarajevo publishing house – and success in writing, first modestly with *Tišine* (Silences), and then spectacularly with *Death and the Dervish* (1966), finally caught up with him. By the end of the decade Selimović had been awarded all the most prestigious Yugoslav literary prizes and even been nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature. He did not win: the only Yugoslav ever to have done so, in 1961, was Ivo Andrić, Selimović's fellow Bosnian, with whom he is often compared and even more often contrasted. Failing health in the 1970s and the cooler reception for his later work, *Tvrdjava* (The fortress) and *Ostrvo* (The island), made the last decade of Selimović's life somewhat mournful. A move to Belgrade at that time, both to escape Bosnian provincialism and to enter Yugoslav and especially Serbian literary "high society," provided him no significant relief from the aftereffects of fading glory, although he continued officially to be honored by both state and public.

In his autobiography, *Sjećanja* (Memoirs), and his other public pronouncements toward the end of his life Selimović developed with increasing insistence the idea that he was a Serb by nationality, a Bosnian merely by birth. Such self-identification was no idle semantic game in Yugoslavia, as has become painfully clear in the aftermath of that country's breakup. Notwithstanding the claims of the nationalists, the difference among Serbs, Croats, and Slavic Muslims is neither linguistic, nor ethnic, nor, as religious practice fades, confessional. The essential difference derives from a sense of community: Which set of national myths will an individual choose to celebrate as his or her own? Which group of people will he or she celebrate them with? Despite contemporary appearances, movement among these groups has been appreciable over time, and the boundaries until recently have remained porous. How else could Ivo Andrić, born of Croatian parents, baptized a Roman Catholic, raised and educated in Bosnia, be hailed at his death as Serbia's greatest writer? How else could Selimović, so closely identified with the Bosnian Muslim milieu, expect acceptance as a Serb? Many have speculated on the motivations underlying both Andrić's and Selimovic's adoption of Serbian cultural citizenship, and the unkindest have

often posited mean self-interest. In both cases, however, it seems clear that the writers saw Serbdom's tent to be larger, more inclusive, more varied and inviting than the far smaller tents into which they had been born. In the context of the Slavic-speaking Balkans, the Serbs had the most cosmopolitan culture; the rest were more provincial and (consider the Croatian laureate Miroslav Krleža) even stifling. One way or another, Selimović insisted on his Serbian identity at a time when it was not particularly fashionable (or even politically astute) to do so. Whatever his motive, it seemed particularly important to him to join the ranks of Serbian writers, and to understand his Bosnian Muslim ways as a subset of the larger Serbian cultural heritage.

Selimović died at home in 1982: in his will he left everything to his beloved Darka and the two daughters he had by her, failing even to mention the daughter he had had by his first wife. As with Andrić, the Yugoslav literary establishment eulogized him upon his death, and he, and especially his greatest novel, have been the subject of considerable scholarly interest to the present.

The plot of *Death and the Dervish* is simple: Ahmed Nuruddin's brother, Harun, has been arrested by the corrupt establishment of the town on fabricated charges. In fact he knows something he should not, and to prevent his making use of it he is quickly and quietly put to death. As a pillar of the local order, Sheikh Ahmed Nuruddin agonizes over an appropriate response to his brother's incarceration, until it is too late. Then, wracked with guilt for his indecisiveness, he concocts a plot that brutally disposes of the powers that ordered his brother's death, eventually taking over in their place. But hatred engenders hatred, and soon he is the victim of an even more devious scheme to hurt him by targeting his one and only faithful friend, Hassan. In a monumental repetition of the pusillanimity that had allowed his brother to go uncontested to his death, Ahmed Nuruddin even signs the papers that order Hassan's execution. The final scene, with its radical change of tone and complex denouement, is as depopulated as a Shakespearean tragedy's – *Hamlet* comes to mind for more than one reason – and indeed the drama of the plot, though worked out slowly over some four hundred fifty pages, is as intense and inexorable as *Hamlet*'s.

In many ways it is remarkable how popular *Death and the Dervish* has been with the Yugoslav reading public (eventually, a film was made of it as well). It is not an easy read: it is long; it is full of meditations, reflections, and flashbacks; only one voice narrates throughout the whole novel; the

dialogue is so sparse that on occasion the reader might have to check back to see who is speaking; the colorful Bosnian milieus that Andrić had so popularized are completely absent; even exotic vocabulary is kept to a spare minimum (though to the outsider this might not seem the case). Episodes do occur, small side trips are made, but they seem lush only in comparison to the austerity of the main plot: *Death and the Dervish* is a hard book to extract freestanding passages from; virtually every line and paragraph in the book derive their power not so much from the charge they carry within themselves as from their inextricable relationship to everything that precedes and follows them. One very astute critic, Thomas Butler, has called the novel's structure *poetic,* this is indeed the case, and not just in the prose's rhythmicity, its repetitions, its similes becoming metaphors, and its polysemous language. *Death and the Dervish* is in effect one very long poem, circular in fact, with its end becoming its beginning, and with every part interconnected to all the others. Moreover, it is a holy poem, or at least the text partakes of the essence of a holy text: each word is intentional, weighty, meaningful, unchangeable, and consequential. It is not an easy read, but it is a worthwhile and rewarding read, and that might in part account for its popularity.

But critics have also suggested another reason for its unusual success, one even more important for its universal appeal wherever it has appeared in translation (and this first full English translation is probably the last into a major world language, the others having been done decades ago). Selimović's Bosnia is extraordinarily uniform. In this regard it bears no resemblance whatsoever either to the colorful variegatedness of Andrić's Bosnia, or to the reality of the country, which once was celebrated as a multiethnic, multicultural, multireligious society and now is being punished for it. Selimović's Bosnia is precisely what the ethnic cleansers, the sectarians, the fundamentalists, the dogmatists hope to achieve: one people, under one code, bowing to one authority. It is a nightmare (how much of the novel takes place at night!), it is darkness at noon, it is a twentieth-century horror set in a past age that mercifully lacked many (but not all!) of the means to impose such rigidity on living human beings. Ahmed Nuruddin is the pillar that supports this society, and he is the instrumentality that brings it down, by taking the fundamentalism he professes to its logical conclusion. Professing love, he experiences fear and nurtures hate. He is capable of sacrificing his brother and his friend, but, unlike Abraham sacrificing

Isaac (the fugitive is named Is-haq – Isaac!), there is no loving God to stay his murderous hand. Murder begets hate, and hate more hate. And the only one to survive is the one who can escape this vicious circle. Some, of course, do escape, but at a price, as the finale of the novel sadly suggests.

Selimović's Ottoman Bosnia is a microcosm of post-World War II Yugoslavia, and postwar Yugoslavia was (it is no more) a microcosm of life in this century. *Death and the Dervish* was received in Yugoslavia as an antitoxin against the fears and hatreds of both the war and the postwar regime, and it can function that way as well for those who do not know Yugoslavia at all. The point, made slowly, in a complex, poetic way, and coming only at the very end of the novel, is disarmingly simple: the love of brothers, as between Ahmed and Harun; the love of parents and children, as between Hassan and his father; the love of friends, as between Ahmed and Hassan; and finally erotic love, whose absence in his life sends Ahmed down the road toward death – all will indeed remove fear, destroy hate, exorcise the past, generate new life, allow the sun in, bring peace. None of that is actually depicted in *Death and the Dervish.* It had been Selimović's fond hope to do so in the two following novels of the trilogy he had planned, and indeed, in *The Fortress*, the second and only other complete volume of the trilogy, he did move in this direction. But the suggestion may have been more important than the depiction: *Death and the Dervish* remains Selimović's masterly and most successful expression of an ancient wisdom that may prove salvific yet.

Henry R. Cooper, Jr.

TRANSLATORS' NOTE

Death and the Dervish has its fair share of stylistic and linguistic idiosyncrasies, complicating the task of remaining faithful to the original while producing a fluid translation. Selimović uses numerous words and expressions of Arabic, Turkish, and Persian origin, which give the original subtle stylistic and sometimes semantic nuances. As many have no simple equivalents in English, we have kept them if they preserve the flavor of the original and do not affect the translation's readability. Generally our criterion for inclusion was whether these words occur in the *Oxford English Dictionary,* however, we have taken into account their meanings specific to the local vernacular in Bosnia and Herzegovina. We have provided a Glossary at the end of the volume; terms marked with an asterisk may be found here. Since the word *dervish* itself is among them, we were faced with a problem at the very outset, as we obviously could not footnote the title. We assume, though, that the term, which refers to a member of any of various Muslim religious orders, is familiar to the English-speaking reading public – at least through the notion of "whirling" dervishes, to whose very order the novel's hero in fact belongs.

The novel's Koranic language and references to Islam deserve special comment. The motto at the beginning of each chapter is based on a text of the Koran. Other quotations and quasi-quotations occur in various places. Many of Selimović's quotations are less than exact, others are taken out of context, and some consist of lines from different chapters (*suras*), grafted together. Therefore we have in general followed his versions instead of relying on any English translations of the Koran itself. We have footnoted all the quotations we could identify.

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Finally, we dedicate this translation to Mirna Dickey, with whom it all began, and to the memory of Nikola Rakić.

PART ONE

1

Bismilâhir-rahmanir-rahim![1]
I call to witness the ink, the quill, and the script, which flows from the quill;
I call to witness the faltering shadows of the sinking evening,
the night and all she enlivens; I call to witness the moon
when she waxes, and the sunrise when it dawns.
I call to witness the Resurrection Day and the soul that accuses itself;
I call to witness time, the beginning and end of all things
– to witness that every man always suffers loss.[2]

I begin my story for nothing, without benefit for myself or anyone else, from a need stronger than benefit or reason. I must leave a record of myself, the chronicled anguish of my inner conversations, in the vague hope that a solution will be found when all accounts have been settled (if they may ever be), when I have left my trail of ink on this paper, which lies in front of me like a challenge. I do not yet know what will be written here. But in the strokes of these letters at least some of what was in me will remain, no longer to perish in eddies of mist as if it had never been, or as if I had never known what happened. In this way I will come to see how I became what I am – this self that is a mystery even to me. And yet it is a mystery to me that I have not always been what I am now. I know these

[1] "In the name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful!" – the opening line of each of the *suras.* (chapters) of the Koran.

[2] This passage consists of several lines that belong to different *suras* (S. lxviii, 1; S. lvi, 75; S. lxxiv, 33– 34; S. lxxv, 1–2; S. ciii, 1–2).

lines are muddled; my hand trembles at the task of disentanglement that I face, at the trial I now commence. Here I am everything: judge, witness, and accused. I will be as honest as I can be, as honest as anyone ever could be, for I have begun to doubt that sincerity and honesty are one and the same. Sincerity is the certitude that we speak the truth (and who can be certain of that?), but there are many kinds of honesty, and they do not always agree with one another.

My name is Ahmed Nuruddin. It was given to me and I took what was offered with pride. But now, after a great many years which have grown on me like skin, I think about it with wonder and sometimes with a sneer, since calling oneself "*Light of Faith*" evinces an arrogance that I have never felt and of which I am now somewhat ashamed. How am I a light? And how have I been enlightened? By knowledge? By higher teachings? By a pure heart? By the true path? By freedom from doubt? Everything has been cast into doubt and now I am nothing but Ahmed, neither sheikh* nor Nuruddin. Everything has fallen from me, like a robe or a suit of armor, and all that remains is what was at the beginning, naked skin and a naked man.

I am forty years old, an ugly age: one is still young enough to have dreams, but already too old to fulfill any of them. This is the age when the restlessness in every man subsides so he can become strong by habit and by the certainty he has acquired of the infirmity to come. But I am merely doing what should have been done long ago, during the stormy flowering of my youth, when all the countless paths seemed good, all errors as useful as the truth. What a pity that I am not ten years older, then old age would protect me from rebellion; or ten years younger, since then nothing would matter. For thirty is youth that fears nothing, not even itself. At least that is what I think now that thirty has moved irretrievably into the past.

I have just spoken a strange word: rebellion. My pen hesitates above this straight line, upon which a dilemma has been impressed, but all too easily uttered. This is the first time I have so named my anguish, and I have never before thought of it in this way. Where did this dangerous word come from? And is it only a word? I have asked myself if it might not be better to stop writing, so as not to make everything harder than it already is. What if writing, in some inexplicable way, draws from me even things that I do not want to say, things that I have not intended, or that have hidden in the darkest depths of me, just waiting to be stirred up by my present agitation – a feeling that is hardly likely to obey me? If that happens, then writing