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Solipsism Narrated Magnanimously: Reflections on Death and the Dervish

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“Malodušnost” is the Serbo-Croatian word that Henry Cooper uses to describe the subject of Meša Selimovi?’s novel, Death and the Dervish in his preface to the novel. Faintheartedness and moral cowardice translate the Serbo-Croatian word adequately, but its transliteration—small or diminished soul—adds as well to our understanding of the word’s meaning and the novel’s subject. Ahmed Nuruddin, the novel’s protagonist, recounts the sufferings of his distraught soul. The unfolding of his spiritual malady and its tragic consequences within his life-world structure the plot of the novel. Readers witness a human soul fall apart at breathtaking speed and with tragic effect. The narrator’s name means, with obvious irony, “light of faith.”

We do not easily recognize that malodušnost is the novel’s subject. The dervish’s first person reflections are intellectually ernest, psychologically keen, and morally reflective. The depth of his intellectualizing and the profundity of his reasoning are dazzling. The problem arises when readers witness the dervish’s deeds and interactions with others (as composed now by the author, Selimovi?); these interactions reflect a feebleness of self-knowledge and shallowness of insight and are frought with self-deception.

It is important to heed Cooper’s point: the intention of the novel is to bear witness to what malodušnost is and depict the malady as a telling mark of our times. While the dervish’s reflections are rich with psychological and existential insight, they are also Weighted down with tragic misunderstandings. Although the poignancy of moral action stands on the horizon of the dervish’s self-consciousness, his behaviours digress into egregious acts of bad faith. Selimovi? captures the inner thoughts of a human being on the cusp of righteous action, who then spirals away from that possibility. Each sentence in the dervish’s reflective account is fascinating: Clinical and objective in its realism; sublime and beautiful in its irony.

The widely known interpretation of this successful and popular Yugoslav novel is that the Ottoman rule described in the novel resonates closely with the oppressive ideology of Yugoslav communism. Yugoslav readers identify with the psychological tone and political intrique. The parallels are revealing and all too true for Yugoslav readers.

Another intrepretation stresses that the novel’s storyline is based on Selimovi?’s own biography. The imprisonment of the dervish’s brother by Ottoman authorities mirrors the arrest of Selimovi?’s own brother, a partisan, by Communists at the end of World War II. The execution of the dervish’s brother by Ottoman authorities parrallels the killing of Selimovi?’s own brother by Communists.

The trauma of not having saved one's own brother from a banal and empty death is a deep guilt for the novel's narrator and the author himself.

While this reading accounts for the incredible intimacy that the author shows toward his central character, it equates the inner life of Selimovi? too closely with the pathos of the dervish. However apt and revealing this psychological interpretation, it masks a more important and moral understanding of the novel: Selimovi? narrates the malodušnost of his central character with magnanimity or, to use the Serbo-Croatian word, velikodušnost. Selimovi?'s task is not only to bear witness to but also to overcome the malodušnost of his subject. Selimovi? never reproaches his subject; he never judges his narrator's inner character. Selimovi? resists the unbearable sadness of his subject with a compassion that is never condescending, and its irony captures a human soul sadly diminished.

Paradoxically, the self-consciousness of the dervish becomes essential; it becomes ultimate even as it dissipates. Selimovi? depicts the soul of the dervish for its own sake, for its own value, and for no other reason than its human nature, however afflicted it may be. In this manner, Selimovi? stands equal to the Russian author, Fyodor Dostoevsky, who is clearly a model for Selimovi?'s writing.

While the dervish reasons relentlessly, the question is, With what logic does he reason? Consider the first sentence of the novel's narrative: "I begin my story for nothing, without benefit for myself or anyone else, from a need stronger than benefit or reason." We need to step back from this intellectualizing as surely Selimovi? himself does with every sentence he composes to construct the figure of the dervish. There is a problem with this sentence. How can a story begin for nothing? A story must begin for something, with some purpose. If a story were to begin for nothing, it would not be a story. We need to distrust the soundness of the narrator's voice and substance of his reasoning. Selimovi? insists that we do so. To appreciate this novel, we need to take the words of the dervish with a grain of salt, as Selimovi? himself no doubt does, however intellectually earnest, morally authoritative, and existentially profound the dervish's words appear to be. The literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin has named and characterized this authorial technique as double-voiced discourse, and Selimovi?'s mastery of it is as great as Dostoevsky's.

Consider the sentence again: "I begin my story for nothing, without benefit for myself or anyone else, from a need stronger than benefit or reason." What is this need that is stronger than benefit or reason? Does such a need exist for humans? The gods have needs greater than benefit or reason. The will of gods (which the faithful accept without understanding) serve needs that cannot be formulated in terms of benefit or reason despite efforts throughout human history to do so. Likewise, animals have needs stronger than benefit or reason. Animals have instincts. Instincts cannot be formulated in terms of benefit or reason despite the impressive efforts of science to do so. The needs of humans, however, are different; they are different from either the will of gods or the instincts of animals. The needs of humans are grounded in benefit or reason.

What Émile Durkheim writes is helpful in this regard: "When the void created by existence in its own resources is filled, the animal, satisfied, asks nothing further. Its power of reflection is not sufficiently developed to imagine other ends than those implanted in its physical nature." Durkheim's statement describes what is true for animals, but it does not describe what is true for humans. Unlike animals, humans ask for something further than bodily satisfaction. Humans imagine ends other than those implanted in their physical nature. Humans imagine justice, beauty, wisdom, courage, and good. This power of reflection distinguishes humans not only from animals

but also from gods. The gods already possess justice, beauty, wisdom, courage, and good. Gods do not need the power of reflection to develop a relation to what they already have.

It is important along with Selimovi? to access the limits of the dervish's logic despite the allure of the dervish's intellectualizing. The dervish seeks a logic that rejects the essential nature of what it is to be a human being. The dervish seeks not so much to transcend, but to escape the human condition. When action is based on a need stronger than benefit or reason, it is the action of either a god or a brute, but it is not the action of a human. Through Selimovi?'s empathetic prose we witness the dervish act and interact with others, but not as a human being. The dervish acts as the ghost of a human being. Such is the nature of his malodušnost.

From the very beginning the dervish seeks a vain and empty ontology from which to justify the thoughtlessness of his actions. What does the power of reflection do? It collects the benefits or reasons for human action as compelling benefits or reasons. For humans, the power of reflection is sufficiently developed to imagine ends other than those implanted in their physical nature. This endowment pains the dervish, and he employs the gift in ways that debase it.

The opening of the dervish's journey reminds us of something that Thrasymachus asks of Socrates in Plato's Republic, "And now I will not have you say that justice is duty or advantage or profit or gain or interest, for this sort of nonsense will not do for me; I must have clearness and accuracy." Thrasymachus insists that Socrates provide him with an account of justice that is clear and accurate and does not draw upon some indefinable benefit or indeterminable reason. Like the dervish, Thrasymachus wants an account of justice that is stronger than benefit or reason, something infallible, and Socrates, to Thrasymachus's frustration, does not provide him with what he asks. The dervish heads down the same path that Thrasymachus envisions as more powerful than the Socratic one, and as readers we witness the tragedy of this choice. It is not that the dervish does not have needs, needs based upon benefits or reasons. It is that the dervish divorces himself, often violently, from the needs that define who he is as a genuine human being. This drama is one of the most important ever told in literature, and it has perhaps never been so astutely told as it has been by Selimovi?.

The opening sentence, "I begin my story for nothing, without benefit for myself or anyone else, from a need stronger than benefit or reason," identifies the ontology that fuels the dervish's malodušnost. The dervish's logic is put into practice in the novel's first dramatic scene that the dervish has with Hassan's sister. The dervish has the opportunity to visit a dying man who is the father of the Ottoman kadi (judge) who signed the warrant for his brother's imprisonment. It has been ten days since the dervish's brother was arrested by Ottoman authorities. Another dervish (requested by the family) was waylaid, and Ahmed Nuruddin went in his stead. The situation, the dervish recognizes, is a godsend, a fortuitous opportunity to intercede on his brother's behalf and win his release.

Upon arriving at the home, the situation improves considerably. The dervish meets not with the ill man but with Hassan's beautiful sister, the kadi's wife and daughter-in-law of the ill man. She proceeds to make a bold request of the dervish. She asks the dervish to persuade her brother, Hassan (with whom she knows the dervish is closely acquainted), to give up his inheritance on his own accord in order to avoid the humiliation of having her father disown her brother publicly. The dervish observes her and analyzes her motive: "But women like her know the value of everything they gain and lose, and they always have their own reasons for what they do, reasons that might be strange, but are rarely naïve." Hassan's sister confidently knows her needs and clearly surmises

their benefits and reasons in sharp contrast to the dervish.

The request of Hassan's sister creates the possibility of a reciprocal request from the dervish, a request that would serve his need as a brother. The dervish is in a position to ask Hassan's sister to intercede on his brother's behalf. Implicitly, the actions of Hassan's sister demand that the dervish now make a reciprocal request of her, namely, that she persuade her husband, the kadi, to release the dervish's brother. This collusive exchange would make sense; it would seal the deal, and the dervish speculates that the favor lies easily within the power of this beautiful woman: "One humiliating night for him [the kadi], one decisive demand by you, could change my brother's fate."

The dervish, though, does not seize this opportunity that fate so generously hands him although, in terms of insight, he recognizes its significance. Instead, the dervish constructs abstruse reasons not to act and equivocates with a vague sense of duty for his passivity and letting this opportunity pass by. He allows shallow misgivings to trump a moral imperative, namely, the need to save his brother's life not only for his sake but also his father's, who has just visited him during this difficult moment. We see the logic of the novel's opening sentence put into practice: The dervish seeks to follow a need stronger than benefit or reason. The dervish acts independently of benefit and reason. Such action, however, is unintelligible to the external observer and senseless to the dervish himself. Selimovi?, though, never judges his character; his goal is simply to depict the dervish's malodušnost and its tragic consequences for a human life.

As readers, we realize that this exchange of favors between the dervish and Hassan's sister would not have been so difficult. The dervish himself imagines the willingness of Hassan to participate freely in this matter. While listening to the kadi's wife, the dervish says to himself: "Aside from that, I knew, I was absolutely certain that if I only went to Hassan and told him to renounce his inheritance for my brother's sake, he would do it immediately." Hassan is a generous soul, a model friend whose character and charm are unsurpassable. Hassan would have unselfishly agreed to the dervish's request so as to win the release of the dervish's brother. Much later in the novel Hassan admits as much himself. Such is the magnanimity, the velikodušnost, of Hassan's soul that contrasts with the pusillanimity, the malodušnost, of the dervish's soul. Hassan is the spiritual opposite of the dervish. Hassan's soul is as big as the dervish's is small. This irony structures Selimovi?'s narrative as the author of the dervish's first-person account, and we have to believe that it is with Hassan, not the dervish, with whom Selimovi? most identifies.

This opening dramatic scene is the first of many to follow that narrate the small soul in the actions of the dervish with others, a malady that does not so much develop as repeat its pathology over and over through the dervish's sad recounting of his life. What does develop through the course of the novel is the clearness and sharpness with which Selimovi? portrays the small soul of the dervish. The first dramatic scene with Hassan's sister is a template for the tragedy of future events in the dervish's life and his past reminiscences. Selimovi? asks us to witness the illness of the dervish's soul and the soundness of the dervish's reasoning. Selimovi? provokes us by silently playing the reflective role of Socrates in a Platonic dialogue.

Consider now a comparable reasoning in Dostoevsky's Notes from Underground, which parallels Selimovi?'s text. In Dostoevsky's famous novel, the underground man asks:

> Isn't there, indeed, something that is dearer to almost every man than his very best interests, or (not to violate logic) isn't there a certain most advantageous advantage .

> . . which is more important and more advantageous than all other advantages, and for the sake of which a man is prepared, if need be, to go against all laws, against reason, honour, peace, prosperity—in short, against all those fine and useful things—just so as to achieve this primary, this most advantageous of advantages which is more precious to him than all else?

Like the dervish, the underground man seeks to act on a need stronger than benefit or reason. The underground man seeks an advantage greater than advantage itself, which can only be the will of a god or the instinct of an animal. While Dostoevky's underground man and Selimovi?'s dervish appear as exemplars of the power of human reflection, both spurn the foundation from which not only the work but also the need for human reflection makes sense. It helps to consider the rape scenes that are the dramatic climaxes of both novels, Notes from Underground and Death and the Dervish. The underground man and the dervish rape a woman who starts to love them at the very moment they glimpse they are indeed beloved. With no reflection, with no thought, with no benefit, with no advantage, they violate the women whose genuine love they could have received and whose love they could have returned if their souls were not so diminished. The dramatic climax of each novel is shocking, disheartening, but utterly expected if we have been heeding each authors desire for the reader to step away from the void into which their subjects fall.

Death and the Dervish concludes at the break of dawn with Ahmed committing suicide. "The roosters are merciless, they are already sounding the alarm" is nearly the last entry on the last page. The dervish, though, cannot recount his suicide. Only silence bears witness to the act. The dervish's final act stands outside of his written discourse, but it is understood. It is witnessed. Hassan, the model friend who the dervish unconscionably betrayed, enters the dervish's room, finds him deceased, and records the last words in the dervish's manuscript: "I did not know he was so unhappy / Peace to his tormented soul." These lines represent the last act of the novel. Ironically, unlike the ever perceptive Hassan, we have come to know how unhappy the dervish is and why his soul is so tormented. The preceding four hundred and fifty-five pages are a suicide note, an attempt to justify this unjustifiable act, which the dervish wrote feverishly over the course of one long, lonely night.

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