

Spirit of Bosnia / Duh Bosne

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Child of East and West

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I wonder what I think of the phrase “Bosnian Spirit.” I admit that I seldom think of this phrase in itself, but then from another point of view it is even more self-defeating to believe that I will not be able to deal with it in any way, especially not reflectively, in the foreseeable future. Not for two reasons at least. The first is ignorance. I do not know what the concept of spirit is if you add to it the adjective “Bosnian.” The content is thereby enriched but the scope of the meaning of the universal (the scope of the general concept of spirit) is reduced. The second lies in the fact that I do not understand with any certainty this generously formulated phrase (and, I believe, metaphorically rich one) if I approach it using any method accessible to me. How then am I to take it into consideration? Even if I do not know and even if there is nothing to grasp with such a broad term, this does not give me the right, particularly in a logical sense, to deny the reality of that which I do not either directly know or fully comprehend.

There is, though, a possibility for me to express myself through two, metaphorically rich phrases: “Spirit of Bosnia” and “Bosnian Spirituality.” The latter I always associate with such special matters of spiritual life as religiosity, revelation, piety, theology, asceticism, Bible study, tafsir—that Bosnia is very rich in. I doubt that it is necessary to proclaim this in a publicly uttered statement in a newspaper. There remains then the phrase the “Spirit of Bosnia,” which is really a metaphor. Through it it is possible then to say something of what I want to express, but I am not sure that is what someone expects. If I were asked about the meaning of the concept of justice in Plato, knowledge in Aristotle, spirit in Stoics, and so on, I would speak with certainty, after reflection, within the scope of my profession. But what I will say here will be in the capacity of a citizen burdened by his profession.

This kind of reflection is necessarily intertwined with varied content and different layers, incompatible with each other, that I weave counter-logically into a lasting name. This is allowed me by the art of grafting in botany, the continuity of cosmic time, the prehistoric and historical insight, the sense of grounding on the geographical map, the legitimacy of civic experience, the aesthetic perception in spheres of the genetic, the spiritual eye, the insight into the immediate observance—in a word, a life full of spirit and body. I am never able to observe it separately or outside the norms long established in sensible daydreaming and visions of determining authentic human survival. In this place I must confess that I am feeling the [Weight](#) of a stranger’s story.

Bosnia is sensitive to newcomers, although it meets them with a unique hospitality. Perhaps that aura radiates from that singular self-awareness of kindness evidenced and presented in the Fojnica Book of Heraldry, inherited and difficult, like the hardest forms of work granted to Bosnia—in the forces hidden under its crust, in the black gold and iron painstakingly scooped from its bosom, in the warmth of its mineral waters, the vigor and joy of its snows not yet fallen, in the clash of the continent and the heat of the whirlwind, in the interweaving of many climes and influences. Let us say, the land of Bosnia is too complex, lashed by the sea and rivers, tested by conscience, in utter solitude, alone.

I am not sure, but I believe it was so in each specific period, from the spirit of Illyrians to the Roman province, from the arrival of the Slavs to the Ottoman conquest, from the Austro-Hungarian annexation to these dark Serbo-Croat-Bosniak divisions. Bosnian tribes believed, originally and faithfully, in the mysteries of divine influence on the life of people and respected the sacred that looked like the others, from immortal gods to military cults, from Catholic-Orthodox mysteries and the Hebraic reading of The Song of Songs, from Psalmic lament to bowing humbly in prayer to the “All-Merciful.” And at all times, even in those times stuck in bottomless duration, Bosnia has been a land of heresy, evaluated and judged by some kind of tribunal. It has been her own on her own, on Bilino Field when she swore by the “true” faith and renounced the authentic Manichaeism or Patarenism of the Bosnian Church, when she set up a spiritual hierarchy in her Islamic community, when she realized that to “shoot a friar means shooting at herself,” and when she was wrecked and laid waste with fire and sword, in the rhythm of the inexhaustible calendar of evil and pogroms.

Bosnia is a land permanently at Europe’s gate, but also its noble bosom, a child of East and West, a guardian of the values whose origin belongs to the planetary spark of man’s ability to reason, nightmarish passions, light impulses of intuitive depths holding the mysteries of the art of discovery and creation. Those born to her have given the land of the South Slavs, whose geographical center she is, the arts and the knowledge garlanded with planetary wreaths of recognition and honor. But the land of Bosnia is also one of scant gratitude, of rough manners, rich in skepticism and prone to mistrust, illumed by the cult of measure, yet passionate and impetuous. The philosophical method makes wholes subtle, and the pathos of metaphor is foreign to it, although the heat and the cold of faster or slower pulsing of life are more evident in a rich spectrum of colors than they are in utterances without taste or color, sound or smell, that look like impalpable sfumati.

When I say that Bosnia is a paradigm of European experience and also that of the world, I mean that it is, here and now, a metaphor for Europe. I thus get nearer the kinship the man from this area feels. Therefore, I must say: Bosnia is a land of great tragedies without its tragedians; it is a land of great errors against God, men, and laws, which is reason enough—in the Aristotelian sense—for a tragic play overarched by catharsis and moral purification. But I cannot trust in the superficial saying that Bosnia is “a land of hatred” or “fear and lying” because then I would then have to exclude, for the whole’s sake, love, heroism, and truth. And so much that we owe Bosnia would be left out, “in keeping with inconceivable laws or inhumane arbitrariness.” In me, “that same aspiration for order that in the beginning created mathematics” has been put to shame as well as the sense of measure and

responsibility because of the claustrophobic trauma produced by the confined space provided for words of this nature.

The question of what Bosnia owes to me has never even occurred to me because that kind of pride and arrogance is negated by the awareness that we all, with our different names, nations and religions, cultures and customs, on the superb fabric of the Bosnian carpet, in the enigma of the three-dimensional Bosnian trefoil, that we all belong to Bosnia, while only in a transitory way, only once, according to the arbitrariness of human criteria, does Bosnia belong to us. That is why the question “why did I stay here?” hurts me so much more. Does not that question undermine my personhood? Does it not touch those illegible worlds of my ability to reason and my free will? Does it not tear apart the veils of a hidden life of shame, of fear, that reaches to the core of my being, a generic environment, naturally and cognitively protected, and untouchable? And yet, I agree to publicly say: I stayed, not only because I had taken an academic oath and had committed to a life of “scholarly slavery” at the university, but by my own will, I say emphatically, because I have been compelled to do so by the vehemence of unreason and by the denial of the Bosnian way of life as a trans-temporal value and because of the nightmare caused by the threat of extermination of everybody of Bosnian stock; I stayed because I have been compelled to take the test of conscience and consciousness. Because I believe in the unity of the modern world, because I practice the secret of trust and of sincere dialogue, because I see in work a similarity with the Great Creator of the Universe and in no way the signs of damnation, because in war I do not discern the “Father” of everything but the cause of the catastrophic denial of the personhood of “man.” I do not know where this strength to resist senselessness and destruction and the power to withstand doubt come from, but I know that I exist, here and now, thanks first of all to “my” self-confessed credo; I feel calm also because I do not obligate anyone to anything except myself. ¹

Translated by Omer Hadžiselimović - ©2006 Omer Hadžiselimović

Notes

1. This text was originally published in the daily *Oslobođenje* in 1995 as a conversation with Divna Pervan. Most of it was later included in my speech on the occasion of an honorary doctorate in philosophy (DOCTORATUS PHILOSOPHIAE HONORIS CAUSA) awarded me by the University of Ferrara in 1996. The text subsequently came out in *Bosanski duh*, Sarajevo, 1997, 102–105. ↩

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