

# Spirit of Bosnia / Duh Bosne

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## Bosnians in Death and the Dervish

Meša Selimovi?

Hasan remembered how in Constantinople he had spoken about the dignity of his countrymen, and laughed. Fortunately for himself, he did not hold anything against anyone or complain. He took everything that happened to him like a cruel joke. Others are even worse, he would say, and it seemed to me that he was defending his earlier enthusiasm more than the truth. After two or three years he began to love them again. He got used to them and they to him, and he began to value them in his own way, scornfully but without malice, respecting life the way it was more than the way he wanted it to be. "They're a clever people." He told me once, with the strange mixture of sarcasm and seriousness that so often perplexed me. "They get their idleness from the East, and their nice life from the West; they're in no hurry, because life itself is in a hurry; they're not interested in seeing what tomorrow will bring, what's destined will come, and few things depend on them; they come together only when they're in difficulties, and therefore they don't like to be together often; they hardly trust anyone, but they're most easily deceived with pretty words; they don't look like heroes, but they're most difficult to frighten with threats; for a long time they won't pay attention to anything, they won't care about what's happening around them, and then, all of a sudden everything matters to them, they mess with everything and turn everything on its head; then they doze off again, and don't want to remember anything that's happened; they're afraid of change because it often brings them misfortune, and they easily get annoyed with one man, even if he's done them good. A strange people. They'll talk behind your back and love you; they'll kiss your cheek and hate you; they'll ridicule noble deeds and remember them for generations; they live by spite and generosity and you never know which will prevail or when. Bad, good, gentle, cruel, lethargic, tempestuous, open, closed –they're all of that and everything in between. And on top of everything, they're mine and I'm theirs, like a river and a drop of water, and everything I've said about them I might as well say about myself." ..... "The most complicated people on the face of the earth. Not on anyone else has history placed the kind of joke it's played on us. Until yesterday we were what we want to forget today. But we haven't become anything else. We've stopped halfway on the path, dumbfounded. We have nowhere to go any more. We've been torn away from our roots, but haven't become part of anything else. Like a tributary whose course has been diverted from its river by a flood, and no longer has a mouth or a current; it's too small to be a lake, too large to be absorbed by the earth. With a vague sense of shame because of our origins, and guilt because of our apostasy, we don't want to look back, and have nowhere to look ahead of us. Therefore we try to hold back time, afraid of any outcome at all. We are despised both by our kinsmen and by newcomers, and we defend ourselves with pride and hatred. We wanted to save ourselves, but we're so completely lost we don't even know who we are anymore. And the tragedy is that we've come to love our stagnant tributary, and don't want to leave it. But everything has a price, even this love of ours. Is it a coincidence that we're so overly softhearted and overly cruel,

so sentimental and hard-hearted, joyful and melancholy, always ready to surprise others and even ourselves? Is it a coincidence that we hide behind love, the only certainty in this indefiniteness? Are we letting life pass by us for no reason, are we destroying ourselves for no reason, differently than Jemail, but just as certainly? Why are we doing it? Because we're not indifferent. And if we're not indifferent, that means we're honest. And if we're honest, then let's hear it for our madness!"

*Trans. Bogdan Rakić and Stephen M. Dickey. Death and the Dervish. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1996, pp. 336-7 & 408-9. First published 1966 as Derviš i smrt. English translation copyright © 1996 by Northwestern University Press <http://nupress.northwestern.edu>*

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